



Wrongheaded policy

The Karnataka Bill on reserving jobs for locals is self-defeating

Despite the fact that attempts to provide reservation in jobs for local workers have been proven unconstitutional and have been rejected by courts, the temptation to pander to nativist sentiments remains among State governments. A case in point is the draft Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, cleared by the Congress government’s cabinet but later “temporarily withheld” following an uproar from industry heads and trade bodies in Karnataka. The Bill envisaged that industries and other establishments would appoint local candidates in 50% of management positions and 70% of non-management positions, and set stringent criteria for defining local candidates. Similar Bills were passed in Andhra Pradesh in 2019, Haryana in 2020, and Jharkhand in 2023. While the Karnataka Bill added proficiency in Kannada as one of the criteria to define eligibility of a local candidate, the Haryana and Andhra Pradesh laws were largely based on residency criterion. The Punjab and Haryana High Court quashed the Haryana Act in 2023 holding it violative of equality guaranteed under Article 14 and freedom under Article 19 of the Constitution. It added that the Act went against the rights of citizens from the rest of the country and that States enacting such laws could set up “artificial walls” throughout India. The Andhra Pradesh Act is still being heard in court, while the Jharkhand Bill has not been implemented. Apart from the aforementioned reasons, the Karnataka Bill is also violative of Article 16(3) that allows for reservation based on residence, but limits it to public employment and to be enforced only by a law made in Parliament and not by a State Legislature.

The temptation for the Karnataka government to come up with Bills that provide for reservation for locals and labour protectionism despite their proven unconstitutionality is perhaps motivated by the fact that there is resentment among resident workers in better-off States that their jobs are being taken over by migrant workers. This is especially so among those aspiring for jobs in the private sector, where some employers have sought to exploit migrant workers to work for longer hours and at lower pay without benefits or social protections and without political support that is otherwise available to local workers. If Karnataka is concerned about this segmentation of the labour market that pits the migrant worker against the locals, it should enforce labour rights for the former as well; and by curbing exploitative practices, it could create a level playing field for all workers. Protectionism for the local worker and parochialism is not the answer.

Trump season

The former president is leading, but the election is still months away

As the Republican National Convention drew to a close in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, it became obvious that the Party’s expected nominee for the 2024 U.S. presidential election in November, former President Donald Trump, is not only capitalising on the popularity boost that he has inevitably benefited from since surviving an assassination attempt a week earlier, but has now established total control of the Republican Party and is in a strong position to take on incumbent President Joe Biden in that regard. The Convention itself marked several firsts – not only was Mr. Trump’s speech the first major public remarks he delivered since the assassin’s bullet injured his ear but otherwise left him unscathed, but the Convention itself was held for the first time in person since the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation of all public political events in 2020. It would also appear that Republican strategists have deepened their appreciation of optics as far as Mr. Trump’s appeal among the electorate goes. There was a distinct attempt to project the political power of women at the event, almost as if to soften the former president’s image, which was in years past battered by revelations of his unflattering remarks about women. Mr. Trump’s wife Melania made a rare appearance at the event, as did his 17-year-old granddaughter Kai, his daughter-in-law and co-chair of the Republican National Committee, Lara, Arkansas Governor Sarah Sanders, Mr. Trump’s former Press Secretary, and Indian American Usha Chilukuri Vance, who is the wife of Mr. Trump’s running mate, J.D. Vance.

There is much to analyse in Mr. Trump picking the 39-year-old Mr. Vance for Vice Presidential candidate in the upcoming race. Mr. Trump is evidently keen to win over younger demographic cohorts in this election; he is also aligned to white, male America, and what it stands for in the country’s fraught politics today. There is also a geographic message in the subtext – as the junior Senator from Ohio, Mr. Vance could also become a critical interlocutor for the Trump campaign’s engagement with the all-important Rust Belt states – swing states of the mid-western U.S. that can potentially make or break a presidential candidate. While there is no denying Mr. Trump’s overall strong position and lead in swing states according to several national polls, three months is a long time in politics, and that certainly applies to the U.S.

Recently, citing a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) report that said that 8 crore jobs have been created in the last 3-4 years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Opposition of creating false narratives about unemployment. He also said that a lot of infrastructure projects are coming up, which will create more jobs. This was not only an attempt to counter the narrative of high unemployment which has been bothering the ruling party, but also a response to a flurry of reports from financial institutions, such as Citigroup, in July, which pointed to inadequacy of employment generation in India.

Conflicting reports and statements

Mr. Modi quoted a RBI ‘Data Manual’ released on July 7, called ‘The India KLEMS Database’, which “...describes the procedures, methodologies and approaches used in the construction of India KLEMS database version 2024. The dataset includes measures of Gross Value Added, Gross Value of Output, Labour Employment, Labour Quality, Capital Stock, Capital Composition... The database covers 27 industries comprising the entire Indian economy.”

Soon after the RBI released this, the State Bank of India (SBI) came out with its own report to counter the financial institutions’ reports. It said, “Even if we exclude Agriculture, the total number of jobs created in manufacturing and services is at 8.9 crore during FY14-FY23 and 6.6 crore during FY04-FY14.” It added, “The total labour force in India is at 59.7 crore, which is nearly equivalent to 56.8 crore as per the recently released ASUSE [Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises] survey. This total number of labour force is significantly different from private employment surveys.”

However, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), a private data-gathering agency which publishes data on employment and unemployment, reported in July that in June 2024, the unemployment rate had risen to an eight-month high of 9.2% up from 7% in the previous month. This was contrary to the official narrative of massive employment generation.

What is a citizen to make of these conflicting reports and statements? Ground reports suggest that unemployment is a major issue. In February, about 47 lakh applicants appeared for an exam to select around 60,000 constables in Uttar Pradesh. In 2022, 1.25 crore aspirants applied for the Railway Recruitment Board’s Non-Technical Popular Categories recruitment exam. There were protests in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other



Arun Kumar

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Public confusion over the extent of unemployment is a result of the differences in the various data bases used

Living in denial about unemployment

States when the Agnipath scheme was announced in 2022. Indeed, the situation for the educated youth is grim, yet we expect them to be in the vanguard of ‘demographic dividend’.

Public confusion over the extent of unemployment is a result of the differences in the various data bases used. Let us examine these.

KLEMS data

The most recently cited KLEMS data is “a comprehensive measurement tool to monitor and evaluate productivity growth in the Indian economy”. It does not estimate employment but uses the official data available. For labour input it uses the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), conducted between 1983 and 2011-12, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).” Clearly, the KLMS data is based on official data from the PLFS, the ASUSE survey, etc. Given this, why would the employment series from KLEMS differ from the total employment figure given by government agencies? So, neither the Prime Minister nor the SBI should present KLEMS data as an independent source of employment data. Clearly, the officers and economists briefing Mr. Modi misguided him.

Why do different sources give widely varying estimates of employment? This is due to the highly complex structure of the Indian economy and the paucity of reliable data. India consists of the organised and the unorganised sectors. The data for the organised sector is available from statutorily published annual data. That is not the case for the unorganised sector, which employs 94% of the labour force. No other big country has such a huge unorganised sector for which data are sparse. This sector consists of possibly 11 crore farms and 6.5 crore MSME units. Surveying them annually is difficult. Data have been collected periodically via the Census every 10 years and the ASUSE survey every five years. The government is now committed to bringing out the ASUSE survey annually. But ASUSE survey data in turn depend on data from the Census and the Urban Frame Survey (UFS). There has been no Census since 2011 and UFS data apparently pertain to 2012-17. So, outdated data are being used.

Normally, in the absence of current data, earlier data should be acceptable. But 2016-2024 was an abnormal period with four shocks to the economy: demonetisation in 2016, introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, the Non-Banking Financial Companies crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. When shocks occur, use of pre-shock

data for sampling creates problems due to structural changes. These four shocks specifically impacted the unorganised sector, the one that the ASUSE survey seeks to estimate. Many units closed down due to lack of working capital. People migrated, the size of towns and villages changed. Thus, a sample based on the 2011 Census would not be appropriate. Closures will not be captured and only the surviving units will be a part of the sample. The ASUSE 2024 Report says, “... 16,382 FSUs (8,495 in rural and 7,887 in urban) have been surveyed; and the total number of establishments surveyed has been 4,58,938 (2,58,296 in rural areas and 2,00,642 in urban areas). ASUSE 2022-23 gives an estimate of 6.50 crore establishments...”

Due to the shocks, the rural-urban ratio and the ratio of smaller and larger units would have changed. This could give an upward bias to the number of establishments and their employment.

Differences in PLFS and CMIE

PLFS is the other official data source quoted widely. It differs greatly from the CMIE data. This has to do with differences in definitions, such as who is counted as employed. The CMIE adopts the International Labour Organization definition and counts only those who get an income from work as employed. PLFS counts those who are working even if they do not get an income from it. So, those giving free labour or those who sit in fields but have no work also get counted as employed by PLFS. Consequently, in the last few years, PLFS has given around 50%-55% labour force participation, while CMIE says the figure stands at 40%-45%. That means there is a huge difference of about 90 million between the two. The question then is, doesn’t nearly everyone do something or the other? There are millions of home makers doing work, for example. Further, PLFS counts the disguised unemployed and the under-employed. So, as far as PLFS is concerned, almost no one is unemployed, while CMIE tells us how many have simply given up looking for work. That is also unemployment, which the official data do not recognise.

The ground-level situation of unemployment is apparent from the frequent reports about the youth struggling to get work and facing issues in examinations. But the government is in denial. Recently, the officials have denied the problems of using data that have holes in them or of citing KLEMS data from the RBI, which does not independently estimate employment. Why not admit the problem and act, lest the growing youth frustration boil over?

The promise of parametric insurance



Safi Ahsan Rizvi

Indian Police Officer is Adviser, National Disaster Management Authority

The warmest year on record was 2023. A report estimated that losses from natural disasters amounted to \$280 billion in 2023, of which only about \$100 billion was insured. The gap in insurance coverage was particularly wide between developed and developing economies. With the world experiencing a surge in extreme weather events, the insurance industry needs to enhance disaster resilience by devising a number of alternative methods of coverage.

At present, the globally accepted method of disaster risk reduction is to transfer risk through indemnity-based insurance products, which require physical assessment of damage for payouts. However, the past is no longer a precedent for what could follow. When calamities such as cyclones, floods, tsunamis, and storms hit large populations and wipe out settlements, especially of the economically disadvantaged communities who have little record of their assets, it becomes difficult to verify the losses.

Changing course

In this context, several insurance products based on the parameters of a weather event are needed. In these, payments are triggered based on real-time measurements such as rain of more than 100 mm per day for two days in succession, or specific flood levels, and wind speed. For such ‘parametric’ products, payments are made regardless of actual loss or physical verification. Disaster-prone island countries have largely shifted from the risk retention model and embraced such insurance for climate adaptation. Over time, this has built trust between states and insurers, leading to more reasonable pricing and trigger-payout combinations.

Thus far, insurers have been offering standardised parametric products only for low frequency, high-impact disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, and hurricanes. In 2023,

Given South Asia’s reputation as the world’s most ‘climate-vulnerable zone’, India could consider parametric products

for instance, after a 6.8 magnitude earthquake struck Morocco, the country received \$275 million parametric insurance cover arranged with the help of the World Bank. High frequency but low-impact disasters such as landslides, rain, and heat were overlooked, but the consequences of climate change are slowly changing that.

In India, one of the earliest uses of parametric policies was crop insurance, initiated by the government some years ago. The successful Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana is based on verification of loss, while a new parametric product, the Restructured Weather Based Crop Insurance Scheme is based on threshold limits, not requiring field verification. Over the years, the private insurance industry in India has witnessed a rising number of offers of parametric products, customised for States, corporations, self-help groups, and micro-finance institutions. They insure disasters such as extreme precipitation, which is an endemic issue in the north-east; cyclones, which are a standard occurrence in coastal States; and extreme heat, a suddenly prominent and much-published hazard.

Who should bear the burden of paying premiums for parametric insurance coverage? Nagaland was the first State to buy a parametric cover for extreme precipitation in 2021. Based on lessons learned, it has tendered for the second improved version by fixing an absolute annual premium, duration and rate-on-line, allowing bidders to compete over lower threshold limits and maximised payouts. It has imaginatively used the India Meteorological Department’s credible supply of data on precipitation for tehsil-sized grids, opening the doors for other States to consider similar products for insurance against cyclones, wind, and rain.

The Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation in Kerala too has implemented parametric insurance for dairy farmers for lower milk yields due to heat stress to cattle. Some non-profits and

micro-finance institutions have also worked with private insurers to implement daily payouts to workers who lose wages due to excessive heat, based on pre-defined temperature and moisture triggers. Some large corporates have initiated parametric products for cyclonic winds and high waves at competitive prices, using wind speed, cyclone tracks, and storm surge data. The recent impact of heavy rains in West Bengal, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Mizoram in the aftermath of Cyclone Remal underscores the need to consider such parametric insurance as a possible means to reduce the financial burden of the State.

Ensuring effective use

For governments to ensure effective use of parametric products, five factors are essential: precise thresholds and proper monitoring mechanisms; experience sharing between governments to incorporate lessons learned; following the mandatory bidding process for transparent price discovery; a widespread retail payout dissemination system; and encouraging premium payment by households in the long term. While this is more difficult in poorer populations, parametric insurance for earthquakes in New Zealand and Turkey has shown that it can be done.

India is uniquely placed for the use of such products, given that it has the Aadhaar-based payment dissemination system. Aided by multilateral institutions, the Pacific and Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Companies have displayed regional pooling of risk and have successfully implemented parametric contracts with the insurance sector. Given South Asia’s reputation as the world’s most “climate-vulnerable zone”, India and its neighbourhood could consider such products, pool their risks collaboratively, and strike better bargains with the world’s largest insurance companies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Railway accidents

Accountability is important in a democracy (“At least 2 dead, 31 injured as train derails in U.P.’s Gonda,” July 19). People must be held responsible for their actions and decisions which directly affect the public. Elected officials are entrusted with the mandate to serve and protect the interests of the people. When they fail to do so, it is not just a lapse in duty but a betrayal of public trust. Railway accidents show the consequences of oversight. Despite promises

of improvement, these incidents continue to occur, suggesting systemic failures within the administration. Holding ministers accountable is crucial for restoring public confidence.

Neeraj Patel
Mungeli

No remorse

This is a shocking and insensitive comment from Bhole Baba (“Nobody can avoid destiny and death is inevitable, says godman Bhole Baba,” July 18). He shows no remorse. It is truly

unfortunate that the name of this man has not been included in the FIR.

Tharcus S. Fernando
Chennai

Laws against superstition

Laws can protect people from harmful practices and scams (“Does India have enough laws to combat superstition?”, July 19). However, it is also a challenging task because many superstitions are part of cultural and religious traditions. Drafting these laws requires careful

thought to avoid offending communities or be seen as attacking their beliefs. To be effective, legal changes should focus on stopping harm while also promoting education to help people understand the dangers of certain superstitions.

Narayanan Kizhumundayur
Thrissur

Denied entry in a mall

No high-profile celebrity or politician wearing a dhoti would have been denied entry into the mall (“G.T. Mall faces seven-day closure for denying entry to farmer in dhoti,” July 19). This is clear classism at play.

G. Ramasubramanyam
Vijayawada

Thoothukudi firing

The Justice Aruna Jagadeesan Inquiry Commission report had pinned the blame on the police and top officials of the district administration (“DVAC to inquire if assets were accumulated by police and revenue officials before and after the incident,” July 15). Clearly, restraint by the police and timely intervention by the district administration could have prevented the incident.

Chandhrashekar
Chennai

Corrections & Clarifications
In a report, “Karnataka Bill mandates 50% quota for locals in management positions” (Front Page, July 17, 2024), the percentage for non-management positions was mentioned as 75%. It should have been 70%

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GROUND ZERO



In memoriam: Kaveri Nakhwa's garlanded photograph placed in one corner of the living room floor at her residence in Worli Koliwada. EMMANUAL YOGINI

‘Kaveri could have been anyone’s mother’

In another hit-and-run case in Maharashtra, this time in Mumbai, the language of money and power screams louder than the voices of the vulnerable. **Purnima Sah** reports from the fishing village of the victim's family and the political muscle that kicked in from the alleged perpetrators

Almost every resident of Tare Galli locality in Mumbai's Worli Koliwada knows Kaveri Nakhwa as a generous, kind, hard-working woman, who always wore a bright smile. Kaveri and her husband, Pradeep Liladhar Nakhwa, 50, from the Koli community of fisherfolk, had gone to buy fresh fish from the wholesalers at Crawford Market at 4.30 a.m. on July 7. It was a 25-minute scooter ride from their home. When the couple, who had been married for 25 years and had two adult children, were headed back with a basketful of fish to their regular selling spot in Worli, it was about 5.15 a.m.

On the road, they were hit

Pradeep says what happened that morning is embedded in his head. "I was riding the scooter at 30-40 km per hour. Suddenly, near Ceejay House, our scooter's tail light was hit at such a speed that within seconds we were thrown up in the air. We fell on the bonnet of the car. I slipped off to one side, but Kaveri fell in front," remembers Pradeep, who has not been able to get restful sleep since that day. "The visuals, her voice, and the crushing sound of the car is stuck with me forever; I can't close my eyes and sleep in peace."

He says despite him begging, the driver drove over Kaveri's body, dragging her along. "I tried to run after the car, but he drove away," Pradeep says. He then boarded a *kaali-peeli* (taxi) to reach his wife, but could not find her body.

Mihir Shah, 24, had allegedly been drinking with his friends at a bar in Juhu. The legal drinking age in Maharashtra is 25. He allegedly dropped his friends home in a luxury car, then took another one out, and drove out with his driver, Rajrishi Bidawat, in the passenger seat.

The police say that Mihir has admitted that he hit the couple, saw their bodies fly up in the air, and dragged Kaveri from anywhere between 100 metres and 1.5 kilometres. Then he swapped seats with Bidawat, took an autorickshaw from Kala Nagar in Bandra East, and went to a friend's home in Goregaon, say the police. The friend informed Mihir's sister, who then arrived there and took him to her home in Borivali.

Mihir's father, Rajesh Shah, in whose name the car was registered, was arrested by the Mumbai police along with Bidawat on July 7. Rajesh was the deputy leader of the Shiv Sena's Palghar district unit and an aide of party president and Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.

The Mumbai police say he played a key role in



She would have turned 45 on August 19. We had plans to surprise her with presents and celebrate her birthday with all her loved ones

AMRUTA NAKHWA
Kaveri's daughter

destroying evidence in the case – removing the car's number plate and a sticker of the political party – and delaying his son's arrest. On June 8, the magistrate court granted Rajesh bail. His lawyers, Sudhir Bhardwaj and Ayush Pasbola, say he secured a provisional cash bail of ₹15,000.

The Shah family booked a resort in Shahapur in Thane district and Mihir reached there in another luxury car along with his mother, sisters, and two friends. The police say he shaved his beard and cut his hair short as his photos had been flashed across newspapers and television news channels by then.

On July 8, late in the evening, the police traced Mihir's location to Virar when his friend turned his mobile phone on for just 15 minutes. He was arrested on July 9.

The children mourn

Worli Koliwada is a fishing village located on the northern tip of Worli island. The residents settled here over 500 years ago and are considered the original inhabitants of Mumbai. Kolis belong to a seafaring community that traditionally fish in the nearby waters for their living. In Koli households, women are the chief decision-makers. Many men wake up at 2 a.m. to catch fish in the sea and their wives sell the catch in the market. Pradeep is also a fisherman. During the monsoon, when fishing is banned, families source fish from the wholesale market that gets its stock from farms and cold storage.

At home, Kaveri's daughter, Amruta, 24, says, "She would have turned 45 on August 19. We had

plans to surprise her with presents and celebrate her birthday with all her loved ones." Yash, her 21-year-old son, remains in shock, does not speak to anyone, and has confined himself in a room. Kaveri's garlanded photograph has been placed in one corner of the living room floor, with a lamp and fruits on a plate beside it.

Refuting media reports and the police statement that Kaveri was dragged for 100 metres to 1.5 km, Pradeep says, "The distance from Ceejay House to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link is 10.9 km and it takes at least 20 minutes to drive there." The taxi driver suggested they go to the police station, he says. "I informed the Worli police station and within 15 minutes the control room said that a woman's body was found at the Sea Link."

The same day, the police took Pradeep back to the spot for an initial investigation. "The fish and lobsters were still scattered around, some crushed by moving vehicles. We could not find her *mangalsutra*, bangles, not even her clothes. The car dragged her at such a speed that when she was found all bruised, there was nothing on her body," he remembers.

The police inspector on duty that day had not spoken to his mother for two years. After he saw Kaveri's body, he cried. "I called my mother. Kaveri could have been anyone's mother," he says.

Relatives and neighbours gather every day at the Nakhwa house expressing grief and anger. They are planning to stage a candle march when the rain subsides. They are also discussing staging a protest in front of the Worli police station if they do not get justice in the case.

Soon, politicians arrive

On July 11, amid heavy security, State School Education Minister Deepak Kesarkar entered the narrow lanes of Koliwada. With an umbrella held for him, the Minister spent half an hour with the Nakhwa family, asking them to have faith in the judiciary and assuring them that the culprit will be given the strictest punishment. So far, over 15 political leaders from different parties have visited the family.

"All the politicians visiting us are either offering lawyers or money," says Pradeep, then unleashing a barrage of questions. "Why should I take their money or lawyer? What is the guarantee that they won't suppress my case however they want? I will sell my house, live on the streets, but fight till my last breath until I get justice for my wife. On the day of the accident, why did Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis not say a word? Why have they not visited us yet? Will they be quiet if it



Considering the gravity of the crime, it is important to find out who all harboured Mihir Shah when he went missing after the accident

RAVINDRA PATIL AND BHARTI BHOSLE
Public prosecutors

had happened to their own wife and children? Would they have let me go if I had committed such a crime?"

Prominent politicians such as Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray, Congress MLA Aslam Shaikh, and Shiv Sena leader Milind Deora also visited the family. Thackeray had told mediapeople, "This is not a mere accident. This must be treated like a murder case. They allowed Mihir Shah to be in hiding for 60 hours and allowed him to remove the number plate and party symbol from the car."

Then, "Will the illegal CM have the guts to run a bulldozer on Mihir Rajesh Shah's home? Whoever is responsible, we will not spare anyone, we will punish everyone," the Sena (UBT) leader said, though it was unclear how he would ensure this.

Addressing reporters, Shaikh had said, "This is not a government for the common people, but one that supports those who crush common people under their car. The government will have to pay for the pain of the Nakhwa family." The State Assembly elections are due later this year.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut also criticised the way the case was handled from the beginning and alleged that Rajesh has connections with underworld gangsters. On July 10, the Shiv Sena chief sacked Rajesh from the post of deputy leader of the party.

Deora tweeted on X (previously Twitter), "I visited late Kaveri Nakhwa's family, who was killed in the Worli hit-and-run case, to express my deepest condolences and to assure them of my unwavering support in helping them get justice."

On July 11, the Chief Minister announced a financial aid of ₹10 lakh from the CM's Relief Fund for the Nakhwa family and said action will be taken against all pubs and bars that operate late into the night. "All legal and financial support will be provided to the family of the victim by the State government. I believe the victim's family is like our family," the CM had told reporters.

Pradeep now gets calls from NGOs and individuals offering help. "I am getting calls from different parts of India, and I do not even know these people. All are either offering money or legal support. What will I do with the money when the centre of our life, our backbone, is taken away?"

Mumbai sometimes drives dirty

On July 9, the State Excise Department suspended the licence of the bar in Juhu, Vice-Global Tapas Bar, for serving liquor to Mihir. Officials also alleged that Mihir and his friends were served 12 large pegs of whiskey on that day and the bill was ₹18,000. On July 10, the civic body of Mumbai demolished unauthorised constructions on the ground floor and terrace of the bar.

On July 16, Mihir was sent to judicial custody for 14 days. His lawyers opposed the remand order at the Metropolitan Magistrate's court in Sewri, saying it was unnecessary.

Representing the Mumbai police, public prosecutors Ravindra Patil and Bharti Bhosle asked the court to extend his custody as the accused had not revealed important information in the case. "Considering the gravity of the crime, it is important to find out who all harboured him when he went missing after the accident. He has not talked about them yet," the prosecution said.

The defence counsel said the police's remand report states that they have recorded the statements of 27 witnesses.

Retired Justice, Sandeep Shinde, the chief prosecutor in the Salman Khan case, says, "In many high-profile cases, including the recent one in Pune, the rich have pushed their drivers forward to own all the allegations. In the Worli hit-and-run case too, they tried this, but in this case, the victim's husband's statement should have been recorded at the magistrate court on the first day itself." Pradeep's statement was only recorded before the court on July 16.

In 2002, actor Salman Khan was arrested for allegedly running over five homeless people sleeping on a pavement in Bandra. In 2015, he was acquitted due to lack of evidence. In 2013, a high-end luxury car owned by Reliance Ports, a private company controlled by industrialist Mukesh Ambani, reportedly driven by his older son, Akash, met with an accident, but the driver, Bansilal Joshi, claimed responsibility for it.

Kaveri had dreams

Kaveri's parents, Kesari Nath Wadhkar, 77, and Bharati Wadhkar, 67, cannot stop crying. "If we do not demand justice for our Kaveri, then the rich who live without fear of law and order will be encouraged to repeat it with someone else tomorrow," Bharati says.

Rina Dabri, one of Kaveri's two sisters, remembers her as someone who would call the entire family every day over the phone.

"Her dreams were very small, just like any woman from a lower-income family. She would have been happy even with a temporary job for her children. When our children started to earn, she was telling me one day that our bad days are over. From the scooter to the renovation of our house and this air-conditioner, everything was bought with her small savings," Pradeep shares, in their 400-square-foot home.

Kaveri was loved by her daily customers. A family that bought fish from her flew down from Dubai when they heard about the accident. "There is so much support only because of the woman she was," says her father.

Pradeep remembers how Kaveri kept a stock of bajra to feed birds on their veranda. "Every day, at least 70 birds would fly in. Now, some birds won't eat when we feed them," he says.

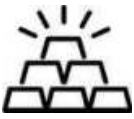


Heartbroken: Pradeep Nakhwa, the deceased woman's husband, at his residence in Worli Koliwada, Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Adding lustre

Gold users must get a transparent Re-based price

The India Bullion and Jewellers Association (IBJA) and All India Gem and Jewellery Domestic Council’s bid to make all gold jewellers quote the same rate for gold across States — ‘one nation, one rate’ — underlines the problems faced by consumers in dealing with non-transparent pricing of gold jewellery.



Though India is the second largest gold consumer with annual demand of over 800 tonnes, consumers do not have any official reference rate with which they can verify the rate quoted by the jeweller. That said, while a single rate across the country is certainly needed, it needs to be discovered under regulatory supervision and cannot be left to industry associations. Currently many jewellers use the reference price fixed twice a day by the IBJA. This price is fixed based on the average of the buy and sell quotes from ten of the biggest gold dealers in the country. Since most of the gold consumed in the country is imported, the dealers use the international price of gold as the base, translate this price in rupee terms, add tax and pad the price further to add their commission to arrive at their quote. But such fixing of gold prices is open to manipulation and misuse as was seen in the London gold fix scandal in 2013. There is a need to provide consumers with a transparently derived domestic reference rate which is under regulatory supervision.

Meanwhile, facilitating trading of physical gold on Indian commodity exchanges has been under discussion for a while now. In 2018, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced that a regulated spot gold exchange will be set up to address the issue. The 2021-22 Budget took the idea forward by proposing the launch of electronic gold receipts. This allowed investors and business entities to deposit their gold in vaults and to trade the EGR issued by the vault in stock exchanges. These EGRs could be converted back into gold whenever needed. But two years after launch of these instruments, not much headway has been made with investors largely staying away. Lack of awareness among investors regarding the benefits of EGRs including standardisation, transparency, ease of storage and conversion could be one reason for the apathy. But the costs associated with EGR with investors having to pay securities transactions tax, the cost of assaying, storage, delivery of gold, could be making it unattractive when compared to other forms of non-physical gold such as gold ETFs and sovereign gold bonds.

The Centre and SEBI can try to bring down the costs for the investors to make the EGRs more attractive. Stakeholders also are of the opinion that the GST of 3 per cent that must be paid while moving gold out of bank vaults to be deposited in exchange-designated vaults, is turning out to be a burden. The GST credit can be claimed only when the receipts are converted back into gold. Tackling these issues could help in discovering a reliable rupee-denominated gold price on exchanges.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

“Our government faces significant challenges in the power sector in terms of addressing the legacy losses of ₹1,29,503 crore created by the previous government; bringing back investors’ confidence; and rebuilding ‘Brand Andhra Pradesh’,” Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, said when releasing the White Paper on AP power sector, recently.

Power is not a challenge for Naidu alone but even in the sibling State Telangana, where Chief Minister Revanth Reddy is facing his own set of legacy issues in the sector — irregularities in power purchase agreements, controversy over privatisation of the sector, among others. The new dispensation in Telangana has proposed the formulation of a new energy policy.

The developments in these two States also bring out the fact how politics governs the power sector in the country. And because of uncertainties and shifting of goal posts, the one who suffers the most is the end-consumer.

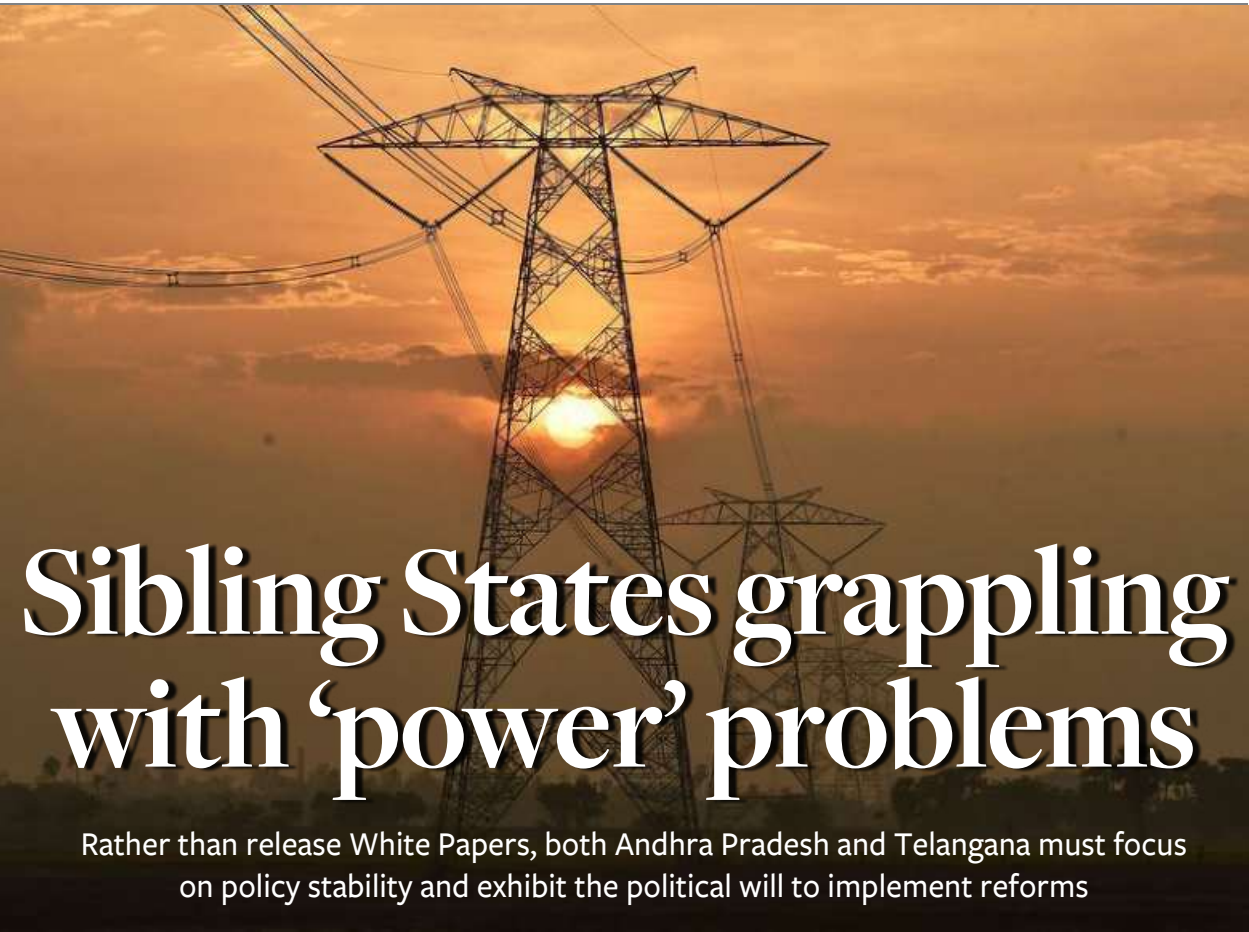
As M Venugopal Rao, convener of the Centre for Power Studies, puts it, “A harmonious balance to the extent practicable between demand and power supply should be there when going for policy stability.”

Rao, who has closely tracked the sector in both the States, holds that “the policies pursued by both Chandrababu government and the previous Jagan Mohan Reddy government (in Andhra Pradesh) are similar with just a degree of difference.”

Instead of coming out with papers, a better approach would have been to analyse the decisions which have led to the current power sector situation in the State, he said.

Rao has a point here. Any reform in the power sector to succeed needs at least a decade of policy stability, whereas what is frequently seen is whenever a new dispensation comes, instead of doing course corrections, the work is brought to a standstill.

Talking about way forward in the White Paper, Naidu says: “Our primary objective is to provide quality and reliable power at affordable rates to all consumers in the State without any power cuts. Currently, the energy sector is rapidly transforming with technological advancements and we intend to take advantage of this transformation to address the



Sibling States grappling with ‘power’ problems

Rather than release White Papers, both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana must focus on policy stability and exhibit the political will to implement reforms

challenges being faced by AP Power Utilities.”

Naidu goes on to say, “We have introduced Power Sector Reforms 1.0, Power Sector Reforms 2.0 and now we need Power Sector Reforms 3.0 to transform the sector for empowering the society. Hence, we are seeking inputs and support from all stakeholders to make Andhra Pradesh an energy hub...”

Well, one cannot take away from Naidu the reforms he had introduced during his previous stint. What was desired was consistency.

Before Naidu, Revanth Reddy’s Telangana State Power Sector White Paper was released in December 2023. The paper said, “the accumulated losses of Discoms as on March 31, 2023, stood at ₹62,461 crore. Discoms have a debt of ₹81,516 crore as on October 31, 2023. Of this, ₹30,406 crore has been borrowed as working capital primarily to pay power charges to the generators. Despite this, an amount of ₹28,673 crore of generation and transmission dues remain to be paid by the Discoms.”

The developments in the two States — Andhra Pradesh and Telangana — bring out how politics governs the power sector in the country.

Payment of dues is a challenge both the States are facing. In fact, the Telangana White Paper goes on to say “...merely to keep the power supply going, Discoms are resorting to borrowings on a regular basis which have reached unsustainable proportions. There is very limited scope to continue to fund the purchase of power through these means. Discoms are now finding themselves in debt trap due to failure of government in paying its dues and commitments to the sector.”

Clearly both States are aware of the challenge they face. A lot needs to be done, Rao said.

CHALLENGES FACING DISCOMS

According to Vikram V, Vice-President & Co-Group Head, Corporate Rating, ICRA, “In terms of reforms, the Discoms face typically three challenges: First , operating inefficiencies which lead to commercial losses. Second, tariff. If you don’t pass on the variation in power purchase cost or the other cost to the customers in a timely manner, there is a build-up of large losses on the books. And third, collection of the subsidy and collection of dues from government departments.”

A major component to ensure revival of the power sector is tariff alignment. Touching tariff can be a very politically sensitive issue, therefore, all political parties across boundaries tread

cautiously. According to Vikram, if there is a requirement of increasing tariff then it can be done in a gradual manner.

“You don’t have to do it in one go. Obviously, if you do a big hike in a single stroke that will have an impact on the consumer sentiment and their own financial position. Typically the way to do it is in a gradual fashion like what we see in Karnataka or say in Gujarat,” he added.

Besides tariff alignment, the other aspect is how you optimise the cost? “Need to put in place a process to optimise the power purchase mix. But this will not happen in a day. It will take maybe three or four years to change that. So if it is a combination of measures — reduce your cost, improve your realisation, ensure that subsidy payments are made timely,” he said.

Says Association of Power Producers DG, Ashok Kumar Khurana, “Everyone knows what needs to be done — bill the power that is supplied, collect the bill and align the tariffs to reflect true cost. To ensure the above, what is required is sustained political will.”

Instead of coming out with papers it would be better if the current dispensations offered the alternatives that are available and how they are going to resolve the current situation.

In the power sector, it is maintaining consistency in the reforms process that matters the most.

Medical education financing needs a reset

Funds must go to improving existing medical colleges, and for setting up new ones in districts with higher teacher potential

Neethi V Rao
Amrita Agarwal

Strengthening medical education has been a key priority area for the government. There’s a need for several strategic changes to the nature of government spending, with focus more on scaling and improving the quality of existing medical colleges, and outcome-based financing. Also, thrust must be given to targeted vouchers for merit-cum-need based students instead of input-based financing, viability gap funding (VGF) in districts with higher supply of teachers, and enhancing funding of biomedical research at quality medical colleges, both government and private.

In December 2023, the government disclosed in the Rajya Sabha that 157 new medical colleges had been approved under the Centrally sponsored scheme. The announcement in the Interim Budget is expected to translate into further increases in the outlay towards this scheme, though the actual implementation of the scheme varies across States.

Existing medical colleges are distributed unequally among States, with Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh,

Maharashtra, Karnataka and West Bengal accounting for nearly half of all government medical colleges. Central sector schemes like the PM Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY) have been used by the government to establish new AIIMS-like institutions in underserved areas and small-towns. However, the new medical colleges in remote areas struggle to attract teachers and patients, leading to inefficiencies.

NOT DETRIMENTAL TO EQUALITY

Our research has shown that investments in scaling existing medical colleges or starting new ones in existing districts are not detrimental to equality, as there is continued mobility of graduates across States enabled by bonds and employment opportunities. This is akin to a few pharma hubs cost effectively producing sufficient drugs for the entire country, and for the world.

An analysis of expenditures of government medical colleges in Maharashtra found that older, higher-ranked colleges spend more than the newer colleges per medical graduate. Suggesting that continued investments are necessary for maintaining the quality of medical education. In addition to sustained investments to enhance quality, there is a need to review the



BUDGETS. More should go for biomedical research and training

current input-based budgetary allocations. The current allocations are not geared towards efficiency and/or quality output, nor do they allow targeting of government spending for addressing inequities. Outcome-based financing along with vouchers for targeted incentives will enable more meritorious medical students from rural areas to finance their education.

The government had announced a VGF scheme in June 2020 to incentivise private sector participation in setting up medical educational institutions in underserved districts by utilising existing district hospitals. Data from the website of the Ministry of Economic Affairs on PPPs reveal that Uttar

Pradesh alone has six such proposals along with others from Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Karnataka.

However, our analysis of the revenue models of private hospitals of various sizes found that the economics may not support the participation of higher-quality private medical colleges. Instead, VGF schemes in remote areas may be creating perverse incentives for participation largely by smaller, poorer-quality private players. The government should reconsider VGF focus, towards existing districts with high teacher potential.

In addition to funding infrastructure, human resources also need attention. Increased government spending on biomedical research, training and global collaborations at medical colleges (both government and private) will incentivise highly trained medical practitioners to participate in teaching. Budgets for the incorporation of technology, AI, simulations and innovative teaching methods are necessary to mitigate at least some of the effects of faculty shortage and meet the demand for trained medical professionals.

Neethi is Fellow, and Amrita is Visiting Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Views expressed 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.

Job reservation backlash

This refers to the editorial ‘Retrograde idea’ (July 19). The recent job reservation Bill of Karnataka is ludicrous. The States is India’s IT headquarters, housing thousands of medium and large size tech companies which contribute significantly to the State’s GDP. Skilled labour and modern infrastructure are vital for IT companies. In the past States like Maharashtra, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana tried to float similar policies but had to withdraw them abruptly due to opposition from across industries. Such moves by any State would be a disservice to skilled and productive workers.

GS Santharam
Madurai

Biden on the back-foot

This refers to ‘Biden gets a reprieve, but a temporary one’ (July 19). The latest turn of events make it clear that Trump is surging ahead with the sympathy wave created by the assassination attempt and the inherent weakness prevailing in the Democratic party, caused largely by the ineffective leadership of Biden. The Democrats haven’t been able to leverage the court cases against Trump.

AG Rajmohan
Anantapur, AP

Splurging on weddings

Apropos ‘Wedding expenses drive farmers further into debt’ (July 19), societal pressures play a big part in farmers celebrating their children’s weddings on a scale they cannot

afford. Many small farmers are forced to sell whatever little holdings they have in order to pay for the expenses incurred for the weddings. While it may seem economically foolish to borrow to celebrate weddings, it does create a bonding among the villagers which is absent in urban India. Going against the trend of celebrating grand weddings would mean the family facing the taunts and jibes of their tribe for generations.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

Behavioural economics

The article ‘Does public policy need to be behavioural?’ (July 19) made for a good read. The consumer is rational to the extent of spending his

scarce resources to get maximum satisfaction. However, irrationality creeps in his consumption behaviour since he is guided by monotonic preference too which in essence means he would like to have more of a good than even really necessary. For instance, when the Tamil Nadu government offered television free of cost to every ration card holder in the State a few years ago, the rich and the poor gleefully accepted it.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Interest on savings

The article ‘A case for tax waiver on savings’ (July 19) has made out a logical and cogent case for comprehensive examination of the real returns on savings and to consider waiving tax on savings.

It is a well known fact that a large section of people, especially senior citizens, depend on interest earned on savings, either in bank savings accounts or term deposits or in governments small savings schemes. However, the real returns on savings has fallen drastically, due to high inflation rate. Making matters worse for them, government taxes those meagre returns on savings also. Banks also have not been considerate towards depositors. They promptly effected changes in interest on loans in consonance with repo rate hikes in recent years, but the hike in interest rates on deposits was not in tune with the repo rate changes.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

The Fed should not cut interest rates yet



MICHAEL R STRAIN

With inflation cooling and unemployment rising in the United States, investors are betting that the Federal Reserve will cut interest rates. At the time of this writing, market prices imply a less than 2 per cent chance that the Fed will not reduce rates at its

policy-setting meeting in September, and even indicate a 7 per cent chance that it will lower rates at the next meeting later this month. The argument for cutting rates is straightforward. As measured by the consumer price index (CPI), the US experienced no inflation in May and deflation in June. At the same time, the unemployment rate has been trending up since last summer. At 4.1 per cent, it is 70 basis points above its post-pandemic low. When the unemployment rate goes up a little, it goes up a lot, which is why many believe that the Fed should declare victory in its battle with inflation and begin its cutting cycle. But this view, while reasonable, is mistaken, because it misreads the outlook for inflation and the labour market. The Fed should not cut rates in

September, and certainly not this month. The Fed targets the price index on personal consumption expenditures (PCE), not the CPI. Like CPI inflation, core PCE inflation decelerated in May (June data are not yet available). But using this measure, monthly prices likely grew by around 0.2 per cent in June. According to my calculations, if that pace continues, underlying inflation will be stuck between 2.6 per cent and 3 per cent for the remainder of 2024—well above the Fed's 2 per cent target. In addition to the uncertainty about whether inflation is moving sustainably toward the Fed's target, the underlying drivers of consumer demand remain strong. Low unemployment is increasing earnings. Average wages have been growing faster than consumer prices for more than a year, boosting households' purchas-

ing power. Fixed-income flows are robust, and asset-holders have seen an explosion of wealth from housing and equities. All of this will sustain consumer spending, putting upward pressure on prices. Moreover, following stronger than expected retail sales data for June, the Atlanta Fed's GDPNow model estimates real economic growth of 2.5 per cent in the second quarter. This rate of growth will arguably put upward pressure on prices. Yes, the labour market is weakening, but it is still strong. According to my calculations, labour demand continues to outpace labour supply. Job openings are normalising, but they remain 17 per cent higher than before the pandemic. This is reflected in wage inflation. Average wages grew by 3.9 per cent in June, year on year. While wage inflation (by this

measure) has fallen by 80 basis points in the past year, wages are still growing at a rate faster than is consistent with the Fed's target for consumer-price inflation. To be sure, the combination of cooling inflation and a softening job market does suggest that a less restrictive policy stance is advisable. But what matters for monetary policy are overall financial conditions, not merely the federal funds rate. Since the Fed's pivot in November, rising equity prices and falling long-term interest rates and credit spreads have eased financial conditions considerably. Much of the financial tightening caused by the relatively high Fed policy rate has been undone. Markets are doing the Fed's job for it. Fed Chair Jerome Powell said as much in congressional testimony last week: "It feels like policy is restrictive, but not intensely restrictive." Current economic conditions do not indicate that the Fed should begin cut-

ting rates in the next two months. Instead, the implication is more modest: Rising unemployment and underlying inflation below 3 per cent suggest that the Fed should start paying attention to both sides of its dual mandate. It may not be time to cut, but the Fed should be prepared to do so — especially if the labour market takes a dramatic turn for the worse, or if the next two PCE readings show clear evidence that underlying inflation is moving sustainably toward the Fed's target. But the risk that inflation gets stuck above 2.5 per cent is too great for policymakers to lower rates now. The Fed has entered the last mile of its fight against inflation. With its credibility at stake, it must not flinch before it reaches the finish line.

The writer is director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. ©Project Syndicate, 2024



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Time for accommodation



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) can be forgiven for asking themselves dismally when there will be good news. The party managed to form the government at the Centre with the help of allies after sliding to 240 seats from 303 in the previous Lok Sabha elections. After the retirement of nominated members, with 90 seats of the 245, it no longer has a majority of its own in the Rajya Sabha. It managed to win only two of the 13 Assembly byelections this month. This string of setbacks is manifesting itself in different ways but it is at its starkest in state politics. In the 18 states and Union Territories where the BJP has its government (albeit shored up by alliance partners in some) out of the 36, the government is showing aggression and assertion in defence. Equally, the Congress and other INDIA partners are now more combative than before. Political and policy contestation has suddenly become more vigorous. Take Rajasthan. The BJP has 58 per cent of the seats after the Assembly elections in 2023 and hence its majority is hardly in doubt: 115 of the 200. The

Congress has just 69, and has lost power. The Opposition we saw in the Assembly from December 2023 to June 2024 was largely somnolent, with the Congress preoccupied with internal stresses and strains. But then, in the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP could win only 14 seats of the 25 in the state, with the Congress getting eight and three seats going to other parties. So, the Budget Session of the Assembly, which started on July 4, is seeing unexpected assertion by the Congress. Every day, Opposition members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) question, disrupt, and decry government policy. Last week, Congress MLAs alleged that the Public Works Department was not consulting them in building roads in constituencies where they had won: It was still going by directions of the BJP MLAs who had lost the election. The BJP is hitting back by reverting to its core programme: The government is drafting a Bill to prevent religious conversion with stringent punishments, putting aside another one passed in 2008 by the Vasundhara Raje government but it never got presidential assent and was not brought back when Ms Raje was chief minister for a second term from 2013 to 2018. In Odisha, after 24 years of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) being in power, the BJP formed the government for the first time in the state in June this year. In the 147-member Assembly, while the BJP got an absolute majority with 78 seats, the BJD managed only 51. The BJD's defeat was made more humiliating by the BJP winning 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats; the lone remaining seat went to the Congress. For the longest time, the BJD has considered the Congress its primary

enemy in the state. But now, not only has the BJD withdrawn support to the BJP in the Rajya Sabha, it has also deployed its MLAs to "shadow" ministers in the BJP government, many of whom are first-time MLAs and have no experience in government or Assembly. Although the BJD has made no overtures to the INDIA alliance, that too could change. The BJP's policy plank is not clear: Is it going to continue the popular welfare schemes of the past government? Is it going to trash Naveen Patnaik and his nominees? In a state highly sensitive to Odia identity, is the government going to harp on the "double engine", leading the BJD to charge that Odisha is in danger of becoming just one more state for the BJP with little regard for its identity? In Uttar Pradesh, buoyed by the Lok Sabha results, the Samajwadi Party and Congress have begun talks to contest the 10 Assembly byelections, the elections to which could be announced anyday. In the past, differences dogged the two parties in Assembly elections. In Punjab, the BJP has just two MLAs in the Assembly. But despite losing seats it held in the Lok Sabha, its vote share was the highest ever. In recognition of this fact, it has made Ravneet Bittu (who lost the Lok Sabha poll) a Union minister. How the BJP consolidates its presence in the state will be interesting to watch. In the coming days, economic reform, especially relating to items on the Concurrent List of the Constitution, will need the support of state governments. In the current scenario, as political positions harden, so will resistance. Achieving a consensus is going to demand negotiation and flexibility.

Watching space Rahul

Congress party's score of 99 in the Lok Sabha elections has vaporised three painful questions dogging Rahul Gandhi for two decades. His record so far deserves a closer look

As Rahul Gandhi heads for the first full session of the third Narendra Modi government, he can take comfort in the fact that three painful questions dogging him for two decades have vaporised. First, does the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — or should it — take the Congress seriously? Second, does it — or should it — take Rahul Gandhi seriously? And third, can you bring back to life a party as nearly dead as the Congress? The answers to all three came by the afternoon of counting day, June 4. Not only must the BJP take the Congress and Rahul seriously, his party also sees a realistic route to power in 2029. At the very least, it has sprung back to life and is back in the fight. You will see it through the monsoon session beginning next Monday.

This session will have the added *tadka* (seasoning) of the Union Budget as well. The difference a rejuvenated Congress makes will also be evident in how the rest of the Opposition conducts itself. Read the op-ed that Trinamool MP Derek O'Brien wrote in *The Indian Express* this Friday. He opens his argument by asking who benefits more from parliamentary adjournments now. The obvious implication is that it's the Treasury benches. When the Opposition was in a hopeless minority, shouted, outnumbered and further squashed by the chair, adjournments and walkouts were desperate escape measures. Now, they'd rather be on the wrestling mat — or in the *akhara* if that sounds more apt — and wrestle.

His party, the Trinamool Congress, has done brilliantly by itself in West Bengal. Would they, however, be so upbeat if the Congress had not come back to life this time? No opposition alliance can be credible without a strong core. That's the expectation the Congress had been failing to meet so far. Now, this has changed. Even as I write this column late Friday afternoon as usual, I see on my television screen J P Nadda, still the BJP president in Odisha and focusing mostly on the Congress and the Gandhi family, especially the siblings. He calls them the educated illiterate ("padhe likhe anpadh"). This, in a state

where the Congress doesn't count for one bit. At least not yet. This leaves no doubt about the answers to the first two of the three questions we posited from Rahul's point of view. For the BJP, the Congress and the Gandhi trio matter. The answer to the third question will need to come from Rahul himself. Since he was first elected an MP in 2004, he has built a political image he'll need to get rid of. This is the image of shoot-and-scoot politics. Don't blame social media or the BJP/RSS's formidable whisper machine for it. Two decades in public life is long enough for reputations to be built, for better or worse. Until the 2024 elections, his was an uncertain commitment. If he moves on from it now after this summer's success, he'll change not just that reputation, but also answer that most important question: Does the Congress have a chance to win back power?

So far, he has had two-and-a-half major successes. In the 2009 Lok Sabha, he electrified his party by winning 21 seats in Uttar Pradesh. Almost all these candidates were his choice. The second was the 2018 winter victories in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The half was the Gujarat Assembly election of 2017 when he ran the BJP close. It was an astute campaign, built on a coalition of rebellious young caste leaders. It gave the BJP a scare. Mr Modi had to carry out a humongous rearguard campaign to salvage the state for his party. How close this election had been, and how sweet his victory was, showed in his speech to his party after the results. Cameras caught tears in his eyes, not something you see often, and we took note of it in a National Interest column on December 29, 2017.

The important thing is that after each one of these, Rahul didn't stay back to build on what had been achieved. The post-2009 period saw his somewhat curious evolution into a dissident within his party, culminating in that infamous public rejection of his own government's ordinance on convicted politicians, something he has regretted multiple times in interviews subsequently. After the state victories in December 2018, no attention was paid to building a coalition or rejuvenating his party. He



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Martian dream vs reality

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHEK

Elon Musk has unveiled an audacious vision: A million-strong Martian metropolis. For his SpaceX team, it's a heady mix of sci-fi fantasy (think spacesuits, domed habitats, the prospects of an interplanetary baby boom, and zipping around in Tesla Cybertrucks on a new world) and logistical nightmare. The American entrepreneur's grand blueprint has reignited the question: Can we really colonise Mars? Meanwhile, hundreds of kilometres above Earth, a different narrative has unfolded. Astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore are stranded aboard the International Space Station, after a malfunction in their cutting-edge Boeing Starliner. Their prolonged stay serves as a stark reminder: The path to our planetary neighbour is fraught with unforeseen challenges. NASA's projections do not anticipate human landings on Mars until the 2040s. Mr Musk wants a Martian foothold in just 20 years! To fund this, the world's richest man is ready to empty his pockets (he has publicly declared that he only accumulates assets to fund his plans for Mars), even planning to use his Boring Company for Martian tunnels. But the journey to Mars itself is a hurdle race: Navigating the flight trajectory, managing spacecraft and fuel, addressing radiation, microgravity, and astronaut health, grappling with isolation and psychological strain, ensuring communication during transit and

on Mars, and refining approaches to orbital insertion (we should first master soft-landing robots on Moon). Even the mere planning of a Mars mission is daunting. Launch windows between Earth and Mars open every two years when they are closest in their orbits, with travel durations ranging from 150 to 300 days. This makes resupplying essentials improbable: How can you send a care package across millions of kilometres? SpaceX's Starship, already the world's biggest rocket, will need steroids for Mars. Mr Musk envisions a colossal 150-metre-tall version. And despite reusability, each launch will cost a cool \$3 million. Need a rescue ship? Forget it. The dangers aren't just technical. Astronauts on long ISS missions suffer bone loss, vision problems, and even genetic changes. On Mars, these threats would be amplified by the constant barrage of radiation. So why Mars? Because it's the best bet for self-sufficiency — a key factor for extraterrestrial colonisation. Yet, despite optimistic projections for robotic manufacturing, Mars won't attain full autonomy until its population swells into the millions. Martians, despite making the most of locally available materials, will rely on Earth for specialised goods, and shipping them through such a distance will be expensive. The question then arises: What could Mars export in return? "If concentrated supplies of metals of equal or greater value than silver (such as germanium, hafnium, lanthanum, cerium, rhenium, and a host of others) were available on

Mars, they could potentially be transported back to Earth for a substantial profit," writes Robert Zubrin of National Space Society, an American space advocacy group, and author of *The Case For Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must*. Before fancy domes, early Martian astronauts will likely live in caves for protection. And, maybe even train on the Moon first. Generating breathable air and potable water is crucial. Technologies like MOXIE, which turns Martian carbon dioxide into oxygen, offer promising solutions. Water extraction and advanced recycling will be essential for survival. Also, space exploration comes with ethical considerations. Mars certainly has a hostile environment for human life, but on the Red Planet, humans will be the invasive species. We can't contaminate Mars with Earth germs, and vice versa (if there are Martian life forms). Strict international rules are needed to avoid an interplanetary version of a biological invasion. Then there's the ownership question. Does planting a flag mean you get a whole planet? The history of European colonisation isn't kind to such claims. If we're going to settle on Mars, we'll need a Martian Constitution — one that learns from our mistakes here on Earth. The road to Mars is long and arduous. But with the visionary drive of Elon Musk and the perseverance of astronauts like Williams and Wilmore, we might find ourselves among the stars one day.



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOVAL

Earlier in the week, Twitter turned 18 — a landmark birthday for the world's most popular microblogging site. Not many know that Twitter, which has now become X, emerged from the podcasting venture Odeo, which was founded in 2004 by Evan Williams, Biz Stone, and Noah Glass. (Williams and Stone had previously worked at Google, and Williams created the popular Web authoring tool Blogger.) Apple announced in 2005 that it would add podcasts to its digital media application iTunes. Odeo's leadership felt that the company could not compete with Apple and needed a new direction. Odeo's employees were asked about any interesting side projects they had, and a young engineer Jack Dorsey proposed a short message service (SMS) on which one could share small, blog-like updates with friends. Glass proposed the name Twttr. Dorsey sent the first message ("just setting up

my twttr") — called a tweet — on March 21, 2006. The completed version of Twitter, however, debuted only on July 16, 2006 — hence, the 18th birthday celebration this week. Seeing a future for the product, Williams, Stone, and Dorsey bought out Odeo and started Obvious Corp in October 2006 to develop the idea further. Interest in the platform sharply increased after it was presented at the South by Southwest music and technology conference in Austin, Texas, in March 2007. The following month, Twitter Inc was created as a corporate entity, thanks to an infusion of venture capital, and Dorsey became Twitter's first chief executive officer (CEO). In 2008, Williams ousted Dorsey as CEO, and two years later Williams was replaced as CEO by chief operating officer Dick Costolo. Twitter's social networking roots became obvious in April 2009, when actor Ashton Kutcher emerged as the victor in a race with CNN to become the first Twitter user to collect more than a million followers. Ever since celebrity "e-watching" has remained a significant draw to the service and Twitter soon became everyone's site for new news, opinions and one-upmanship. There have been many tentpole happenings, which we sometimes tend to forget have helped shape the Twitter of today:

Much has changed at Twitter since Elon Musk moved in as the new boss. For one, he killed the bird and rebranded the platform as "X". He fired almost 75 per cent of his workforce, lost advertisers due to concerns over the changes to community guidelines and launched a paid subscription. While it was once taken for granted that most of the world's top brands would include Twitter in their campaign strategies, many are now real-locating those ad dollars toward other channels. So what is it that could help Twitter/X retain its supremacy? ● The possibility of X launching a viable video ad product to align with its enhancement as a long-form video hub. ● X, under Musk, is headed towards becoming a closed platform where everyone needs to pay to participate. After a few months when the spammers, trolls, bots and general craft are cleared, an ad-supported model will open up to the world. ● With the introduction of features such as Twitter Spaces, video capabilities and incentives for content creators, the platform is paving the way for diverse ad formats, attracting a wider range of advertisers. From Threads to Koo — many have tried to edge out X, with little success. The big cake at the 18th birthday celebrations is well deserved.

The writer is chairman of Rediffusion



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

No better advice than one’s own

The SC has correctly laid down the principle of individual liberty in stressing on the importance of bail. But far too many in the judiciary appear hesitant in applying a dictum the top court first pronounced 40 years ago

Personal liberty is one of the cornerstones of a robust democracy. And the custodian of this liberty is typically the judiciary, firewalling the individual from the potential excesses of the State and its many prosecutorial arms. In younger democracies such as India, the judiciary assumes an even more important role as other safeguards in restraining police action are usually nascent. The biggest weapon at its disposal is bail, allowing it to free the individual from police overreach, and upholding the principle of innocence until proven guilty.

Time and again, the Supreme Court (SC) has underlined the importance of making bail the rule and jail the exception. The latest instance came this week, when the apex court condemned the practice of higher courts casually staying bail orders granted by lower courts, particularly when the accused is neither a terrorist nor considered a threat to society. It called the practice shocking, and underscored that such stays should not be granted merely at the behest of probe agencies, especially when reasons for bail have been detailed by the trial courts.

This is all good in theory. In practice, however, adherence to this principle has been haphazard and sporadic, right from district magistrates to the highest court in the land. Judges appear hesitant in granting bail and often automatically side with the arguments of investigating agencies — this becomes even more pronounced in high-profile cases or proceedings involving politicians. More egregiously, the practice of obtaining a stay on a bail order, or for bail proceedings to be treated as full-blown trial is now no longer a one-off occurrence.

For the common citizen, it effectively means that obtaining bail is as good as an acquittal (because case proceedings routinely linger for decades) and is considered dependent on their ability to muster financial resources and access to competent legal representation. Those who come from weaker sections or marginalised communities struggle to obtain either. In sensitive cases that involve stricter statutes, the problem is compounded, subverting the principle of bail over jail. Against a backdrop where the police appear all too happy to file FIRs for frivolous or motivated reasons (such as a photoshoot or allegations of interfaith coercion), this spells doom for personal and civil liberties and, by extension, democratic freedoms.

This has led to India’s jails getting crammed with people who have spent years behind bars without any shred of guilt being proven. At last count, three-fourths of people (nearly 400,000) who are incarcerated are undertrials. In 25 out of 29 states, prisons are at more than 100% capacity and the national average overcrowding stands at 131%, with more people spending more time behind bars than they did a decade ago. The responsibility for this has to be shared evenly — from overzealous agencies and lower courts to the SC that appears to not pay heed to its own sermons. When deciding bail matters, senior judges only need to recall the principles they extoll in weekend lectures on civil liberties. It is unfortunate that in a mature democracy, repeated appeals from the apex court have still not instituted a robust mechanism for bail that lower courts follow scrupulously — one that is unsparing but fair, incisive but transparent. If there is to be a change in attitude, and there needs to be one, it has to begin now.

{ THIRD EYE }

Barkha Dutt



In Jammu attacks, a clear imprint of the Pakistan army

There is, by all accounts, enough intelligence that points to a direct participation of the Pakistan army, and not just in the conventional sense of the Pakistan Deep State patronising security assets against India

Something sinister is unfolding in Jammu. While all terrorism is ghastly and every soldier’s life lost at the front line is a tragedy, the nature of the attacks suggests that this challenge is different from the norm that security forces are accustomed to.

“Sniper-like military precision” is the phrase being used by veterans and counter-insurgency heroes who have fought terrorists in these very mountains. As coffins of young men, in their early twenties, come home to distraught but stoic parents, experts flag what seems different. Even though the soldiers were appropriately shielded by bulletproof vests and helmets, the infiltrators were still able to get their shot by aiming at the relatively tiny exposed parts.

The weapons wielded by the terrorists are highly sophisticated too; their internal communication has not been easy to intercept. The forests of the Pir Panjal also provide camouflage and tactical heights from where they are able to lead ambush assaults on Army soldiers. Forty-eight soldiers have been killed in action in the Jammu region alone since December 2021 — 11 of these fatalities have been in 2024. More soldiers than terrorists have been killed in Jammu this year.

Kashmir Tigers, a shadow group of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), has claimed responsibility for these attacks. That by itself means very lit-

tle. The name itself reflects a tactical attempt to give the outfit a political rather than religious dimension. But these are cosmetic face masks that may hide the insidious reality of what is going on.

Let us remember that we are now only a few days away from the 25th anniversary commemoration of the Kargil War of 1999 between India and Pakistan. July 26 is celebrated as Vijay Diwas every year, and this year is a special milestone. Let us also remind ourselves of the role of the Northern Light Infantry soldiers of the Pakistan army in that war. It is a different matter that — in the worst disservice to a man in uniform — the Pakistan army at first refused to acknowledge these soldiers, and their burials and last rites were performed by the Indian Army.

If publicity is oxygen for terrorists, very little in the timing of their violence is a coincidence. Before the ambush in Doda, the terror attack in Kathua, Jammu, occurred on the day that Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist Burhan Wani was eliminated by our security forces in 2016. As the Kargil anniversary approaches, military veterans like Lt General Ata Hasnain are warning of “something big” that could be attempted by Pakistan to change the headlines and the mood in a week of commemorations.

There is, by all accounts, also enough intelligence that points to a direct participation of the Pakistan army. I don’t mean this just in the conventional sense of the Pakistan Deep State

FORTY-EIGHT SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN KILLED IN ACTION IN THE JAMMU REGION ALONE SINCE DECEMBER 2021 — 11 OF THESE FATALITIES HAVE BEEN IN 2024



If publicity is oxygen for terrorists, very little in the timing of their violence is a coincidence... Now, there will be pressure to deploy more troops in Jammu’s mountains

patronising Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar as security assets against India. Every single military veteran and police officer I have spoken to — some choosing to stay in the background, some on the record — believes that the guerilla operations in Jammu are the handiwork of highly-trained infantrymen or special forces soldiers.

In other words, the infiltrators inside Indian territory may not be only mercenaries with a gun for hire or ideologically indoctrinated terrorists; alongside them, the threat is evidently also from Pakistani soldiers, regulars of its army who have likely retired recently. Some veterans say it is not possible to rule out the involvement of serving Pakistan army personnel either. The operation bears their imprint in one or the other way.

So, what is the aim? I can think of a few. Move the centre of gravity of counter-insurgency operations to Jammu. Put pressure on the security grid — remember, the threat from China means that eastern Ladakh is also heavily militarised, in a way it was not some years

ago. Now, there will be pressure to deploy more troops in Jammu’s mountains. Seek to overshadow a week of Kargil headlines. Challenge the political narrative around the abrogation of Article 370. The record turnouts in the Kashmir Valley in the Lok Sabha elections ran counter to every position Pakistan has taken traditionally. And, of course, to delay the assembly elections. But as Lt General Hasnain reminds us, in 2002, there were 1,650 incidents of terrorism and a watershed assembly election was still held. Anything else would be to play into the hands of the terrorists.

Can Pakistan, with its internal turmoil and bleeding economy, afford a bigger conflagration with India? Is China aiding and abetting this plan? And how may India respond? These are no longer hypothetical questions as we enter another phase of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Pezeshkian and the art of complexity management

The election of Masoud Pezeshkian as the ninth Iranian President was no surprise for all those eligible voters who refused to vote or hesitated to approve the Iranian regime nearly two years after the national unrest which followed the death of Mahsa Amini in custody of the moral police in Tehran. Hundreds were killed and thousands arrested as the authorities sought to crush the protests. Reformist Pezeshkian won with 53.7% of the vote, defeating hardliner Saeed Jalili in the run-off polls.

According to Iran’s interior ministry, over 30 million Iranians voted in the run-off presidential election, higher than the 40% participation in the first round on June 28. The voting time was extended by two hours. However, many videos and photos posted on Iranian social media showed empty polling stations around Iran. Also, various political groups outside Iran gathered in front of the Iranian embassies and consulates and urged the electorate to boycott the election. This presidential election recorded the lowest voter turnout in the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979. In a speech on June 25, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called for a large turnout in the election in an effort to stop the enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Even the prisoners in Saqqez, in western Iran, were compelled to participate in the presidential election. However, many Iranians seem to believe that this

election, like many others, was staged and prepared by the entourage of the Supreme Leader and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

The new President is a reformist who has never been a serious critic of *velayat-e faqih*, the theocratic system under which the Supreme Leader has absolute authority. Pezeshkian, born in 1954, in Mahabad in northwestern Iran to an Azeri father and a Kurdish mother, was the health minister during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, but he gained prominence for his stance against the crackdown of the 2022 urban protests. During these protests, he said in an interview with Iran’s TV: “I bear part of the blame, the distinguished religious scholars and the mosques bear part of the blame, and the (Iranian) broadcasting authority bears part of the blame. Everybody should step forward and be held

accountable, rather than capture that girl, beat her up, and eventually deliver her body to her family.” Pezeshkian also aligned himself with the former Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who negotiated Iran’s 2015 nuclear deal with the US and the European Union. He later served as a deputy parliament speaker and backed the cause of the Iranian moderates.

Pezeshkian’s win is a way for the Supreme Leader and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards to find a solution to Iran’s growing legitimacy crisis and the succession battle that will follow



Ramin Jahanbegloo



Masoud Pezeshkian’s win is a way for Iran’s authoritarian theocratic regime to find a solution to its growing legitimacy crisis

85-year-old Khamenei’s eventual passing. Despite the appearances, Khamenei and his headline allies played in a manner to ensure that the polls produced no surprise and gave the impression that Pezeshkian’s victory was difficult to obtain. However, the truth is quite the opposite, since both reformists and the conservatives, who are loyal to the Iranian establishment, feared that a visibly rigged and undemocratic election would leave Iran’s rulers totally isolated from a population already tired of the theocratic regime with its tough oppressive laws and economic mismanagement. Versed in the art of regime survival, Iran’s leaders smoothly opened the doors of the political system through the election of a moderate President who is also acceptable to the military and paramilitary apparatus. Whatever the future of President Pezeshkian, one thing is clear. The war in Gaza showed the Iranian establishment that Iran’s ongoing move to hegemony in West

Asia is in urgent need for a back stage United States (US)-Iran diplomacy, especially if the American election in November produces a strong anti-Iran president like Donald Trump.

This said, the suspicious death of former President Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, in a helicopter crash leaves the interpretation open to those commentators who rightly believe that the so-called Iranian reformists function only as safety valves for a violent face-to-face encounter between the ultra-conservatives themselves, who represent different camps and try to reshape the Iranian political system in their own way by searching alliances between clerical autocrats and security and military officials. As for the reformists, they hope to have a piece of the cake, in spite of not having been invited to the party. That is why, if Pezeshkian and his “reformist” supporters refuse to play it smoothly, the friction between him as an elected President and the entourage of the unelected Supreme Leader will be stronger at every challenge. This balancing act will require from Pezeshkian the unproven skill of moderating the ultra-hardliner’s drive for hegemonic power without shutting the door on the face of the absolutist clerics or the warmonger Revolutionary Guards. Is President Pezeshkian witty enough to stop the Revolutionary Guards from intensifying repression at home and confrontation with the US? At a time when Iran and the region are in a potentially disastrous situation, the new president will need the art of complexity management to be able to solve the endless economic problems and an escalating legitimacy crisis of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Ramin Jahanbegloo, an Iranian philosopher, is director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace Studies, Jindal Global Law School. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



A lost opportunity for a forward-looking civil code

Given that it is a project over seven decades in the making and a core promise of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) manifesto, you would imagine that post-Independence India’s first Uniform Civil Code (UCC) would be breathing in the scale of its imagination — or at least reflective of Constitutional values of equality and dignity.

Uttarakhand’s UCC is neither. It does little to promote equality or inclusion, goes against the grain of more progressive judicial pronouncements such as the right to privacy, and fails to reflect a modern society’s

changing social mores including the rising aspiration and desire for autonomy among women.

Perhaps its greatest flaw, when it kicks in by October, is that it infantilises adult women and seeks to curb their independence.

Among its more outrageous features is one that mandates the registration of live-in relationships (breakups in such relationships must also be registered). Under its provisions, parents of adults aged between 18 and 21 must be kept in the loop. Of course, it is anybody’s guess how such couples will

approach the police in a state where adolescent boys get arrested for going on a date with their minor girlfriends, based on the complaints filed by their girlfriends’ parents, as highlighted by the Uttarakhand high court in a recent order.

In state assemblies from Maharashtra to Gujarat, the fear that young women will break social, faith and caste barriers to marry men of their choice is so strong that elected legislators are debating on the need for parental consent for love marriages.

“Gender is often the entry point when we talk about reform in family law. But, very quickly, the goal of gender is overtaken by talk of national integration and a political party’s positions,” said Saumya Saxena, a law professor at OP Jindal University.

A common law for all citizens for marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance has, from the inception of the Constitution, been a desirable goal. But, it’s not as if personal laws have remained static. Since the Hindu code amendments of the 1950s, court rulings have made sweeping changes in personal laws to align them closer to the Constitution.

Muslim personal law has not been

exempt. Last week, the Supreme Court (SC) reiterated that Muslim women, no matter what their personal laws state, are entitled to maintenance after divorce. Triple talaq was banned by the courts two years before Parliament criminalised the practice in 2019.

The Juvenile Justice Act makes it possible for Christians women to adopt. In *Shabnam Hashmi vs Union of India* (2014), the SC ruled that adoption was a fundamental right available to all. Elsewhere, the SC granted a Zoroastrian woman, barred from entering Parsi temples for marrying outside the community, the right to enter a fire temple. Everywhere, mutinies against archaic customs continue to brew.

Can we imagine family beyond just biological ties? How do we promote gender justice and the inclusion of minorities, including sexual minorities? Can we do better to protect the right of adult women to love?

Uttarakhand’s UCC could have been a blueprint for a modern nation. Instead, what we have is an opportunity lost.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

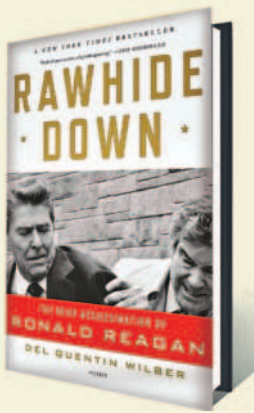
{ EDITOR’S PICK }

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

ANATOMY OF A NEAR ASSASSINATION

The attempt on Donald Trump’s life last week shocked the world, but America is no stranger to political assassinations. Del Quentin Wilber’s book, *Rawhide Down: The Near-Assassination of Ronald Reagan* explores one such episode in the history of the United States. Reagan, of course, was the President in 1981, when John W Hinckley Jr shot and injured him in front of the Washington Hilton Hotel.

Rawhide... is not a mere compilation of accounts of people — nurses, law and order personnel, Secret Service agents — who were either eyewitnesses or parties to saving Reagan that day, even though it digs deep into their memories. It meticulously creates a narrative that goes beyond just reporting, offering insights on security, leadership and crisis-management. Reagan’s remarkable composure that day, as narrated by Wilber, highlights the personal fortitude required of a leader during crises. As with Reagan, the Trump incident invites reflection on the security protocols, dangers of radicalisation and the qualities that define leadership in moments of peril.



Rawhide Down: Del Quentin Wilber Year: 2011



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

PREJUDICE IS A BURDEN THAT CONFUSES THE PAST, THREATENS THE FUTURE, AND RENDERS THE PRESENT INACCESSIBLE. — MAYA ANGELOU

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

REAR VIEW MIRROR

There are noises within BJP on reading Mandate 2024, allies are also speaking up. Listening to them could be the first lesson

EVER SINCE RESULTS of the general election came in, the BJP has been in the throes of a post-mortem — and so far, it is only shining a light on the flailing within. Be it politically crucial Uttar Pradesh, where the party's winning streak of 2014, 2017, 2019 and 2022 was arrested, its tally sliding from 62 to 33 and vote share plunging by 8 per cent, or West Bengal, where its relatively recent rise has been interrupted, its Lok Sabha tally dropping by six, the BJP's search for answers is marked by party leaders sniping at each other, settling scores, deflecting blame. In UP, senior party leaders have suggested that the BJP's losses can be attributed primarily to the party organisation being forced to take second place to government, and to a high-handed bureaucracy given a free run while the party worker was marginalised — a thinly veiled attack on Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. In Bengal, Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari has sought to fend off the calls for accountability directed at him by upending a slogan coined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Why "Sabka saath, sabka vikas", Adhikari has asked. In other words, and despite his subsequent attempts to backtrack, he has posed a fundamental — and in a country of many diversities, a fundamentally disturbing — question: Why must the BJP court the minority at all, why have a Minority Morcha, if the minority won't vote for it?

Of course, in a party that has grown so spectacularly and where power, especially since 2014, has been so concentrated, discordant voices in public also betray stirrings within and may strengthen the party's feedback mechanism. They can suggest new directions, help in course correction. But ruling parties, as they look within, must walk a fine line between looking back and moving ahead, between finding scapegoats and searching for solutions. As the mainstay of the NDA combine, the BJP has just won a third consecutive term in power and the onus of continuing and re-imagining governance of this large and complex country is on it. That also depends on what lessons it learns from Mandate 2024 which, in turn, depends on how it reads it. While it needs to find out why it lost 63 seats, and even a simple majority, it should resist the temptation to jump to self-serving conclusions like Adhikari and his colleagues have done. A look-back by the ruling party is useful in as much as it helps it move on quickly, shows a clear way forward, not if it leads to an incoherent standstill and reinforces its weaknesses.

Its diminished numbers also mean that, not just the Opposition, its allies are also watching the BJP. Some have spoken out already. In UP, Nishad party chief, Sanjay Nishad, has raised the issue of "misuse of bulldozer against the poor". Subsequently, the RLD and the JD(U) have openly questioned and described as divisive an order by the Muzaffargar police directing that shops and carts on the Kanwar Yatra route display the names of their owners. This push-back and those questions are welcome and reassuring in a democracy — after a decade, the BJP is being held to account both by an emboldened Opposition outside and by stronger allies within. Listening to these voices could be the first lesson for the party as it tries to figure out Mandate 2024.

A BIGGER TENT

At Republican National Convention, a more expansive sweep, an attempt to woo working class votes

THERE ARE TWO ways to analyse American politics at the current juncture. The first is to assume that — as has been the case for long — much of the electorate is divided along party lines and the contest between the Democratic and Republican parties is for undecided voters in swing states. The second is to see the upcoming presidential election as bringing on a fundamental reshaping of US politics in general and the Republican party in particular. Some recent developments stand out: The political aftermath of the attack on Donald Trump; the attempt to expand the social umbrella of the Republican Party and a potential shift in the minority vote.

Speaking on the final day of the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Milwaukee, Trump initially sought to strike a statesman-like note. However, despite the initial attempt at rising above the fray, much of Trump's speech was riddled with divisive themes — "invasion" by "criminals" and "immigrants". Two other speakers at the RNC — Vice President nominee JD Vance and head of the Teamsters Union, Sean O'Brien — showed that not only is the traditional pro-big business party looking to expand, it might be finding the vocabulary to do so too. Vance (39), invoking his childhood of poverty, drew a straight line between globalisation, immigration and the struggles of the American working class. He sought to frame the immigration debate as an issue of political economy, not race. O'Brien did not endorse Trump. But the fact that the leader of the largest labour union was willing to speak at the RNC, shows the degree to which working class votes are up for grabs. Against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter and Trump's hard position on guns and policing, it is also worth noting that as many as 17 per cent of African-American voters have said in a GenForward survey that they would vote for him — nearly double the number that did in 2016.

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton strengthened the Democrats by bringing together Black and White working-class voters, unions and urban liberals. For Trump 2.0, that might be easier said than done, given the party's pro-business core. However, there are some conservative social values within the working class as well that the Republicans' "anti-wokeism" seeks to build on. If it can succeed in bridging these contradictions and build a New Conservatism that takes both the rich and middle class on board, it will create a formidable political constituency. The challenge for left and liberal politics is to not just be seen to play catch-up.

TAINING A VICTORY

Argentina's Copa America victory celebration was marred by a racist song. The sport needs its heroes to do better

LAST WEEKEND, ARGENTINA'S gifted generation of footballers, led by Lionel Messi, reinforced their superiority by defeating Colombia in a draining Copa America final. However, the triumph was stained by the distasteful celebration that followed. On the way back from the stadium, in the team bus, Argentina's world and continental champions sang a song steeped in racism. "They play for France, but their parents are from Angola. Their mother is from Cameroon, while their father is from Nigeria. But their passport says French." It was the ugly noise of a team adored for sweet symphonies.

When the country's under-secretary for sports, Julio Garro, said captain Messi — who was n't seen singing — should apologise, he was sacked. And although Enzo Fernandez and some other players have expressed regret, the Argentines have rejected the need for an apology from their heroes: The song was made popular by a group of fans before the 2022 World Cup final, where Argentina beat France. Players from Brazil, who visit Argentina for club competitions, have spoken about fans making monkey gestures.

Racism in football isn't new. But it was especially jarring that it wasn't fans targeting players, but the players themselves insulting their counterparts. Every player in the Argentina squad, except the reserve goalkeeper, has played in Europe's multi-racial club teams but they seem to have imbibed little from these experiences. With their go-to hate song, these footballers have done a disservice to football. With the fervent following they enjoy at home where football is an escape from harsh economic realities, the popular team has set a poor example by amplifying a hateful racist mal-verse in their moment of glory. Of course, Messi could still send across a clear anti-racism message that will endure longer than the hurtful victory celebrations.



ISHAN BAKSHI

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP against which the upcoming Union budget will be presented is remarkably different from that of the previous 10 budgets. How the ruling dispensation has read the fractured election verdict, and what it perceives its chances are in the upcoming state elections could well have a bearing on the contours of the budget proposals. After all, it will feel the need to wrestle back control over the narrative.

In this changed landscape, the Finance Minister will undoubtedly have a tough job, balancing multiple pulls and pressures. In the past, when faced with electoral uncertainty, governments of varying ideological leanings have tended to opt for new welfare programmes and enhanced social sector spending. More recently, governments in states such as Maharashtra and Haryana also seem to have opted for this approach — their proposals range from providing a monthly cash transfer to women to free bus rides, along with filling up vacancies in government posts. As politics revolves around a constant reconfiguration of alliances, the ruling dispensation at the Centre could, in a similar vein, make a concerted attempt to woo those who exercise disproportionate electoral sway.

And it is the government's good fortune that its revenue constraints have been eased with the RBI transferring a larger-than-expected surplus. Along with the other budget proposals, how this surplus is utilised — whether it is used to ramp up welfare or capital spending or bring down the fiscal deficit — will not only indicate the government's views on the changed political landscape, but also on the state of the economy and how it may have played a role in swaying the voters. For, under the veneer of 8 per cent growth lies several uncomfortable questions. Growth isn't as robust as many argue. And the distribution is perhaps worse. The fact that the Centre's fiscal deficit was at 5.6 per cent of GDP last year only underlines that government spending remains a key driving force in the economy. An increase in employment largely via self-employment — which essentially involves

The budget's dilemma

Against a changed political landscape, will it tinker at the margins or break new ground?

In the fourth quarter of the last financial year, the country posted a current account surplus. While some have viewed this as a triumph, it is not. The current account is the difference between domestic savings and investment in an economy. A surplus essentially implies that savings exceeded investment, and that rather than borrowing from abroad to finance domestic investment, as India normally does, domestic savings were invested abroad. Not an ideal situation for a capital deficit country, when, in fact, household savings are under pressure.

one-man roadside shops and unpaid work in household enterprises — is not a sign of a healthy labour market. Stories of unemployed and underemployed youth trading during the day and gaming during the night only indicate the opposite. Alongside, they also incur the tax of high food inflation.

But, the election result has also posed a rather uncomfortable question to political parties on the possible limits of welfarism. And that perhaps the public provision of private goods might not always be enough to sway the electorate. Sooner or later, governments will run up against the wall of structural transformation, of inadequate job creation and deepening labour market duality.

So far, the government's approach to push up manufacturing — a pathway to more productive job opportunities for low and semi-skilled workers — has largely relied on a combination of raising tariffs and providing subsidies through the PLI scheme. While there has been some success in mobile phones — Apple in particular — beyond that, progress has been modest, if at all. The sector's share has remained stagnant at around 17 per cent of GDP for the past two decades. The contradictory approach of raising tariffs, trying to become *atmanirbhar*, while wanting to be part of global supply chains isn't helping. While the government has shown some urgency in signing trade deals, succumbing to pressure groups and not joining RCEP, when almost every competitor in the China-plus-one play has, or is planning to, calls for serious introspection over the trade policy.

Overall, corporate investments remain subdued despite the use of all fiscal levers available to the government. While the emphasis on national champions may be part of a well-thought-out strategy, it is unlikely to move the needle significantly on either investments or jobs. For instance, as per reports, Goldman Sachs has estimated capital investments by Reliance Industries at around \$125 billion over the past 10 years, implying an average of \$12.5 billion per year. To put this in perspective, total investments

in the economy were in excess of \$1 trillion last year. A much broader base of companies is needed to drive the capex cycle, especially if some of the national champions largely resort to inorganic means of expansion. While some believe that with healthy bank and corporate balance sheets, the private sector is ready to embark on a new investment cycle, for the moment, fear — or caution — is trumping. Animal spirits remain caged, not unleashed.

In the fourth quarter of the last financial year, the country posted a current account surplus. While some have viewed this as a triumph, it is not. The current account is the difference between domestic savings and investment in an economy. A surplus essentially implies that savings exceeded investment, and that rather than borrowing from abroad to finance domestic investment, as India normally does, domestic savings were invested abroad. Not an ideal situation for a capital deficit country, when in fact, household savings are under pressure.

Subdued investments, and a consequent weak labour market, where millions remain trapped in low-productive jobs, imply that overall consumption demand is likely to remain anaemic. Some segments, however, will thrive on the back of higher spending by the affluent. There are several markers of this deeply splintered domestic market. FMCG volume growth remains muted, two-wheeler sales are well below the pre-pandemic highs, and the entry-level car market has all but collapsed. On the other hand, sales of high-end cars and premium real estate are racing ahead. The top is soaring, the middle is stagnant, and a vast majority faces near-stagnant real wages.

Against this backdrop, will the budget tinker at the margins or break new ground? Considering the budgets presented in the last decade when the ruling dispensation had an absolute majority, only the changed political scenario could possibly trigger a bold policy agenda, if at all.

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H C POKHRIYAL

THE NEET 2024 exam crisis seems to be the subject of several debates, in Parliament, the Supreme Court, and in the media due to the alleged use of unfair means in the examination process. But the rhetoric does not consider the dangers of the alternative — an exclusionary, high-stakes medical entrance examination. The discourse and subsequent criticism are also highly politicised. There is a need to clarify the misconceptions that are damaging the reputation of professional agencies like the National Testing Agency (NTA).

The examination, for which around 2.4 million students appeared across 4,750 centres, was flagged for the use of unfair means by several candidates. However, there is no conclusive evidence of mass malpractice. NEET 2024 was conducted using Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets with specific question booklets. A few cases of the examination superintendents tampering with the OMR sheet occurred and they were arrested. The government constituted a high-powered committee to suggest future improvements in the conduct of entrance tests.

There are allegations that a particular set of question papers was leaked and bought by certain students, which helped them achieve inordinately high scores. But in the exam, there are multiple sets of question papers with no guarantee of which set a student may receive. It is likely that these students were duped. Such a situation can only arise if all stakeholders, including the centre's superintendent and the invigilators, conspire with the paper solvers to leak the paper. This would be rare, considering the inbuilt checks and balances of the system.

WHY NEET DEBATE IS UNTIDY

It looks for digital quick-fixes, lacks nuance. Hybrid examination should stay

Experts have suggested online examinations as a possible solution. The debate over pen-and-paper vs computer-based testing is unending. The former would be better given the familiarity and conditioning of Indian students. This may explain why the regulatory body in health education opted for the hybrid mode — students answered using OMR sheets and the results were processed through computing.

The OMR sheets belong to different series and have jumbled questions, allotted according to the number of examinees sitting for the exam. It would be difficult to predict which student would receive a particular series number. Moreover, the results of those who've engaged in such practices have already been cancelled and disciplinary action has been taken against them. Discrepancies in scoring will also reveal the use of unfair means. The media narrative seems to miss these crucial nuances.

Designing such an entry-level test is the sole responsibility of the examining body, the NTA in this case. There are standard operating procedures for OMR-based examinations — from setting the question papers to printing to transporting. The examination centres are instructed to create a seating plan to ensure candidates with the same paper set sit apart. There is also the issue of grace marks, which are frequently allotted during paper correction as directed by the Supreme Court's 2018 judgment. However, there is a need to formulate a comprehensive grace marks policy.

Experts have suggested online examinations as a possible solution. The debate over pen-and-paper vs computer-based testing is unending. The former would be better given the familiarity and conditioning of Indian students. This may explain why the regulatory body in health education opted for the hybrid mode — students answered using OMR sheets and the results were processed through computing. There persists the view that computer-based testing is more efficient. However, the issue of accessibility, data security, and more importantly, students' comfort using such technology must not be overlooked. NEP 2020

highlighted the issue of a digital divide, with digital reach still limited across the country.

Digitisation of exams would likely be outsourced to private sector enterprises, rendering the testing agencies dependent on these companies. Another important aspect favouring the hybrid mode is the governance of entrance examinations. Good governance happens through process mapping and change management, as opposed to the broad application of information and communication technologies. There is also the issue of cyber-security. The example of EVMs in the Indian elections exemplifies the benefits of technology whilst ensuring data security.

Professional agencies must ensure accountability and trust whilst conducting these examinations at the grassroots. Rather than using private institutions to hold the exams, government secondary schools and colleges, which offer a wider network across the country, could be used. The NTA must also identify the state coordinators monitoring the NEET and appoint observers carefully. The district authorities should be made responsible for safe custody of question papers.

The integrity of institutions that design and conduct entrance examinations can only be upheld by reforming exam governance rather than jumping to digital solutions. Hopefully, the government-instituted committee tasked to look into the NEET issue would pay heed to the aforementioned aspects and devise a plan of action to improve educational governance.

The writer is former executive director, School of Open Learning, and worked as the Dean (Examinations), University of Delhi

JULY 20, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

POWER OUTAGE PANIC

THE ENTIRE CAPITAL and the states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan were plunged into darkness for several hours following the power breakdown. No power was available for essential services like hospitals, airports, railway stations, and TV stations. The residents, in a state of panic following total darkness, started making frantic inquiries about whether it was an act of sabotage.

NOTICE TO MINISTERS

THE J&K HIGH Court issued notice to the 12 ministers of the G M Shah cabinet with re-

gard to the Speaker's reference to the high court under section 70 of the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution read with section 24 (G) of Jammu and Kashmir People Representative Act. It was to seek disqualification of members for violating the party whip and choosing to withdraw support to Farooq Abdullah.

WORRYING AMENDMENT

THE AMENDMENT OF the Indian Evidence Act through the Terrorist Affected Areas Ordinance vests the police with extraordinary power. The amendment was introduced in the context of terrorism in Punjab.

But the possibility of misuse is immense according to legal circles as its applicability extends to any disturbed area. The new provision puts the burden of proof on the accused, if the accused is charged with criminal conspiracy.

PM GANDHI RESHUFFLE

SIX MONTHS BEFORE her current term was to come to an end, PM Indira Gandhi appointed P V Narasimha Rao, Minister of Home Affairs. Prakash Chandra Sethi was appointed Minister of Planning and the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, with the task of completing the Seventh Five Year Plan.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Trump’s coming victory

The Donald Trump presidency will accelerate a transition away from democracy, in the name of democracy



JOHN KEANE

THE ATTEMPTED MURDER of Donald J Trump by a young gunman in Pennsylvania last weekend reminds us that assassinations of presidents and presidential candidates are as American as pecan pie. In my lifetime alone, there have been the fatal shootings of President John F Kennedy (1963) and his brother Senator Robert F Kennedy (1968) and the vicious attack on presidential hopeful George W Wallace (1972). President Gerald Ford survived two separate assassination attempts (1975). President Reagan required emergency surgery after being seriously wounded by shots from a .22-calibre pistol (1981). And now Trump, the current odds-on favourite to win control of the White House, has miraculously survived death by a whisker — with the help of God, he says.

Many countries have experienced high-level political assassinations — Xi Jinping is rumoured to be the survivor of more attempts on his life than any other current world leader — but there’s something peculiarly American about these attacks. Their frequency and drama have much to do with the way a declining global empire is politically neglecting its social foundations, widening gaps between rich and poor and stirring up angry citizen disaffection in a political culture tinged with religious zealotry and poisoned by citizens’ freedom to buy and bear arms.

Less obviously, these assassinations are symptoms of the unusual way democracies treat their elected leaders. Past monarchies, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes treated leaders as if they were gods ruling over a unified body politic. Democracies, by contrast, dispense with the fetish of rulers. They, of course, need leaders, follow them, learn from them — but they do not worship them as Leaders blessed with magical powers. That’s why, when they’re in good shape, democracies regularly poke fun at their leaders.

Shortly after 9/11, for example, I remember a popular American joke about the George W Bush presidency. Halted by a traffic snarl on a freeway leading into Washington, ran the story, a commuter is startled by shouting. She winds down her window, to be greeted by an excited citizen carrying a jerry can and bearing breaking news. “The president has just been kidnapped by terrorists! They’re demanding a huge ransom, otherwise they say they’ll set him on fire! The government says citizens should contribute, so the situation can be resolved fast.” Replies the startled driver: “How much on average are citizens donating?” Says the messenger: “About a gallon apiece”.

Granted that democracies put their leaders under a pedestal, and that assassinations are part of the American way of life, the key political question is how the failed attempt on Trump’s life will shape the future of American politics.

This week’s iconic image of his bloodied face and defiant fist pumping the air is a portent of coming troubles. Playing to perfection the role of a wronged outsider fighting against an incumbent president lost in a mental fog, Trump will barnstorm the country — and, in a country brimming with angry citizens and backed by loads of money and a big sympa-



CR Sasikumar

thy vote, enjoy a landslide victory on November 5, or so I predict.

After taking office, helped by recent landmark Supreme Court decisions guaranteeing him political immunity and a rather free hand in politicising and downsizing federal agencies, Trump will resume his old ways, with a vengeance. To recall, his stormy four-year presidency was locked in a permanent war with the federal bureaucracy, so-called “fake news” media, the judiciary and intelligence services, and even the Boy Scouts of America. He hankered after trust in family ties, and demanded loyalty from his followers, egged on by their talk of the need to “bring everything crashing down” (Steve Bannon) through deep budget cuts, the centralisation of federal decision-making and refusals to fill empty leadership positions. Trump fancied himself as a lollapalooza leader, a guide, a god, a redeemer who never ever loses battles. He stood for government by nepotism: Not procedural rules that ensure fair play, but personal channels, self-styled machismo against foes at home and abroad.

We can expect much the same during the next four years. Things aren’t going to end happily. There are many known unknowns, such as whether a Trump presidency will pull the plug on arming and funding Ukraine, ramp up military tensions with China, or launch war on Iran. Will there be repeats of January 6-style meltdown moments, when thousands of armed and angry protesters storm legislatures, cheered on by Trump and his buddies? We don’t know.

What’s certain is that a Trump presidency will accelerate a transition away from democracy in the name of democracy. Millions of American citizens will remain angry. Hopeful of a great future, their bitter disappointment will continue to be the night soil — the untreated politico-faecal excreta — in which Trump’s demagoguery was hatched in the first place.

A November victory certainly won’t slake Trump’s thirst for power. Unchecked ambition will be his thing. Expect endless speeches brimming with narcissistic self-belief and aggressively sexualised machismo. The Great Redeemer demagogue will bellow and brag. Every dirty political trick in the book will be played. Rich friends will be richly rewarded. There’ll be bribes in backroom meetings, dinner deals with business oligarchs, courtroom victories, state-of-the-art media dog whistling, troll factories and message bombing, lies, rough talk of conspiracies and plots

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against “the people” and threats of brute force. Independent media platforms, free-thinking journalists and power-monitoring, watchdog institutions will be special targets.

The big-mouthed Redeemer and his high-level games of thrones will care little for the complexity of the world or the niceties of public accountability. Sirens will be sounded by his opponents and public protests will fester, but politics charged with fighting phrases and the dark energy of “punch ‘em in the face” violence will prevail. The big boss Leader will insist he’s turning everything around for “the real people”. But politics will cease to be give-and-take bargaining and fair-minded compromises. It will degenerate into bawdy jokes, spectacles, scapegoating, tightened border controls, barbed-wire fences against dark-skinned “foreigners” and ruling by lies and cheating.

The endgame? Trump might well be stopped in his tracks, politically outflanked in the coming years by an opposition party committed to long-lasting democratic reforms, as happened in the US during the Progressive era, which countered outbursts of populist bigotry and widespread citizen grumbling with inclusive reforms such as a directly elected Senate (1913), the full enfranchisement of women (1920), municipal socialism, new laws covering income tax and corporate regulation, and the eight-hour working day for all wage earners in the country.

If few or none of the 21st-century equivalent of these reforms come to pass, democide in the name of democracy would become the new American reality. It wouldn’t be old-fashioned tyranny or military dictatorship, or describable as a single-ruler horror show the ancients called autocracy. It would not be a repeat of 20th-century fascism or totalitarianism. The endgame would be a form of counterfeit democracy.

America would be saddled with a strange new kind of despotism: A corrupted state of a crumbling empire ruled by a demagogue backed by government and corporate oligarchs with the help of law enforcement agencies, pliant journalists, docile judges and the voluntary servitude of millions of loyal subjects foolishly lending their votes to a Leader promising them a better future that never happens.

John Keane is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney. His last two books are The Shortest History of Democracy (2022) and China’s Galaxy Empire: Wealth, Power, War, And Peace In The New Chinese Century (2024)

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The DNC is taking a big risk acting as if nothing has changed — and treating voter concerns as neither legitimate nor pressing. Mr. Biden himself also appears to be in denial, oblivious to the severity of the crisis surrounding his candidacy.” — THE WASHINGTON POST

A process more punishing

By making provisions for extended police custody, the BNSS violates an undertrial’s right under Article 21 of the Constitution



OPENING ARGUMENT

BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

THE BHARATIYA NAGARIK Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS) has replaced the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC). As Indian criminal laws have undergone a change, in this column we shall explore a very troubling change to procedural protection that an accused has enjoyed: The protection against long periods of “police custody”.

The CrP is my favourite piece of legislation, as I have always thought of it as the “Accuseds’ Constitution”. This is because when you have been detained, are being questioned and are surrounded by police officers, it’s the CrPC that protects you, limits your detention period in police custody, mandates that you be produced before a judge and enables you to access a lawyer. Importantly, the CrPC was not the coloniser’s instrument, but a post-colonial law that had undergone reforms in independent India. As a practitioner of criminal law, there is no statute more important than the CrPC that stands by the side of any accused.

The custody of an accused is broadly divided into two kinds — police and judicial. The former means that the police have principal control or physical custody over you, while the latter typically has you placed in a jail which has its own institutional rules and regulations, including visiting hours, access of the police to the accused, mealtimes, and sleep time. It is police custody which is typically the harshest experience for any accused.

In a previous article (‘The custody question’, IE, August 19, 2023) on the then BNSS Bill, I had argued that the wording of the Bill made it appear that custody, including police custody, could be extended up to 90 days, from the current limit of 15 days. Many of my colleagues at the bar argued that surely that could not be the correct reading of the Bill. Unfortunately, my assessment has proved to be accurate.

The BNSS appears to do away with the 15-day limit on police custody prescribed under the CrPC, nullifying safeguards against police excesses and violating an undertrial’s rights under Article 21. How does the new law manage this?

Section 167 of the CrPC authorised custody up to a maximum of 60 or 90 days, depending on the extent of punishment prescribed. Further, it contained a proviso to section 167 (2) which limited police custody to 15 days out of the 60 or 90 days (depending on the punishment imposed). The proviso read “(a) the Magistrate may authorise the detention of the accused person, otherwise than in the custody of the police, beyond the period of fifteen days, if he is satisfied that adequate grounds exist for doing so...”

It is evident from this that the attempt

was to limit police custody and protect the accused from police excesses by mandating that police custody would only be up to 15 days. Section 187 of the BNSS does otherwise. It retains the timelines of 60 or 90 days and the concept of default bail, as in the CrPC. However, it omits the maximum limit of 15 days of police custody that was in the CrPC. This omission creates a situation where the Magistrate can authorise police custody detention for a period exceeding 15 days.

Section 187 (3) of the BNSS states: “The Magistrate may authorise the detention of the accused person, beyond the period of fifteen days, if he is satisfied that adequate grounds exist for doing so, but no Magistrate shall authorise the detention of the accused person in custody under this subsection for a total period exceeding— (i) ninety days, where the investigation relates to an offence punishable with death, imprisonment for life or imprisonment for a term of ten years or more; (ii) sixty days, where the investigation relates to any other offence, and, on the expiry of the said period of ninety days, or sixty days, as the case may be, the accused person shall be released on bail if he is prepared to and does furnish bail.”

To give you some context for how astonishing this extension of custody is, let us compare a harsh statute like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA), which prescribes a maximum limit of 30 days for police custody. Further, section 43 D of UAPA mandates that the investigating officer is required to file an affidavit providing reasons for seeking police custody, if the accused is in judicial custody. By contrast the BNSS, which is a statute pertaining to general criminal law, enables a three-fold increase of the maximum period of police custody as compared to even UAPA.

This is a constitutionally burdensome provision that will impinge on the rights of an accused. Spending up to 90 days with the police having unimpeded access to an accused is debilitating from the point of view of rights to life, health (including mental well-being) and fair trial. Under the CrPC, for any period beyond the 15-day limit for police custody, a judge can have the accused detained in judicial custody or order other custodial arrangements.

The BNSS, thus, nullifies safeguards against police excesses and violates an undertrial’s right under Article 21 of the Constitution. For an accused to be held in police custody for such a long period can make her susceptible to custodial violence/torture. In *D K Basu v State of West Bengal*, the Supreme Court held that Article 21 includes the right to live with dignity and thus also includes within itself a guarantee against torture and assault by state functionaries. Further, it held that the protection of Article 21 cannot be denied to convicts, undertrials, detenues and other prisoners in custody, and that any form of torture or cruel or inhuman treatment would fall under inhibition of the said right. BNSS seems to be at odds with this.

The writer is a senior advocate at the Supreme Court. She is grateful for the research assistance and insights of Utkarsh Pratap, Advocate at the Supreme Court



RAM RAJA

BY RAM MADHAV

Vote for, not against

‘Tactical voting’ is hurting the minority community’s own interests

THE CURRENT LOK Sabha will have the second-lowest number of Muslim MPs — just 24 — since Independence. The figure touched an all-time low in 2014 at 22 MPs when the biggest beneficiary of Muslim votes, Congress, fumbled at the hustings. It then went up marginally to 26 in 2019 only to recede again.

Congress and other Opposition parties have acted as custodians of Muslim interests and benefitted from their votes. As a result, Muslim representation was directly linked to the prospects of these parties. This time, while Congress, almost doubled its tally from 52 to 99 seats in the Lok Sabha, and the INDI Alliance secured 234 seats, Muslim representation didn’t increase correspondingly. Instead, it plummeted. This decline was not because Muslims did not vote for these parties, but, having gobbled up their votes, these parties shied away from proportionately giving tickets.

The BJP fielded only one Muslim candidate from Malappuram in Kerala. But the merchants of the Muslim vote bank — Congress, TMC, SP, NCP, RJD and the Communists — fielded just 78 Muslim candidates as against 115 in 2019. The Congress, known for its politics of appeasement, ended up fielding just 19 Muslim candidates this time as against 36 in 2019. It’s the same with other parties — TMC gave only six seats to Muslims this time as against 13 in 2019. The SP, the biggest benefi-

ciary of the Muslim vote in Uttar Pradesh, also reduced the number from eight to four. The result? Representation for the community that constitutes 14 per cent of the population (2011 Census) is reduced to 4.4 per cent in the 18th Lok Sabha. The community doesn’t have a single representative from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Odisha and several others.

This is certainly not a happy situation for the community. Some political pundits blame the BJP for creating an environment that led to this decline. That is tantamount to casting aspersions on the Indian electorate, who, even at the height of post-Partition communal polarisation, elected 21 Muslim MPs in 1952. Another four Muslim members were nominated to the House, taking the number to 25.

Some Muslim leaders like Asaduddin Owaisi lament the decision of the Indian Muslim leadership not to start an all-India Muslim party after Partition, like the Muslim League of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. There is one remnant of the Muslim League in Kerala, which won three seats this time, but that too, like Owaisi’s AIMIM, remains a regional outfit. Leaders like Owaisi continue to harbour Jinnah’s mindset seven decades after Partition.

Both arguments — blaming the BJP or raring for a national political outfit for Muslims —

demonstrate that the leadership of the community is unable to grasp the real causes of its woes. The 2024 Lok Sabha election is the latest manifestation of the fact that the Muslim community has not come out of polarisation politics. Its politics of what commentators describe as “tactical voting” to defeat that BJP helps merchants of the community’s votes but not the community per se.

In competitive politics, polarisation on one side invariably leads to polarisation on the other. Such a counter-polarisation in India will be detrimental to the Muslim community. Instead, it should take up the politics of development and social change. The community is not a monolith. About 95 per cent of the community are Ajjaf and Arzal, while the remaining 5 per cent are Ashraf. Ashrafs regard themselves as the descendants of the early Muslim immigrants into India, the Ajjafs and the Arzals were Hindu converts from OBC and Dalit communities. Together, they are called by a Persian name, “Pasmandas” — those left behind.

The BJP preferred to champion the developmental and societal concerns of Pasmandas — caste discrimination, economic and educational backwardness etc. At the national executive meeting of the party at Hyderabad in 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhorted party cadres to reach out to Pasmanda Muslims and he held several meetings with

prominent Pasmanda leaders. During the corporation elections in Delhi in December 2022, the BJP put up four Pasmanda candidates. In UP, a Pasmanda Muslim is the minister for minority welfare. Last year, in a by-election in the state, a Pasmanda candidate fielded by BJP’s ally, Apna Dal, romped home victorious over the SP’s Hindu candidate. In the run-up to the general elections, the BJP continued its Pasmanda outreach through the enlisting of “Modi Mitras” — friends of Modi.

These efforts to bring the Muslim community out of ghetto politics appeared to be yielding results initially. A survey by the US-based Carnegie Endowment earlier this year concluded that by the time of the UP state assembly elections in 2017, 12.6 per cent of general category Muslims and 8 per cent of Pasmanda Muslims supported the BJP. By the time of the assembly elections in 2022, Pasmanda support for the BJP increased to 9.1 per cent.

Unfortunately, the recent parliament elections once again proved that the BJP’s efforts to de-communalise Muslim politics didn’t go much further. In discarding the welfarist overtures of the BJP lies the real defeat of the interests of the Muslim community. That calls for a serious introspection.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

JUSTICE DENIED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Rahim Ali, Indian,’ (IE, July 19). It is gratifying to learn that at last, the Supreme Court has restored Indian citizenship to the late Rahim Ali. But this is two years after his demise and following a long-drawn legal battle. It is a commentary on the sad state of affairs of our justice administration. Rahim Ali would live now only in our memory as an Indian but died with a question mark on his identity. Efficiency is essential in this process.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Rahim Ali, Indian,’ (IE, July 20). Rahim Ali was declared an Indian by the Supreme Court, two years after his death. His difficulties started with a police report, declaring him to be a Bangladeshi seemingly without evidence. This was compounded by the Foreigners Tribunal’s ex-parte order and Gauhati High Court rejecting his appeal of absence due to medical conditions. Both these bodies missed the gravity of the issue. This is a classic case of justice-delayed-is-justice-denied. How many others like Ali have to suffer the same fate? Considering the Centre’s repeated claims to implement a nationwide NRC, the challenges ahead are plenty.

L.R Murmu, New Delhi.

A BAD MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The cover is slipping,’ (IE, July 19). Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s government announced that it was considering banning the Tehreek-i-Insaf. This drew widespread condemnation, not only from its rivals but also from allies and human rights groups. Political analysts have noted that banning the party could “lead to the government’s downfall”. This will lead to more instability and Pakistan’s public is now clear that their democratic will is being suppressed. The PM must respect the voters’ mandate.

SS Paul, Nadia

LET THEM SPEAK

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Let the Opposition speak this session,’ (IE, July 19). The last session saw several disruptions and the outcome of proceedings was drowned in all the noise. People expect that their aspirations should be presented in the Lok Sabha and their voices be heard. Consensus must prevail for the smooth functioning of any democracy. The Speaker should allot sufficient time to all members who wish to participate in the discussion. The Opposition also represents the voice of the people which must not be suppressed.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

Plug project delays

As public capex-driven infrastructure is exhibiting its limits, financing & project monitoring need greater focus

INDIA'S GLARING INFRASTRUCTURE deficit has been addressed with much greater efficiency and resolve over the last decade. Even though the government has had to rely primarily and increasingly on taxpayer monies to finance projects, the investment tempo has been retained in the recent years. However, the infrastructure sectors which require annual investments to the tune of ₹30-35 trillion at the current level of the nominal GDP to avoid a slippage are now faced with fresh challenges on multiple fronts. First, the financing strategy is at a crossroads again. With a contingency plan to retire humongous debts piled up over the years, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and Indian Railways (IR) had to put a lid on fresh market borrowings effective FY22, and would need to stay away from the market for another few years. Union Budget is the main recourse for both these entities now, though they do strive to maximise receipts through monetisation (long-term leasing out) of operational assets. The NHAI is achieving reasonable success in this, but IR is lagging.

Secondly, with the recent spate of news about newly built bridges coming apart, expressways developing cracks, and airport roofs crashing down, serious questions have been raised about the quality of the facilities being built. The third challenge is a perennial one with large projects in India — huge delays in execution inflating costs and denting viability. The Pragati interactive portal, set up in 2015, showed an initial promise in resolving the grievances related to projects, but has since lost much of its traction. Of 1,873 projects, each with investments of ₹150 crore or more, monitored by the ministry of statistics and programme implementation, 449 have seen cost escalation, and 779 are delayed. With the current level of cost overruns, this set of projects itself would now require a staggering ₹5 trillion more than the sanctioned costs for completion, and the clock is ticking.

The fact is despite the government's best efforts, private players have remained aloof towards long-gestation infrastructure projects. Large corporate houses would limit their exposure to a clutch of sectors, where they are more confident of fetching remunerative returns on investments. They are seemingly ready to punt on renewable energy, seaport services, telecom, airports, and lately, power transmission and captive coal projects, but would still stay away from railway and highway segments, and also thermal power ventures. The new institutional structures put in place to bridge the financing gap like the development financial institution unveiled in Budget FY22, and quasi-sovereign wealth fund (National Investment and Infrastructure Fund) set up in 2015, are yet to muster the required capacity to dovetail finances. Global patient capital seems content with only brownfield infra assets. Financing constraints are already visible on the ground, with the slowing of highway construction pace, and the minimal 2% rise projected for railway capex growth for FY25, versus 28% in FY24.

The government must devise and implement a contingent plan to keep up the pace of infrastructure creation; in areas like railways, where the open-access model to lure private investors hasn't been a big success even in many European countries, public investments must remain robust. In other areas, including highways and expressways and where investor interest is already forthcoming, the concession agreements must be sweetened further. Proceeds of monetisation should be re-deployed with higher efficiency. Efforts to cut delays must be institutionalised.

Lessons from the rice price scare

WHEAT AND CORN are the most actively traded grains in financial markets. But they can't damage the global economy like rice. The staple for half the world is largely ignored by Wall Street, but it's the one commodity that really matters for global food security. For the last three years, Asia and African nations had been on the defensive: A dangerous mix of bad weather, protectionism, and panic buying fuelled an inflationary spike. Many feared worse was still to come — a full-blown crisis accompanied by violence. It didn't come to pass, though, and now that the weather is starting to improve, it's becoming clear the rice price scare is all but over. Food inflation, particularly in Asia, is starting to ease.

For long, I'd been sceptical that the world faced another food crisis like the one in 2007-08, when the cost of rice jumped to a record high of about \$1,100 per metric ton, up from \$250 a ton, triggering a wave of dozens of food riots, from Haiti to Bangladesh. The opposite was true, I argued: While rice prices rose, they weren't as uncomfortably high as wheat and corn.

Although several Asian nations reaped lower-than-expected rice harvests starting in 2021, global inventories were much higher than in 2007-08, providing a cushion. As production lagged consumption, prices nevertheless rose. From about \$400 a ton in 2019, they climbed to a 12-year high of \$650 a ton last year, and since they remained around that level until only recently. Still, rice prices were about 40% below their all-time high.

In any commodity market, government policies are important. But in rice they're crucial. Critical as the crop is, not much rice crosses borders; most is consumed domestically. Only about 10% of the world's rice crop trades internationally. By contrast, more than 25% of wheat, and 40% of soya bean output are traded, respectively. As such, small changes in exports and imports have an outsize impact on world prices.

Asian governments are now reconsidering the subsidies and restrictions that sent prices spiralling. In India, seasonal monsoon rains have arrived this year on time, and rainfall is about average, spurring a nearly 20% year-on-year increase in rice planting. Several of its neighbours are already lobbying Prime Minister Narendra Modi to act soon.

Other than in parts of China, southern Vietnam, and the Philippines, weather conditions are "generally favourable" for the rice harvest, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization said recently. As a result, global rice production in 2024-25 is expected to reach a record high of 528.2 million tons, according to the US department of agriculture. That would exceed global consumption, estimated for 2024-25 at 523.5 million tons. Thus, inventories will rebuild after three years of declines.

Now, it's the time to strengthen the rice industry. First, Asian governments need to do more to support farmers, particularly to ensure resilience against droughts. Irrigation is key. Advances in agricultural genetics, which can create seeds that tolerate both less rainfall and flooding, should be encouraged, not banned. Chinese scientists have completed trials of new genetically modified rice varieties that offer much hope. African nations, too, need to reduce their import dependence.

Second, governments should recognise that rice is a thinly traded commodity, and thus any export restrictions and hoarding encouragement can have far-reaching consequences. They should agree on regional norms to keep trading flowing, other than during catastrophes. As the world's top exporters and importers, India and the Philippines should take a lead on those talks.

Third, it's clear that some large importers, particularly in West Africa and the Middle East, need to build national reserves. Recently, Isabella Weber, an economist who ignited controversy in 2023 blaming corporate greed for the surge in inflation, has published a new paper suggesting that grain buffer stocks could be released during emergencies — much as Washington opens the taps of its Strategic Petroleum Reserve. I don't agree with every bit of her paper, but a limited version of her proposal, at the very least, merits consideration. If it works for oil, why not for rice?

HOME TRUTHS

UNLESS IT ALLOWS ENTREPRENEURS TO REDOMICILE, INDIA RISKS TURNING INTO A DIGITAL COLONY

India must bring in innovators

INDIAN INNOVATION POWERS the digital world. India has shipped more software than Saudi Arabia exports oil — worth over \$200 billion in a year. Over 1 million engineers in the US are of Indian origin. Over 10% of the Fortune 500 companies have Indian-origin chief executive officers (CEOs). Eric Garcetti, the US envoy to India, joked that one cannot become a CEO in America unless they are from India. A study of US unicorn founders by Ilya Strebulaev of Stanford Graduate School of Business showed how Indians are the largest proportion of non-US-born founders.

This innovative heft has propelled India to become the third-largest start-up ecosystem in the world in terms of capital raised, unicorns, and number of start-ups. Yet, a dirty secret exists in the Indian start-up ecosystem — over half of India's unicorns are not Indian companies, but foreign companies run by Indians. The Flipkart sale to Walmart, which is the largest start-up exit from India, was not of an Indian company. Flipkart was and is still headquartered in Singapore, though the team and management sit in India. India is at risk of becoming a land of subsidiaries, not start-ups.

The reasons for founders to choose to enter the Indian market though a foreign country are manifold, beginning with incorporating a company where founders run the risk of their company names being rejected for frivolous reasons. Our compliance demands for raising capital are onerous and require multiple forms to be filed and approved, with the choices of securities severely restricted. India is also unique in taxing capital investments as income, a tax col-

SIDDARTH PAI
Partner, CFO and ESG officer
3one4 Capital

loquially known as angel tax. Though laundering unaccounted funds is a global issue, no other country has sought this innovation of taxing investments as income. The Foreign Exchange Management Act regulations and enforcement make it impossible to launch global software as a service companies from India, where every credit from a foreign source requires invoices in triplicate before the

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tow. India crossing \$2,000 in terms of per capita GDP in 2019 marks an inflection point where spending shifts from sustenance to consumption. This happened in the US in the 1950s, Germany in the 1960s, Japan in the 1970s, and China in the early 2000s. Regulators such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India and International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) have created regulated vehicles for pooling capital into private assets such as start-ups, creating an over \$100 billion investing industry through alternative investments funds. This has allowed rupee capital to finally invest in start-ups, though the legislated subordination of private market investing to listed market

investing in terms of tax rates and holding periods should be removed. Various committees have been formed to reevaluate our existing laws and rationalise them further. Indian retail investors are pumping close to ₹19,000 crore monthly as systematic investment plans into the stock market and are lapping up initial public offerings through double-digit oversubscriptions.

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Many start-ups that shifted out of India over the last 15 years now wish to come back to the country, but lack a mechanism to do so. PhonePe was unique in paying over \$1 billion in taxes for moving back to India from Singapore, but no other start-ups have the balance sheet to support this.

This is why the scheme mentioned in the "Onshoring Indian innovation to GIFT IFSC" report released in August 2023 is crucial. It lays out a framework based on the scheme to redomicile funds investing in India but based in other countries to shift to GIFT International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in a tax-free manner. GIFT IFSC has a unified regulator in the form of the IFSCA, allows start-ups to maintain accounts in US dollars, and has a host of tax benefits to attract and retain companies. It forms the perfect landing spot for such flipped start-ups to come back to India and remain Indian companies.

Digital businesses have blurred geographic boundaries and the extent of the sovereign over digital businesses arises from having these companies domicile in the said country. This is best understood by the US and China, who allow their companies to operate overseas while remaining domiciled in the motherland. Europe is a digital colony as it lacks major tech companies headquartered in its borders. India too runs the risk of this unless it allows for Indian entrepreneurs to redomicile in India and reforms legislation that prompted them to move out in the first place.

Indian entrepreneurs look up to the Start-up Prime Minister to allow them to return to the country and create immense value for India and Indians.

Can discoms spark a turnaround?



RAJASEKHARA DEVAGUPTAPU

Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). Views are personal

Gains have been asymmetric, with excess subsidy receipts and improved billing losses. But they aren't sufficient. Discoms urgently need regulatory intervention

HISTORICALLY, INDIAN ELECTRICITY distribution companies (discoms) have been running at a loss. This scenario was worsened by Covid-19 as it hit sales and raised costs. Now there is a widespread discourse about discoms' financial turnaround, citing aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) loss improvements over FY22 and FY23. Analysis suggests this change is impressive, but difficult to sustain.

The challenge becomes stark as AT&C losses are split across its components. These have not improved uniformly, and some have even worsened. Further, studies at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) show that although AT&C loss improvements are important, they alone cannot effect a financial turnaround without cost-reflective tariffs and helpful tariff-setting processes.

Regulators set AT&C loss targets for discoms, which inherently consist of two components — billing loss (energy terms) and collection loss (rupee terms). Billing loss is the difference of the energy discoms' purchase from generators and what they sell to consumers. Collection loss is what discoms fail to collect after billing, both from consumers and the state government (unpaid subsidy).

According to the official data for FY22 and FY23, discoms made excellent progress in billing losses, besides receiving more subsidy from state governments than what was sought. A part of pending supply costs (approved earlier but deferred, called regulatory assets) also recovered. With these, discoms recorded measurable financial progress. But component-wise analysis throws more light on their sustainability.

First, by FY23, discoms reduced billing losses to an unprecedented 13.3% averaged across India. Although it missed the target of 12.6% (set by state regulators) by a whisker, this is not a small achievement. This missing margin is less than ₹5,000 crore (FY23), in contrast to ₹11,150 crore for FY19. This improvement is critical as any billing loss beyond the normative target is treated as discoms' business loss and adds to the accumulated financial deficit.

While billing losses closer to the targets are welcome, a question remains whether the targets are optimal? Examination of core data indicates that 27 public and private distribution utilities out of 70 across India (including power departments) have achieved a billing loss below 10% and these utilities together account for almost 40% of power sold in the country. Some big states such as Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana have comfortably achieved this feat. This emphasises the heterogeneity across India, and the scope for tighter targets.

The second aspect is receipt of excess subsidy. For two successive years (FY22 and FY23), discoms received more subsidy than what was booked. Some of it may have been a correction for the underpayments during Covid-19. The excess subsidy receipt of 9.6% and 8.1% in FY22 and FY23 respectively increased cash flows and cleared close to 30% of unpaid subsidy dues accumulated till FY21.

Unfortunately, this excess subsidy payment masks the deterioration in collection from consumers. In FY23, "consumer non-collection loss" exceeded 22% of the annual financial gap of discoms, unheard of since FY09. The excess subsidy payment brought down the total (subsidy+consumer) collection loss by 50% in FY22 and 43% in FY23, but the overall picture improved by just 29%. This is one reason why regulators must bifurcate collection losses into its components — subsidies vs consumer non-payments. In fact, the latter should ideally be segregated between retail and governmental consumers, since a huge fraction of pending receivables pertain to the latter.

Third, the issue of regulatory assets, where regulators purposely set an insufficient tariff that is non-cost-reflective, ostensibly to prevent tariff shock to the retail consumers. Although laws disallow state regulators from creating such regulatory assets, this problem is still concentrated in a handful of states. In FY22, the regulatory assets were partly realised through tariffs. However, in FY23, close to ₹20,000 crore of new regulatory assets were created, a surge of 47%.

The two-year AT&C loss improvement from 22.5% to 15.8% should ideally sustain. However, by assuming a limit of 100% subsidy payment (without overpayment) the loss crawls back to 17.3%. Even such loss figures do not give the true financial picture.

The gap between average cost of supply and average billing rate (rev-

enues) widened, leading discoms' accumulated losses to increase by 19% over two years, taking the total to ₹6.77 trillion. It is so massive that for liquidation in one year through a one-time tariff surcharge, the consumers would need to bear a burden of ₹6.39/kilowatt-hour, greater than the average per unit bill they pay (excluding subsidy).

How do we fix this problem? Regulators must proactively guide discoms on loss management. The short-term scope for billing loss reduction is limited and subsidies cannot be paid above 100% indefinitely. Hence, the focus should be on tackling consumer collection loss; and there must be no new regulatory assets, rather the existing assets should be wound down systematically.

Regulators should segregate AT&C loss components and determine separate trajectories for subsidies, consumer non-collection, and billing losses. Research at CSEP has shown it is necessary to revisit the true-up process and align discom revenues with actual costs, besides reducing the time lag in recovery of projected versus actual cost differences as allowed into tariffs.

Although AT&C loss reduction is critical, it won't solve all discom problems. Cost-reflective tariffs are important, and the energy transition will further strain their finances. With renewable energy (RE) taking off, high-value customers will exit discoms disproportionately. Also, pricing norms should reflect variability of RE, like time-of-day pricing.

We should celebrate short-term improvements, but not lose sight of the larger challenges. If we don't take a holistic approach, discoms will continue to struggle financially, putting the energy transition at risk.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Govt should focus on bread-and-butter issues

Apropos of "Budgeting for a Viksit Bharat" (FE, July 19), the rosy picture painted by the writers is at complete variance with the ground realities. Firstly, we need to understand what *viksit* really means. Is it being the third- or fourth-largest economy? Or is it improving the living standards of people? The entire nation is in a mess and not just in the past 10 years.

"Fostering a spirit of transformative transcendentalism" confuses more than it clarifies.

The Budget is treated as a non-event in most *viksit* nations. It is time we too stopped paying too much attention to it. I have never known any business person give less than 8/10 for any Budget. Never mind who is in government or opposition. For India to become *viksit*, the outlays on education should increase. The government would do well to cut out

the optics and concentrate on bread-and-butter issues more than anything else.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Privatisation road map

Apropos of "Recalibrating privatisation" (FE, July 19), there is no doubt that bullish valuation of most public sector undertakings have given enough elbow room to the government in its endeavour to privatise some of them. But it should

be on a case-to-case basis and we should remember that privatisation is not a panacea for all ills.

The government's reduced majority in Parliament will weigh on this sensitive matter as far as the upcoming Budget is concerned. However, a clearer road map should be shared so that every stakeholder has much needed clarity.

—Bal Govind, Noida

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

INVESTORS NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS ON SECTORAL FUNDS

NDIAN equity markets have been on a roll during the past year. Both Sensex and Nifty have risen by over 20 percent over the period. Mid-cap and small-cap indices have been much more generous to investors, with over 50 percent gains. These are, typically times when irrational exuberance leads to excesses, resulting in investors making mistakes, and subsequently incurring losses when the markets turn unfavourable. The surge in retail participation in the futures and options (F&O) segment of the market is one such worrying trend that has caught the market regulator’s attention. The Securities and Exchange Board of India has already formed a committee to look into ways to curb participation in the F&O segment.

Similar kinds of exuberance are also playing out in the mutual fund space, with asset management companies lining up thematic and sectoral funds to cash in on the bullish market trends. The two themes that seem to be the flavours of the season are defence and manufacturing funds. Then there are others focused on new energy and automotive funds. Such themes are often sold with fancy predictions, and at times, with the promise of unrealistic returns. Retail investors must be wary of taking too big a bet on sector-specific funds, as these are, at best, ‘flavours of the season’.

Mutual funds are considered an ideal investment option for retail investors, as by their very nature they offer diversified portfolios across companies, sectors, asset types and even geographies. Such a strategy helps in minimising sectoral or single-asset-related risks. Over the years, passive funds have emerged as better and cheaper options for investors as they try to replicate a particular index. A passive fund, over time, eliminates biases or errors committed by fund managers. During the last sustained bullish market trend between 2005 and 2008, mutual funds flooded investors with then-popular themes like infrastructure funds. We know how those funds fared after the massive crash in 2008 and then the sovereign debt crisis in 2011. Investors must be wary of repeating those mistakes. The key for investors is to have a diversified portfolio, invest in a disciplined manner and not get carried away when markets sway in one direction or the other.

TN MUST BALANCE PUBLIC SAFETY WITH CIVIL LIBERTY

THE state of law and order in Tamil Nadu has been a bone of contention between the DMK government and the opposition since 2021. However, recent events have brought matters to a head. First, in the aftermath of the Kallakurichi hooch tragedy in which 66 people lost their lives, it became evident that police had failed to sufficiently crack down on the menace since a similar incident in the same region had claimed over 20 lives the previous year. Worse, it emerged that it was an open secret that the illicit brew was being sold just metres from a police station. Next came the horrific murder, in public, of BSP state president K Armstrong in Chennai—again, just metres from the local police station. That the leader of a national political party could be so unsafe in his own neighbourhood caused a furore, with even DMK’s allies Congress and VCK raising concerns. Armstrong was an Ambedkarite leader fondly remembered for having supported the educational aspirations of many Dalit youngsters. While the police acted quickly in zeroing in on suspects after the murder, questions were raised on the failure of police intelligence that could have prevented it. Heads have rolled in the force since the events, with the police commissioner of Chennai becoming one of those shifted out.

However, it became evident which way the state had decided to act when the incoming commissioner told reporters that rowdies would be spoken to in a language they would understand. To no one’s surprise, a week later, one of the accused in the Armstrong murder was shot dead in “self-defence” in a police encounter. Days later, another history-sheeter was killed in an encounter in Tiruchirappalli. While this hard line from the police may have its supporters, sensible residents of TN wonder why the state cannot control law and order without resorting to extra-judicial violence. The desire of any member of the public is a safe environment maintained by a responsive, transparent and effective police force. Celebrating or even accepting extrajudicial violence as a requirement to guarantee order weighs the importance of ostensible public safety over individual civil liberties and human rights. It is a slippery slope that, historically, has never ended well for the common man or woman.

QUICK TAKE

SPREAD THE TECH RISK

A computer systems outage on Friday that hit essential services across the world exposed the risk of concentrating too much tech market share in too few hands. A software update on Microsoft systems that disrupted work at several airports, airlines, banks and trading houses in India also played havoc with transport, healthcare and security elsewhere. Anti-trust action against tech giants has gained global momentum in recent years. Big tech is now intensely lobbying the Indian government on some provisions in the Digital Competition Bill. As the outage reminded us, the onus is also on businesses and governments to smartly spread operational risks while procuring IT systems.

I have written about this earlier, so I will keep the anecdote brief. In 1926, there was a Royal Commission on Agriculture. The report was submitted in 1928. The chairman of this commission was Lord Linlithgow. Among other things, the commission recommended that cattle should be improved by careful breeding, including by importing bulls. Like most government reports, the recommendations gathered dust, until it was announced in 1936 that Linlithgow would become governor general and viceroy.

The mandarins of Madras presidency woke up. Surely, the governor general would ask about implementation of the recommendations. Abolishing government jobs is impossible. But creating government jobs is also difficult. The Madras presidency solved the problem by invoking the governor general’s name in the job title. LBKs (Linlithgow’s bull keepers) and LBAs (Linlithgow’s bull assistants) were created.

LBKs imported and maintained foreign bulls. These would impregnate inferior Indian cows and improve the species. But since a government subsidy was involved, fraud needed to be prevented. LBAs performed this supervisory role. They ensured the impregnation occurred on time. Eventually, LBKs and LBAs became pensioners and the posts were abolished in the early 1980s.

The commission wrote, “Many fine cattle belonging to a number of well-recognised breeds are to be found. Amongst the known ones are perhaps the Hariana and Sahiwal of the Punjab, the Tharparkar and Sindhi of Sindh, the Kankrej of Gujarat, the Gir of Kathiawar, and the Ongole of Madras.” This is an incomplete list.

The National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) tells us there are 50 “well-defined” Indian breeds of cattle. They are used for different purposes—transport, milk, draught and manure. For example, the Thutho of Nagaland is used for meat and the Pulikulam of Tamil Nadu for game (Jallikattu).

NDDB states the obvious. “These breeds have evolved over generations, surviving due to their adaptability to harsh climatic conditions, ability to perform on poor quality feed and fodder, resistance to diseases etc. Adult males of some native breeds are also known for their draft qualities. Thus these indigenous breeds are well adapted to our existing agro-climatic conditions and are resistant to many tropical diseases. They can survive and produce on marginal and poor feed and fodder resources. Some of these breeds are well known for

Indian dairy yields need an upgrade. There was a time India exported prized Gir cattle to Brazil. Now we are seeking their help to make more milk in India

WAITING FOR THE BULLS TO COME HOME



their high milk and fat production.

“However, the production potential of these animals has deteriorated over a period of time due to lack of selection. The population of some breeds have declined over the years and the primary reason is reduced productivity—an uneconomical proposition for farmers. The solution therefore lies in the genetic improvement of these breeds for milk production.”

The 20th livestock census was held in 2019. (The 21st is due in 2024.) This tells us the total cattle population is 192.49 million, marginally higher than in 2012, the year of the last census. The female cattle population has increased, while that of males has decreased. With mechanisation and an emphasis on dairy, one should expect an overall decline in population and a marked

preference for the female. Most cattle are in West Bengal, UP and MP, in that order.

The census classifies cattle into exotic or crossbred and indigenous or non-descript. Exotic or crossbred mean things like Jersey and Holstein Friesian, pure or crossbred. Just over one-fourth of cattle are exotic/crossbred, but the share has been increasing, understandable as these are high-yielding. On an average, an exotic cow yields 11.36 kg of milk per day. It is 8.32 kg for crossbred, 4.07 for indigenous and 2.83 for non-descript. Were the switch to be feasible, everyone would shift to exotic/crossbred. In the indigenous, the major ones are Gir, Lakhimi and Sahiwal.

Since December 2014, the department of animal husbandry and dairying has a Gokul Mission. It is meant to develop and

EXISTENTIAL PERIL NOT ALWAYS A TRUMP CARD

ONCE more, we learn that a hole in the head is political capital. A badly-aimed shot at Donald Trump on campaign trail has pushed him much closer to the White House. In India, a bit over a decade ago, Anna Hazare had similarly used the distant memory of a war wound to mesmeric effect. “*Sir mein goli lagi thi* (I was shot in the head),” he reminded his fans every other day during his fasts and protests. With every utterance, his support grew—and, in a way, India’s political landscape was changed by a shot fired by an unknown Pakistani soldier almost 50 years earlier.

Trump doesn’t really have a hole in the head, but his attacker’s bullet did a flyby of his headquarters and clipped an eartip, exactly where a freshly spayed cat is nicked by the vet to signal that it has been neutered. But the Democrats won’t stoop to animal humour. The shooting has had the surprising effect of subduing rhetoric and hushing party workers on both sides.

It’s a pleasant change. Trump has always played aggressive and, divided by the question of President Joe Biden’s ability to hold office, Democrats were united only on the need to attack the orange peril as an existential threat to the idea of America. They had to call off the attacks on Trump as he was bundled off, bleeding profusely, punching the air and mouthing, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Trump has used the incident to prove he has no cognitive problems under fire. He has also strengthened his image as the indomitable victim. He is now a man being harried by the deep state, the law, the press and assassins, all at the same time. And it helps that a still of his shooting by Pulitzer-winning AP photographer Evan Vucci recalls the iconic World War II shot of another AP Pulitzer-winner, Joe Rosenthal, of the marines of Easy Company raising the US flag on Iwo Jima, which became the stuff of American propaganda.

A murderous attack is an electoral trump card. In India, the Congress can thank assassins for being able to retain power twice on sticky wickets. In 1984, Indira Gandhi lost control of her Punjab plot with Operation Blue Star, but her assassination by her bodyguards ensured the unopposed transition of power to Rajiv Gandhi, the most reluctant PM of all time.

Rajiv’s prospects were not brilliant in the 1991 general election. The muck of Bofors clung to him. V P Singh had shak-

en up the board of the caste game. L K Advani had polarised half of India. A serious economic crisis was at hand. The only factor in his favour was that the electorate wanted political stability after the turbulence of the V P Singh and Chandra Shekhar governments. But Rajiv’s assass-

had dressed up the 2024 election as an existential struggle for INDIA. The opposition fended off a wipeout by projecting it as an existential struggle for India. The voter’s gaze shifted from the *jumla* of endangered Hindus to the grim certainty of the endangered Constitution. A reassuringly large number of people, who had brought the BJP to office a decade ago on its promise of radical change, voted for continuity via the Constitution.

US voters also believe they face hard choices in an existential election. Liberals are privately ashamed of their president’s commitment to backing Israel’s genocide in Gaza. They also deplore the fact that they can’t talk about it for fear of being labelled anti-semitic, a slur used indiscriminately, like our own ‘anti-national’. They hope Trump would be a lesser evil because he has the instincts of a businessman and would wind down material support to conflicts overseas. In reality, though, business interests frequently back conflicts.

Conservative voters are desperate for change but fear that electing Trump could invite the deluge. Anxiety about America’s future is no longer the preserve of survivalists. People of various persuasions are eager to survive in a world that is changing incomprehensibly fast. The future is hard to read partly because of right-wing disinformation, which is flourishing as wildly in the US as in India.

A poll conducted a month ago found over half of Americans think their economy is dwindling under Biden, though the GDP is up. A staggering 72 percent believe that inflation is up, although it is down. And multitudes believe that it’s all the fault of Joe Biden, whose tribulations do not cease. This week, he has been careless enough to catch Covid, and will be isolated.

Facing him is the bloody but unbowed guy with an extra hole in the ear. But as India has shown this year, in an existential election, there are no certainties.

(Views are personal)
(On X @pratik_k)

sination at Sriperumbudur secured the government for the Congress and ensured the smooth succession to P V Narasimha Rao, the most unlikely PM ever.

In right-wing territory, a knife attack on Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 helped him win the Brazilian election. In the US, the shooting of Ronald Reagan by John Hinckley Jr in 1981 secured public support for Reaganomics. It also helped to make his huge defence budgets palatable to voters, who eventually applauded him for grinding down the USSR and ending the Cold War.

While liberals fear that Trump’s ear piercing has assured him a victory, parallels with the Indian elections suggest that it isn’t a foregone conclusion. The BJP

conserve indigenous breeds of cattle and buffaloes. Without denigrating other breeds, the star of the Gokul Mission seems to be Gir.

Let me quote from a paper from the Food and Agriculture Organization. “The Gir is a famous milk cattle breed of India. The native tract of the breed is Gir hills and forests of Kathiawar, including Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Rajkot and Amreli districts of Gujarat. This breed is also known as Bhodali, Desan, Gujarati, Kathiawari, Sorthi and Surti in different parts of the breeding tract. The Gir are famous for their tolerance to stress conditions and resistance to various tropical diseases. Bullocks of this breed are used to drag heavy loads on all kinds of soil. Brazil, Mexico, US and Venezuela have imported these animals, where they are being bred successfully.”

As this quote states, Gir cattle were exported to Brazil. (Anecdotally, the Maharaja of Bhavanagar first gifted them to Brazil in the 18th century.) Not just Brazil, but other South American countries too towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. It was also exported to the US.

Selective breeding led to new breeds being created, with Brazil experimenting not only with Gir, but also Red Sindhi, Ongole, Nellore and Kankrej. It is difficult to estimate numbers of a breed like Gir. When is it a pure Gir and when does it become mixed? With that caveat, the number of Gir cows in Brazil is roughly double the number in India, a fact most Indians may find surprising. To state it starkly, we went the Jersey and Holstein Friesian route, Brazil went the Gir route.

Our Gir breed needs improvement. Back in 1926 or 1936, we would have imported Gir bulls from Brazil. But technology and techniques have changed. So the NDDB has imported 40,000 doses of bull semen to be used for artificial insemination. There may be more imports, even of embryos. There are mind-boggling figures on milk yields for Brazilian cows. Even if the spectacular doesn’t happen, with better breeds, Indian milk yields can become three times what they are.

However, there is some irony (there was a lot of controversy too) in Gir semen, if not Gir bulls, being imported from Brazil. There is a metaphor for globalisation as well. Make in India requires imports also. There is a phrase about cows coming home, indicating a slow, long and indefinite period of time. Hopefully, this experiment of bull semen coming home will do better.

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

VAT woes

Ref: *Lessons from India’s midnight tryst with fiscal destiny* (Jul 19). India is a heterogeneous fiscal federation unlike, say, Australia, where a unitary tax system is said to be successful. There is no need for a centralised tax regime in a nation as diverse as India. VAT may work when managed by state governments, but the GST is an ill-conceived tax system.

Sankara Venkataraman, Chennai

Cooperative federalism

The article is exemplary. Just like the author, I truly hope for the states and the Centre to move forward hand in hand to achieve success to the envy of the comity of nations.

Hulasa Behera, Bhubaneswar

Be vigilant

Ref: *Disease outbreaks test Kerala govt’s competence* (Jul 19). It is high time Kerala’s health minister, preoccupied with welcoming a person accused under the Kerala Anti-Social Activities (Prevention) Act into her party, took steps to ensure the disease outbreaks don’t evolve into a large-scale epidemic. Lack of vigilance now will cost us dearly.

Ullattil Pakkirettu Raghunathan, Thrissur

Quota quandary

The debate on a local quota in Karnataka gives the wrong signal to other states. Instead, each state may consider a quota for jobs to people from other states on a reciprocal basis. Jobs for only Kannadigas in their state is detrimental to national integration. Tomorrow, there could be a danger of all states emulating it, creating chaos. Let wisdom prevail on the state government to shun such unwise decisions.

P Vasudeva Rao, Secunderabad

Techies’ worry

The Karnataka government’s decision of giving reservation to Kannadigas in private jobs is not only impractical but unjustified and prejudiced. It will create hatred and oppression among techies from across the nation who are working in Bengaluru.

Abhilasha Gupta, email

NTA credibility

Ref: *SC directs NTA to publish centre-wise NEET scores* (Jul 19). The hopes of students clamouring for a re-examination has gone up in smoke. With IIT Madras, which was mandated to review the paper leak and other irregularities, confirming the leak was minimal, the SC apparently felt the exam could pass muster and the results published. The NTA now has the herculean task of restoring its credibility.

CV Aravind, Bengaluru

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When Tech Showed Covid Symptoms

Wake-up call for heads in the cloud

Friday morning, tech showed some serious Covid symptoms across the world when in a blue screen nightmare, an update by 'cloud-first' cybersecurity company resulted in crashing Windows systems, grounding flights, and holding businesses and emergency services hostage. Microsoft will have to investigate how a single update could cause an outage on this global scale. Tech companies go to extraordinary lengths to protect their platforms from cyberattack. They also build powerful systems to detect bugs that could be uploaded in the process. Microsoft failed to do so as CrowdStrike tweaked its virus scanner that had an adverse effect on computers running on Windows. The fix is to boot computers in safe mode and delete the offending file. But this has to be done on millions of machines. The outage, one of many in recent times but by far the most severe, will have a long tail.

Yet, the way technology has evolved, keeping computers updated with the latest version of their operating systems, Apple and Linux included, remains the best defence against malicious bits of code. There has been no report of data breach during the outage. So, it'll be a matter of fixing processes once software integrity has been restored, which Microsoft claims was almost immediate — an outage is usually over by the time it's detected. But its customers — some of the biggest brands in the world — can't be blamed for feeling powerless over the extreme centralisation of core operations. Money was lost as the initial Microsoft, CrowdStrike statements stopped short of issuing apologies. Businesses can't be faulted for devising coping strategies against something going horribly wrong with a routine software update.

Software is being updated continuously in all manner of devices. Systems are becoming better at detecting anomalies. With more businesses moving to the cloud, software companies will have to ramp up their service delivery in productivity enhancements and increased security. The world is now dependent on giant companies remotely managing millions of devices to power economic activity. Friday was a wake-up call.

Don't Get Tulips Just To See Them Die

Efforts to beautify a city are always welcome, and many of our cities can certainly do with prettier spaces. But these exercises, undoubtedly with the best of intentions, need to be thought out, pros being measured against cons. Unfortunately, in many cases, projects are undertaken because someone in authority has a whim, never mind if it's bound to flounder and become a waste of public funds that could have been utilised with more thought. The tulip-planting programme in Delhi seems to be the latest vanity project that actually defeats its very purpose. The Delhi Parks and Gardens Society (DPGS), which has both the L-G and CM in its governing body, has been asked to import 3 lakh tulip bulbs from the Netherlands this year for

₹1.5 cr, adding to the 1.5 lakh bulbs imported in 2022 and 5 lakh in 2023 from Europe. DPGS is supposed to distribute these bulbs to parks and gardens management committees and RWAs. But it's difficult to rationalise the choice of tulips for a city like Delhi with its arid and hot climate, far removed from the flower's natural habitats in Holland, Kashmir or Sikkim. Moreover, tulips bloom for 1-3 weeks in Delhi, compared to 2-3 months in their usual habitats. While rows of tulips are, indeed, delightful to the eye, Delhi should set aside this tulipmania, focus on growing species more suited to Delhi's climes, and seek making the city by other means. Most will say that clean drains, well-maintained footpaths and green spaces, and clean roads that don't go underwater every monsoon can be a better push towards making Delhi a visual pleasure. But maintaining flower beds is also worth pursuing. As long as they don't wilt at the slightest hint of heat and present a sad spectacle of attempted beautification.

JUST IN JEST
A study confirms what you already know — but with a twist

As Suspected, To Be Rich is Glorious

Now that the grandest wedding in the history of weddings is done and dusted — or is it? — and many are feeling blue (no, not the Microsoft kind) about the utter void in their social media feeds, let's get back to a fundamental question: can money buy happiness? While the Beatles had a consensus on this — 'I don't care too much for money/ Money can't buy me love', sang the by-then very rich quartet — scientists are still scratching their heads (and spending serious amounts of cash) to figure it out. The latest research is by Wharton's Matt Killingsworth. While tracking happiness for his larger research, trackyourhappiness.org, he sampled 33,269 employed US adults aged 18-65 with household incomes of at least \$10,000 a year, who answered questions on a scale called 'Satisfaction with life', along with data from the ultra-wealthy — folks with a median net worth between \$3 mn and \$7.9 mn. He found the super-rich were 'substantially and statistically' — in other words, significantly — happier than people earning over \$500k a year. So, why might rich people be happier? Killingsworth says it's 'more fundamental and psychologically deeper than simply buying more stuff'. It's about having a greater feeling of control over life. In effect, they have more freedom to live the life they want to live. Much like a hermit or bum, actually.

As we rely more on software & cloud systems, so does the need to address cyber vulnerabilities

Bolt From the Blue Screen



Subimal Bhattacharjee

On Friday, massive outages were observed in Microsoft's Windows OS across the world, causing severe disruptions across sectors including aviation, banking, stock exchanges and hospitals after the Blue Screen of Death (BSOD) appeared in those impacted systems. BSOD is a blue critical error screen with white text displayed on Windows when the system encounters a fatal error that it cannot safely recover from. It halts the system to prevent damage to hardware or data corruption.

Initial indications have ascribed the outages to the malfunctioning of updates to the Falcon sensor that US cybersecurity company CrowdStrike provides to various Microsoft systems, including Azure, Microsoft 365 and Windows, for wider cybersecurity coverage as part of a partnership. CrowdStrike provides advanced endpoint (computers, servers, mobile devices) security for Microsoft environments, and helps organisations meet compliance requirements in Microsoft ecosystems.

The Falcon sensor is lightweight, with minimal impact on system performance, and collects telemetry data about activities and events occurring on the endpoint, including process executions, network connections and file system changes. It analyses this data real-time to detect potential threats or suspicious activities. It uses behavioural analysis to identify potential threats, rather than relying solely on signature-based detection.

Both Microsoft and CrowdStrike have assured that these outages are not due to cyberattacks, and systems would be restored soon. However, the sca-

le and impact of this 'blue nightmare' — till date, the largest cyber outage — has sent concerns across businesses, governments and the tech community. It has renewed calls for better security and stability measures for digital technology systems.

The scale of Friday's BSOD 'glitch' has raised the need for greater cooperation on critical infrastructure protection that's heavily interdependent on digital systems. In an increasingly interconnected world, critical infrastructure relies heavily on software and cloud-based systems.

While these technologies offer numerous benefits, they also introduce significant cybersecurity vulnerabilities that can have far-reaching consequences when system failures happen, or when exploited. Common types of system vulnerabilities include buffer overflows, SQL (structured query language) injection and cross-site scripting. These often arise from programming errors, outdated systems or insufficient security testing. In critical infrastructure, software vulnerabilities can lead to system compromises, data breaches or even physical damage to equipment.

Likewise, cloud computing introduces its own set of vulnerabilities. These include misconfigured access controls, insecure APIs (application programming interface) and data breaches due to shared infrastructure. The distributed nature of cloud systems can make it challenging to maintain consistent security across all components.

Additionally, reliance on third-party providers introduces risks related to data sovereignty and supply-chain attacks. Even software updates and patch



Install a screamsaver

management carry their own degree of risks. In the current incident, these possibilities seem more credible.

Clearly, the tactical focus is on technical mitigation strategies that would be a combination of:

- Finding points of vulnerability and the right patching.
- Conducting regular security audits and penetration testing.
- Implementing robust access controls and encryption.
- Ensuring defined best practices and employee training on cybersecurity best practices.
- Adopting zero-trust security models.
- Collaboration between public and private sectors to share threat intelligence.

These actions often go on a continual basis for organisations. Many countries have a regulatory or government agency to mandate and assess regular security audit reports. Cybersecurity being a very dynamic activity, round-the-clock security services and managing vulnerabilities are undertaken by large corporations.

But the technical solutions can't only address these risks. Many of these risks have escalated over the years as both countries and rogue elements of ten backed by states have made many efforts to exploit vulnerabilities. They engage in ransomware pursuits as well as attacks on critical infrastructures.

A significant aspect of recent geopolitical pursuits is usage of digital technologies for disruptions and debilitation by giving it a force-multiplier

er punch. Thus, the need for wider global cooperation on critical infrastructure protection is prudent. Efforts towards implementation have been very casual so far.

In its July 2021 report, the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security had recommended measures for critical infrastructure protection. There hasn't been much progress due to its non-binding nature.

Many countries are hesitant to adopt international standards that might limit their autonomy in managing their critical infrastructure, or in conducting cyber operations. Likewise, different countries have varying priorities and approaches to cybersecurity, making it difficult to reach consensus on implementation. Countries are also reluctant to share sensitive information about their critical infrastructure vulnerabilities or capabilities.

Then there are wider concerns around AI and its regulation that have overshadowed efforts for cybersecurity

Different countries have varying approaches to cybersecurity, making it hard to reach consensus on implementation



cooperation, which is seen more as bilateral activity. While AI-induced cyber vulnerabilities are being flagged, there hasn't been a more detailed approach to AI and cybersecurity cooperation discussed in global engagements.

Friday's outage clearly serves as a wake-up call for closer engagement on addressing cyber vulnerabilities. As our reliance on software and cloud systems in critical infrastructure grows, so does the importance of addressing cybersecurity vulnerabilities. The potential impact of successful attacks on these systems underscores the need for ongoing vigilance, investment in security measures, and a proactive approach to identifying and mitigating risks.

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The Assassin Survivor's Creed



Indrajit Hazra

Like getting dumped in a relationship, being on the wrong end of an assassination sucks. But, again, like after getting dumped, the best thing one can do is to just snap out of it and take advantage of the situation. You didn't see that coming from a Dale Carnegie sceptic, did you?

I know, I know. You're asking what advantage can you possibly take if you're the one who's been discarded like a proposed set of farm laws. Well, for starters, you can get back to the proverbial sea with its plentiful fish. Or, if you're too tired to put your game face back on, reclaim the joys of single-person remote controlhood and/or having pizza in bed.

As for assassinations, making the most of them has been a proven charm across cultures and down history, especially if the assassination was an unsuccessful one. And it's double espresso special if you have the wit and wherewithal of a Ronald Reagan. After being shot by the very assassin-sounding John Hinckley Jr, Reagan

quipped to his distraught wife Nancy upon her arrival at the hospital, 'Honey, I forgot to duck', referencing boxer Jack Dempsey's line to his wife after losing the 1926 heavyweight title. If before being shot three months into assuming office for his first term he was deemed a 'Hollywood import' novice in Beltway Hamerica, then the near-death turned him into a political untouchable — that is, King Salami no one could touch thereafter.

Donald T, like Ronald R, has the gift of the gab, albeit suited more to our emoji-OMG times. The Gipper wit is replaced by the meme-rable raised fist with the 'f' word uttered thrice: 'Fight! Fight! Fight!' It's as if Trump was referencing Al Pacino's 'Attica! Attica! Attica!' invocation of the Attica Prison riot in Dog Day Afternoon to get the crowd on his — a bank robber — side. A frame capturing the moment from a low angle by AP photographer Evan Vucci led the rest. With the American flag levitating behind our Hero's thin red ribbons-of-blood-bifurcated face, this is Emanuel Leutze's iconic 1851 painting, 'George Washington Crossing the Delaware' all over again. And in the first 20-odd minutes of his Republican National Convention speech in Milwaukee yesterday, Trump channelled this very stream, sharing his intimations of 'mortality, displaying vulnerability that was (strangely?) quite un-Trump-like.



The Expressionist says it all

Coming out alive of a targeted kill holds tantalising value. Three things simultaneously come into play. One, this is the ultimate 'What if?' — the alternative being all too palpable in everyone's imagination each time one sees the Still Alive One. Two, it's not an accident averted but an engineered death warded off. Three, surviving an assassination attempt — whether it's British India magistrate Douglas Kingsford (he survived several bids on his life) or Salman Rushdie — brings a talismanic power to the survivor. Death defeated, the assassination survivor is that magnificent paradox: the cham-

pion underdog, cheater of those who want to cheat him or her of life.

There is, undoubtedly, the borrowed weight of the word 'assassin' in assassination survivor. The term itself originates from the Arabic 'hashshashin', a Shia order that targeted and killed prominent Christian public figures during the late 11th-13th century. This, by itself, differentiates an assassination from a murder, adding another layer of importance to the VIP target. Like the survivor of 'terrorism', the survivor of an 'assassination' holds a special place in the popular imagination.

Mohandas Gandhi isn't a great poster boy for assassination survivors. At least twice — first in May 1944 at Panchgani in Maharashtra, and a second time in September the same year during his journey from Sevagram to Mumbai — Nathuram Godse attempted to stab him, and was foiled on both occasions. Gandhi didn't press charges, and didn't make much of a big deal of either attempts.

Trump, on the other hand, has abided by the assassination survivor's SOP after his 'death within earshot' episode: taking the 'god-given' opportunity with both hands and spreading wonderment and outrage. There's little that his detractors can do now other than pray for extremely rapid climate change.

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From 100 cr to 70k cr in 40 Years



Ashok Chawla

Capital Issues (Control) Act 1947 was a post-war legislation enacted to keep check on moneys raised by the corporate sector with the objective of conserving scarce financial resources. It may have outlived its objective, but continued to operate. No capital issue could take place without the consent of the Controller of Capital Issues (CCI). Premium — if any, was specifically approved — range of instruments was limited and largely restricted to equity.

The formula for determining premium on share issues was a simple average of net asset value and profit-earning capacity value discounted at a fixed rate. Capacity in GoI to handle proposals was adequate to apply the prescribed parameters, but not for creative innovation, which wasn't on the table anyway.

Ideas and new instruments came from Bombay's small community of 3-4 merchant bankers. Thus were born

debentures — fully convertible, and then partially convertible. But interest rate was capped. The market was thought to be 'booming' when in FY1965, the amount raised was the princely sum of a little more than ₹100 cr. Forty years later, that number seems from another world. Today, market capitalisation of shares listed on NSE is over ₹4 lakh cr (about \$5 tn). More than 50 firms are estimated to raise about ₹70k cr in FY2025.

The winds of change came slowly but surely. Capital Issues (Control) Act was considered advantageous to small investors, but didn't help businesses grow. Opening up of the economy required a new regulatory framework. This was born Sebi in April 1988. It got statutory powers from the Sebi Act 1992, and the Capital Issues Act was repealed, even as the transition between the two regulators led to manipulation for a while.

Sebi's role is both to develop and regulate the capital market. In its first 10-15 years, Sebi functioned as a statutory regulator more focused on its developmental role. It has three powers: executive, legislative and judicial. It drafts regulations in its legislative capacity, conducts investiga-

tion and takes enforcement action in its executive function, and passes orders in its judicial role. There is an appeal process at the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT), with a secondary process at the Supreme Court.

In its 36 years of existence, Sebi has acquired credibility as an effective capital markets regulator. Despite its decent track record, though, it finds itself in the crossfire from time to time. There have been some half-a-dozen major scams during its existence. Market intermediaries have now and then brought it disrepute by fraudulent activities resulting in losses to investors. Insider trading

cases and delays in their detection and punishment is another aspect. Three other areas of concern: ► Time taken to dispose of matters that come to its attention. Internal



My, how it's grown

capacity can't be trotted out as a defence since Sebi has been around for a while.

► Perception of Sebi sometimes 'overdoing' things, and in some others, 'underdoing'. While this may not be entirely correct, perception among stakeholders is important in determining the level of trust.

► Sebi seen as constantly tinkering with the regulatory architecture rather than following the dictum, 'Don't fix it, if it ain't broken'.

A final word about accountability. An arrangement where a parliamentary standing committee has an annual, detailed review of Sebi's functioning should be institutionalised. It may be argued that this will curb the regulator. But this would actually move the needle from mere executive oversight to an arrangement that can be more broad-based.

Largely informal interventions will be replaced by a formal review of functioning that can be made public through the parliamentary committee's report. Suggestions and directions would then flow and provide a matrix for work in the year ahead. This would strengthen the regulatory framework and help in taking the capital market to still greater heights.

The writer is former finance secretary, GoI



THE SPEAKING TREE

Eudaimonia And Peace

ULLHAS PAGEY

The relentless chase for pleasure often leads to the 'hedonistic treadmill', 'a cycle where gratification is fleeting and the desire for more intensifies. This pursuit, centred around material possessions, offers only temporary satisfaction. However, eudaimonia emerges as a profound alternative beyond this superficial allure, leading to enduring contentment.

Eudaimonia, a Greek concept often translated as human flourishing, signifies a life well-lived. It's about finding meaning, purpose and virtue in one's existence. Unlike the hedonistic focus on pleasure, eudaimonia emphasises spiritual growth and contributing to something larger than oneself.

Spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and mindfulness play a crucial role in cultivating eudaimonia. Spirituality empowers individuals to break free from the hedonistic cycle by shifting focus from external rewards to inner peace. It offers a resilient foundation for happiness that is less susceptible to the fluctuations of external circumstances. Research consistently demonstrates the positive correlation between spirituality and well-being.

Integrating the principles of eudaimonia with an awareness of the hedonistic treadmill can enhance one's spiritual quotient. Eudaimonia encourages a life of virtue and meaningful fulfilment while understanding the hedonistic treadmill helps balance the pursuit of transient pleasures. Together with spiritual practices, it fosters lasting inner peace.



BSOD's Day Out

One day, the Blue Screen of Death (BSOD) decided it needed a vacation from crashing computers. It packed its bags with error codes, and booked a flight to the Cloudy Isles.

Upon arrival, BSOD checked into the Debugger Hotel, where the concierge, a cheerful little antivirus program, welcomed it. BSOD decided to go sightseeing and visited the famous Kernel Falls. As it admired the cascading bytes, it bumped into an old pal, the Spinning Beach Ball of Doom (SBOD). 'Hey, BSOD! Long time no crash!' SBOD greeted. They decided to catch up over a cup of JavaScript coffee.

BSOD asked, 'So, how's the Mac life?' SBOD sighed, 'Oh, you know, just spinning around, causing confusion. Same old, same old.' Just then, the infamous Sad Mac strolled in, looking, well, sad. 'Cheer up, Sad Mac!' BSOD said. 'Life's too short for sad bytes. Join us for a reboot party tonight!'


The party was a blast, with blue screens, spinning balls and Sad Macs dancing under the glow of pixelated disco lights. Even error messages joined in. It was the best vacation BSOD ever had, full of crashes and laughter, proving that even errors can be awright.

Chat Room

The Extended Business Family

Apropos 'New Kids on the Block' by Harsh Mariwala and Tatvamasi Dixit (Jul 19), Indian family businesses must acknowledge that their success is not solely reliant on traditional values and legacy but also on the ability to generate new ideas and embrace changes. While the entry of the next generation into the family business must be a curated process, they must also recognise the value of intrapreneurship — a way to find and fund the ideas of their employees, who turn entrepreneurs within the enterprise. By creating space for creativity and experimentation, businesses can unlock the potential of their workforce and generate new products, services and processes for staying competitive and relevant in a fast-paced world.

PRADEEP KUMAR Surat



A thought for today
Problems worthy of attacks, prove their worth by hitting back
ADAM SMITH

The IT Blues

About outage in a hyper connected world

Yesterday, when Windows machines simultaneously started BSODing worldwide, it looked like the much prophesied ‘cyber Pearl Harbour’ was upon us. Then, the critical error indicated by the blue screens was identified and a fix deployed, thankfully fast. But even then, there was really no sinking into a sigh of relief. As against early speculation about a cyberattack, it turned out that the unnervingly widespread tech outage had been caused by a flawed security update by CrowdStrike. This is a prominent cybersecurity platform, with kernel-level privileges to run across vast computer systems, to detect and protect against threats, ironically.

Did the firm tasked to ward off viruses and malware itself ‘violate every good software engineering practice we know’, critics are asking. Did the traumatic outages from airlines to banking take place because a software update was rolled out globally without proper testing? This does feel worse than ‘bad guys’ wreaking havoc. And given the usual nature of licensing agreements in the software industry, particularly the exemptions therein, a comforting level of accountability is also unlikely. Separately, accountability has been MIA within India as well, when, say, services at AIIMS Delhi were crippled as a result of an IT outage caused by ‘improper network segmentation’.

In a less connected world, the outage would have had less impact. The more our lives and livelihoods have moved online, the more dependent we have become on a global network of servers and satellites. We felt this deep vulnerability of interconnectedness during the pandemic too. Amid a chorus of ‘this should be a wake-up call’, which we have heard before, one fact stood out as constructive yesterday. That Mac and Linux hosts were unaffected. As even more global traffic inevitably gets onto digital highways, one thing govts should reconsider is dependence on too few platforms to serve too many critical functions. Yes, risks spread like wildfire in our connected world. But we can minimise those risks.

In Whose Name?

UP gov't's kanwar yatra decision is wrong

CM Yogi has, unfortunately, doubled down and expanded the UP police order to display the names of owners of eateries *all* along the route that thousands of Shiv-bhakts take on their annual trek to Haridwar. The police order had covered only the three districts on the route with high Muslim populations. The state's order ignores the severe criticism of UP police's measure. Earlier, cops had dialled back, saying the measure was “voluntary”. BJP veteran Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi had captured the essence of the police measure: “Hasty orders of overzealous officials may give rise to...untouchability...Faith must be respected...but untouchability must not be patronised.”

Kanwar yatra is a tradition, even if it has exploded in numbers over the last 15 years. Districts with high Muslim populations have always been on the Kanwar route. There've been no communal conflicts, during the trek or during return journeys. That police in the first place thought issuing such an outrightly prejudicial instruction was their business is evidence of the blindness to real duty. That police imagined their bias would go unnoticed also showed their belief that they can fearlessly interfere in people's day-to-day lives and livelihood.

NDA ally JDU had sought a review of the order saying Muslims along the route have always cooperated. At the heart of coalition is accommodation. The yatra starts on Monday. Preparations are underway by locals to cater to the walkers. UP police crossed a line. Yogi's decision can not only potentially disrupt local businesses, it can also drive a new wedge in communal relations – because it can promote distrust. The order should be revoked.

King Tut To Trump, A Formula Endures

Podcasts about whether assassinations ‘work’

The word ‘assassination’ was used for the first time in English literature, by Macbeth, who of course ended up calling it a ‘poisoned chalice’. With the topic in the spotlight this month, here are some podcasts that dive into it.

Ones and Tooze | A conversation with columnist and history prof Adam Tooze reminds us that although nothing else has grabbed global attention like Trump's failed assassination, this is just one of a string of attempts to assassinate prominent leaders over the past year. For example, Jan saw the stabbing of Democratic Party of Korea leader Lee Jae-myung and May the shooting of Slovakia PM Robert Fico.

If we take assassination to be the killing of a prominent political individual, the ‘palace coup’ type of assassination is almost timeless, from King Tut to Caesar. Assassination in war has had a more chequered state, but the 20th century saw it return with a bang, from attempts to assassinate Hitler to systemic targeting of PLO leadership by Mossad. In the new mode of drone warfare, it's become the standard mode of operations. This is a fact to which Putin, for example, is very alert, both as client and target.

History Extra | Historian John Withington, who has analysed 266 assassinations from ancient Egypt to the present day, discusses what are assassination's ‘ethics’, how it ‘works’ less in the case of democrats, than autocrats. In the Roman empire where there were no rules of succession really, 15 of the 17 assassinations Withington looked at were carried out by the

emperor's own bodyguards or troops. There is also the notion of tyrannicide as an ethical act, going back to ancient Greece, including Plato. This notion got buttressed by the Reformation, which divided Christendom into two lots, each seeing the other as heretics. Then over in China there was Sun Tzu who argued that assassination is very cost effective, to change regimes. It can also have unintended consequences. Take the assassinations of MLK and JFK. Both remain shrouded in controversy to this day, but one thing we can be fairly confident about is that the killers were not supporters of the civil rights movement, which they ended up advancing greatly.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Will. Their bomb killed the czar but also took the assassin's life. So while Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination is generally regarded as the first suicide bombing assassination, this 1881 one is also in the competition. In any case, the czar's successor reversed many of his reforms. One of those who plotted the history-bending assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand actually admitted later, that if he had known what it would set off, he would have blown himself to bits instead.

Warfare | Broadcaster and war historian James Rogers hosts a conversation about assassinations that changed the course of history. Alexander II of Russia was a reformist, he emancipated serfs, introduced some version of universal education and of a constitution, but lots of people felt he wasn't going far enough, including a revolutionary organisation called People's Will. Their bomb killed the czar but also took the assassin's life. So while Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination is generally regarded as the first suicide bombing assassination, this 1881 one is also in the competition.



OUR WINDOW TO CHAOS

If an update from a cybersecurity firm tasked to protect Windows computers can cause global disruption, how vulnerable is a connected world to a concerted malicious attack?

Rahul Sasi

When attempting to sabotage a VVIP's car, one approach is to directly tamper with the specific car, such as cutting its brake lines. However, due to extensive security measures, this would be challenging.

A more insidious method would be to target the supplier of the brake pads used by the VVIP's entire convoy. By introducing faulty brake pads into the supply chain, all the cars in the convoy could be compromised with a single action. This strategy allows for a broader impact with a hidden, yet highly effective, attack.

Now, think of your computer as similar to the VVIP's car. If a hacker wants to attack your computer, they could attempt a direct assault on the machine itself. Alternatively, they could implant malware into various components used to build the software your computer relies on. These components might include software for mathematical calculations, graphics processing, or cybersecurity, each developed by different vendors. By compromising these components, an attacker could indirectly undermine the entire system.

An insidious threat | Yesterday, millions of Windows computers experienced the Blue Screen of Death (BSOD). This is a critical error screen displayed by the Windows operating system when it encounters a severe system error from which it cannot recover. The BSOD indicates that the operating system has reached a state where it can no longer function safely, leading to its shutting down to prevent further damage. This results in a blue screen with an error code and a message that indicates the cause of the crash, prompting users to restart their computers.

The widespread nature of BSOD in this scenario is akin to sabotaging the brake pad supplier. Just as a faulty brake pad could cause multiple cars in the VVIP's convoy to fail, a widespread issue with a software component can lead to massive disruptions across many systems.

What caused the issue? | CrowdStrike, a leading cybersecurity platform, holds a 19% market share in endpoint security. Its faulty update caused Microsoft's operating system to crash, leading to numerous instances of BSOD. CrowdStrike's flagship product, Falcon, uses a single sensor and a unified threat interface to monitor and protect endpoints, workloads, and identities. Falcon Identity Threat Protection is designed to prevent identity-driven breaches in real time by correlating attacks across various vectors.

Was this incident a deliberate attack or a quality control error? Currently, it appears to be a mistake from CrowdStrike's quality control. However, this incident resulted in significant disruption, affecting critical sectors such as hospitals, airports, and other essential services. IT and security teams need to work around the clock to resolve the issue because the fix released by CrowdStrike needs to be performed manually.

In the engineering world, there is a humorous yet wise saying: “Never deploy updates on Fridays.” This advice stems from the risk of issues arising when most of the team is off for the weekend. Deploying updates end of the week can lead to unforeseen problems that require urgent fixes. Avoiding Friday deployments ensures that the workweek is available to address any complications and maintain system stability.

Dependence & complications | In today's interconnected world, almost every aspect of our lives is linked to computer systems. This includes critical infra such as hospitals and airports, as well as everyday conveniences like banking and shopping. Disruptions in these systems can have far-reaching impacts, from the inconvenience of being unable to make a purchase to life-threatening delays in medical care.

For example, modern healthcare heavily relies on computer systems for patient records, diagnostic tools, and even life-support machines. One real-world example is the cyberattack on Düsseldorf University Hospital in 2020, which caused system failures, leading to the emergency redirection of a critically ill patient to a more distant hospital. This delay in medical treatment tragically resulted in the patient's death. Such incidents clearly illustrate the critical need for robust cybersecurity measures to protect both our digital infra and human well-being.

Security is going to be paramount, and it's not going to be easy. This BSOD incident underscores the risk of future supply chain attacks by malicious groups, highlighting the need for rigorous security practices, comprehensive quality assurance, and improved vigilance throughout the supply chain.

The writer is CEO of a cybersecurity start-up

An insidious threat | Yesterday, millions of Windows computers experienced the Blue Screen of Death (BSOD). This is a critical error screen displayed by the Windows operating system when it encounters a severe system error from which it cannot recover. The BSOD indicates that the operating system has reached

If You Are Truly Hindu, You Can't Hate

In Hinduism's foundational principles, concepts like chosen ones, villains, victims and oppressors don't exist. So, hating someone or some group is fundamentally un-Hindu

Devdutt Pattanaik

Hatred is a powerful tool to unite a people. Israel uses it against Palestinians. The entire Muslim world uses it against Israel. Each one argues passionately why their hatred is justified. Hatred is easy to justify, when you see yourself as the victim. But the idea of victimhood does not exist in Hinduism, from a structural point of view.

Hinduism today has been reduced to casteism, by academics and activists, who believe in justice and equality; ideas that are not universal, contrary to popular belief. They are cultural, with foundation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. When Marx referred to religions as the opium of the people, he did not realise that his own ideas of justice and equality came from the religions he was vilifying. Anyone who believes in justice and equality feels it's a good idea, well worth spreading.

The reason why one cannot proselytise Hinduism is because it is not based on justice or equality! It is based on an altogether different way of seeing the world. It is about becoming aware that life has no climax. There is no oppression, villainy or victimhood. We simply exist in an unpredictable, uncontrollable forest of hunger, fear and ignorance, where we alone can bring nourishment, security and wisdom.

When you believe in justice and equality, it feels right to hate those who oppress, those promoters of injustice and inequality – the villain, the monster. In modern retellings of Hindu tales, asuras and rakshasas are presented as villains and monsters, who need to be killed by gods. Durga impales Mahisha with her trident. Narasimha disembowels Hiranakashipu with his sharp claws. Ram brings down Ravan with a volley of arrows. However, when we delve deeper, and actually observe the ritual performances, and temple ceremonies, we notice that the masks and images of Mahisha, Hiranakashipu, and Ravan are always worshipped. These ‘demons’ are not vilified. They are venerated.

The lower gods (devas) may seek ‘destruction’ of the asuras and the rakshasas, but the higher gods (Shiva, Vishnu, Devi) ‘uplift’ them. The violence becomes a metaphor either to establish the rhythm of nature, or to end ignorance. In subaltern spaces, the violence is a fertility ritual: the annual harvesting and the threshing of grain that brings food to the table. In intellectual circles, the violence unknots the human mind. At no point are Mahisha, Hiranakashipu or Ravan called evil. In fact, there is no Sanskrit synonym for the word ‘evil’.

Concepts like oppression, evil, villain, and victim are part of mythologies that presuppose one life: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, atheism. In mythologies that presuppose rebirth, life is endless, without triumph or tragedy. No one enters this world with an empty balance sheet. No one leaves with an empty balance sheet. Those who consume are in debt. Those who are consumed are in credit. Mahisha is being slaughtered so that he does not consume the gods, but is instead consumed by the gods. This is the annual fertility cycle of food production

and food consumption. Hiranakashipu is in debt – he is liberated by Narasimha. Ravan is blinded by his fortunes, his credits. In the wise eyes of Hanuman and Ram, he is no more than a petulant immature child. There is no hate in these stories.

But when these stories are retold on television or cinema, screenplay writers distort the mythic narrative to the demands of modern storytelling. They need heroes, villains, victims. So, they turn Durga, Narasimha and Ram into superheroes fighting supervillains. Effectively, the Hindu story becomes a Biblical tale – where the messiah comes to the rescue!



Politicians who tell Hindus to hate are spinning a rather un-Hindu yarn of injustice and inequality. Social media propagates the discourse that Hindus are victims of injustice; that Hindus have to fight back. If Jews have weaponised ‘Antisemitism’ and Muslims have weaponised ‘Islamophobia’, Hindus need to weaponise ‘Hinduphobia’.

Manufacturing enemies, inventing threats, does mobilise people. Feminists demonise men to rally women. Communists demonise capitalists to rally workers. In American institutions, White, heterosexual males are being demonised in the name of social justice. This ‘binary’ template of social change has now reached toxic proportions globally, as indicated in the cantankerous left-right debate manifesting everywhere. As a result, in India, all issues are reduced to either a Brahmin-Dalit, or a Hindutva-Muslim, confrontation. We do not have to subscribe to it.

We need to revisit the foundational principles of Hinduism, where there is no concept of Chosen People enslaved by a Pharaoh seeking a Promised Land. The Veda states the timeless truth (sanatan dharma) that in nature there is always the predator and the prey. One is not a villain; the other is not a victim. That which eats eventually has to repay its debt by being eaten. Humans want to eat but do not wish to be eaten. So, they create culture. Here debts are repaid by feeding. If we do not repay, we will continue to be reborn. So, the point of life is to feed, rather than eat. Hatred makes us eat rather than feed. It puts us in debt. Traps us in the endless cycle of samsara.

Calvin & Hobbes



Guru Is An Embodiment Of Compassion

Yogi Balkrishna

The phenomenal world operates on the principle of cause and effect; every effect results from a preceding cause. For humans, all endeavours stem from underlying motivations or physio-psychological causes. No deliberate human action is possible without a motivation or an unfulfilled need driving it.

In his seminal work Motivation and Personality, Abraham Maslow outlined a hierarchy of human needs in the form of a pyramid. Maslow studied exemplary individuals such as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Frederick Douglass, as well as a select group of college students. At the base of Maslow's pyramid are physiological needs, which sequentially rise to safety, love and belonging, esteem, and culminate in self-actualisation. The lower four layers,

which Maslow termed ‘deficiency needs,’ include physical needs, security, friendship and love, and esteem. According to Maslow, once a level of need is satisfied, individuals naturally progress to the next level.

Millennia ago, Indian yog masters presented a similar yet more profound reality in an esoteric manner through the teachings of the seven chakras. These chakras, or energy centres, are located along the subtle body of a person and are aligned with the spinal column. The seven chakras – Muladhar: Swadhishtan, Manipur, Anahat, Vishuddhi, Ajna, and Sahasrar represent different stages of the psycho-spiritual evolution of a person. With the initiation and the grace of an enlightened master, these centres become active and uninhibited channels

for life energy, kundalini, ensuring a person's spiritual development.

Maslow's findings reveal a limitation: At each level of the pyramid, the object of motivation changes. There is a continuous lurching between various levels of needs, making fulfilment illusive and unending.

This raises a fundamental question: Is there truly an end to human desires and resultant sufferings?

According to Vedanta, the Self, indivisible, limitless, nondual consciousness, is the ultimate goal of all our seeking. Paradoxically, the sought is hidden in the seeker as their very Self.

A true master has not only discovered this ultimate Truth but is gifted to impart this liberating knowledge to others. Free from the shackles of binding desires and resulting miseries, the guru, out of

Sacredspace

The grace of the Guru is like an ocean. If one comes with a cup, he will only get a cupful. The bigger the vessel, the more one will be able to carry. It is entirely up to him.

Ramana Maharshi



compassion, leads others to divine freedom. The blessings of such a master are a sure path to transformation. Having discovered the supreme state, the master rejoices in his true svabhav, nature. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad beautifully describes such a sage: ‘atmanam ched vijaniyaat aham asmi iti purushah kim ichan kasya kaamaay sariram anusanjuaaret,’ – ‘if a person knows the Self as I am the limitless Atman,’ then desiring for whose sake will one suffer in the wake of the body.

A master, having fulfilled the very purpose of life, is at the acme of human development with no other motivation except compassion. Overflowing with love, he represents the ultimate flowering of existence. On this Guru Purnima, with a grateful heart, let us bow to enlightened masters who guide us on the path to Self-discovery and liberation.

Guru Purnima is on July 21

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Kanwar Yatra row

UP order threatens communal harmony

THE BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has ordered all food and beverage shops along the Kanwar Yatra routes to display the name and identity of the operator/owner. Though maintaining the sanctity of the pilgrims' faith and ensuring peaceful movement of *kanwariyas* have been officially cited as the reasons for the move, there is an unmistakable intention to single out the minority Muslim community. No wonder Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has warned of action against vendors selling halal-certified products.

The fortnight-long Kanwar Yatra has occasionally witnessed violence, with *kanwariyas* and shopkeepers getting into an argument over food, particularly the sale of meat. In August 2018, the Supreme Court had taken a serious note of 'grave incidents of vandalism' of private and public property during the yatra in western Uttar Pradesh and the National Capital Region. In 2022, an Army man was allegedly murdered in Haridwar by a group of yatis from Haryana following an altercation. The onus is on the state government concerned to deploy an adequate number of police personnel along the route so that clashes or disturbances can be averted. Marking out shops run by Muslims will only fuel communal disharmony and no way guarantee that there will be no confrontation between *kanwariyas* and vendors/passersby.

Notably, two BJP allies — the Janata Dal (United) and the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) — have slammed the UP order. BSP supremo Mayawati has called it 'unconstitutional'. The polarisation playbook did not do the trick for the BJP in the recent Lok Sabha polls in UP. However, the party apparently cannot resist the temptation of trying it out ahead of the Assembly byelections. Finding itself on a weak wicket after the electoral reversal, the BJP seems desperate to win over disenchanted Hindu voters. However, the play may backfire and worsen the party's woes in UP.

Child marriages

With 81 per cent cut, Assam's new move pointless

WITH an 81 per cent reduction in child marriages from 2021 to 2024, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's government has made commendable progress through a clampdown on violators in the past year. The stringent measures in place are clearly showing positive outcomes, putting the administration on track to attaining its target of eradicating the social evil by 2026. The results are particularly significant in the light of a recent NGO report that highlights the alarming prevalence of child marriage in India. Quoting government figures, it reveals that nearly 4,400 child marriages occur daily across the country, though only about 3,800 cases were registered over the past five years.

The CM's directive for a biannual crackdown, with the next scheduled for later this year, indicates not only a relentless pursuit of this goal but also achieving it. Thus, it is baffling why the CM has chosen to ruffle feathers that have the potential to trigger social and religious discord by emphasising the necessity of additional safeguards in the state's battle against child marriage. The Assam Cabinet's recent approval to repeal the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act of 1935 may lead to confusion in the registration of Muslim marriages as many Muslims in the state still follow personal laws prescribed by the 1937 Shariat Act. Also, the repeal is rendered redundant since the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, enacted by the Centre, already addresses the issue.

This legislative move by Assam, while commendable in its intent to protect young girls, raises critical questions about implementation and the balance between reform and religious customs. As the Bill heads to the Assembly, it is imperative that Sarma addresses these nuances to prevent any administrative and social turmoil. Instead, the state should focus on complementing the clampdown with educational programmes on the issue.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JULY 20, 1924

The Delhi riots

IT is an unfortunate fact, not easily to be explained, that in spite of its being the winter capital of India as well as a prominent centre of nationalist activities, no detailed account of the deplorable happenings at Delhi during the last few days has so far been supplied to the public except what has emanated from the Associated Press or other correspondents of newspapers. The Muslim and Hindu leaders, the Congress and the Khilafat Committee as well as other public bodies have so far not said a word on the subject. The Government, which remained unaccountably silent from the 11th to the 16th, issued a brief statement on the 17th, which was little better than a bare enumeration of some of the broad facts. Had such an incident happened in the capital of any Western country, the public would have been deluged with detailed statements of the incident both by the Government and by such political or semi-political organisations as might exist at the place. What is more, neither would have had any peace until they had stated all that they could reasonably be expected to state. It is a striking commentary upon the stage of development we have reached that in India such happenings seem to be taken as a matter of course, not, indeed, in the sense that no one outside those immediately affected is seriously perturbed by them, but in the sense that even those who are most perturbed by them do not deem it necessary to compel those in a position to know to make a full and immediate statement of all the facts of the case, both with a view to the formation of public opinion and to the devising and adoption of measures to cope with the situation.

The complicated diaspora story

Our admiration remains focused predominantly on successes & achievements of those in the West



JYOTI MALHOTRA

THE *New York Times* can't seem to have enough of Usha Chilukuri Vance. Her non-designer dresses, her square heels, her black hair with its "visible streaks of gray" — indeed, all her appearances this past week at the US Republican National Convention, where her husband JD Vance accepted the nomination as Donald Trump's running mate — have persuaded the grand old newspaper that the potential second most powerful wife in the world, unlike the Trump women, doesn't spend all her time "catering to the male gaze".

Usha's professional credentials seem far more interesting — she works with a 'cool, woke' San Francisco law firm. She met JD Vance at Yale and went on to get a Gates fellowship at Cambridge. Till 2014, she was a registered Democrat. She was already married to him for seven years when he delivered a speech titled 'The Universities are the Enemy' in 2021.

There's so much shifting in America these days that the old certainties about 'red' and 'blue', the colours of the Republican and Democrat parties, respectively, may no longer ring as true. Trump, himself, wants to speak for all of America, not just the Republican 'half' of the country. Vance himself has moved from describing Trump as 'cultural heroin' to becoming his vice-presidential pick. And then there's Kamala Harris.

When Joe Biden steps down from his re-election bid, as seems more than likely this weekend, will the eminently forgettable Ms Harris slide



IRONY: The adoration of Usha Vance (left) and Kamala Harris is tainted, but we are simply unable to see it that way. REUTERS

into his spot — or will the Democrats find another leader to lead them?

For all those cheering at home about 'Indian-Americans' being right next to the heartbeat of power — the fact is Kamala has always identified herself as 'black' rather than 'brown'. Usha, too, who remains both Hindu and vegetarian, is hardly likely to influence her husband to change US policy in favour of India, even though her granduncle back in Andhra Pradesh was once the head of the state RSS unit.

In the lingo of the Chandigarh street, people like these are called 'coconuts' — Brown on the outside, White on the inside.

Remember Daleep Singh? Two years ago, the former US Deputy National Security Adviser — and grandnephew of Dalip Singh Sand, the first Sikh as well as Indian-American to be elected to the US Congress — told the Modi government that there would be 'consequences' if India tried to circumvent US sanctions and buy cheap Russian oil in the wake of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Daleep's remarks seriously upset New Delhi at the time and Indian officials had to tell the Americans that if they

The exact opposite is also true. We revel in criticising the 'foreigner', especially if he is White, using our superior '5,000-year-old civilisation' inheritance as a weapon.

wanted to speak frankly, they would have to do it in private.

Daleep would certainly qualify as a top-quality 'coconut' — incapable of sensitivity towards the people he still looks like.

Of course, we must celebrate the achievements of Indians abroad — that's a given. In the last 100-odd years since the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act, when Indians were forbidden from entering the US, the Indian-American community has possi-

bly become the most successful expatriate community, numbering about five million. When @TheRabbitHole84 handle pointed out on X that the median household income of Indian-Americans at \$119,858 was higher than of all other Asian communities, including Chinese, Japanese and Pakistani, Elon Musk himself RT'd the tweet. Sundar Pichai of Alphabet and Satya Nadella of Microsoft lead two of the 10 largest US companies.

The diaspora story is a complicated one. Love and yearning for the mother country remain strong, even though both the immigrant's nicely manicured feet are firmly planted 'back home'. Most people are able to juggle both identities and emotions well — Karan Johar's many movies will testify to that. The problem arises when Indians begin to identify with their compatriots abroad and imagine that these compatriots are still part of the extended village they left behind — even when the village in question may be from a different part of the country and, perhaps, even from a different era.

It's a bit like the village bumpkin saying he has a right to live in the house of his 'jaat-bhai' in

the city. In fact, the current hysteria over Usha Vance or earlier Kamala Harris — as journalists hunt out grandaunts and uncles in the mother country — is really a bit of an extension of that exact same feeling the said bumpkin expresses towards the successful city-bhai. We are an emotional people, for sure, and what is life without feeling and fervour; the problem arises when we allow sentiment to contaminate our better judgement.

So, Rishi Sunak becomes 'our man' in London, although it was his grandparents who left India and first moved to Kenya. Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam has a special connect — even though he is of Jaffna Tamil origin. And Leo Varadkar, the former Taoiseach of Ireland, is just a small hop and step from 'amchi Mumbai'.

Sometimes, it gets worse. Few care about Mohamed Irfaan Ali, the President of Guyana, or Chandrikapersad Santokhi, the President of Suriname, or Wavel Ramkalawan, the President of Seychelles — all of them descendants of British-indentured labour in these former British colonies. Government figures suggest there are 32 million people of Indian origin abroad, not counting those in South Asia, but the truth is that our admiration remains focused predominantly on the successes and achievements of those in the West.

The exact opposite is also true. We revel in criticising the 'foreigner', especially if he is White, using our superior "5,000-year-old civilisation" inheritance as a weapon — blissfully unaware that it actually reveals our deep insecurity about our own place in the world. Congress leader Jairam Ramesh once captured this Indian dilemma succinctly. "Yankee go home," he said on our collective behalf, "but take me with you".

Moral of the story? The adoration of Usha Vance and Kamala Harris is tainted, but we are simply unable to see it that way.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In a land of immigrants, one was not an alien but simply the latest arrival. — Rudolf Arnheim

A couple of curious coincidences

NJ RAVI CHANDER

TWO of my maternal granduncles passed away within a span of one year. RK Shamaraj, aged 74, died on November 27, 2005, at 4.30 pm. His brother, RK Jeevarathnam (86), bid farewell to the world one year later — uncannily, the date and the time were the same. The curious coincidence prompted people to wonder whether Shamaraj had 'summoned' his sibling to join him in his heavenly abode.

The brothers were among seven siblings — four boys and three girls — and had a special bond that lasted until the end. Jeevarathnam displayed composure and poise, while Shamaraj exhibited assertiveness and persuasiveness. Despite their contrasting traits, they were like two peas in a pod. The elder brother constantly doted on the last-born, while the latter revered his senior sibling.

Sadly, the brothers couldn't see each other during their last years because of age-related complications. Family members concealed the news of Shamaraj's death from an ailing Jeevarathnam to spare him the distressing truth. As a result, the elder brother, who became blind in old age, remained oblivious of his sibling's demise. He continued to enquire about the latter's wellbeing. The family boosted his morale by falsely claiming that Shamaraj was doing well. The pretence was not exposed as there was no telephonic contact between the brothers.

Another episode that left us flummoxed happened on New Year's Eve of 2007, when my father and my niece Nikitha perished within a few minutes of each other.

After a sleepless night of tossing and turning, dad woke up with a nagging backache. He had been in fine fettle, but our mother's demise six months prior had unsettled him. So, when my younger sibling and I pleaded with him to see a doctor, he waved us off, saying that he would be okay. He lived alone in his modest house. My siblings and I, who lived separately, visited him daily. My oldest son and Nikitha's brother stayed overnight with him.

Just nine years old, Nikitha fell critically ill. Father showered her with love and attention because she was the first girl child in the family. She had to skip school for months because of her deteriorating health.

Around 9 pm on December 31, 2007, dad switched on the television to watch his favourite soap. But he soon passed away, the remote still in his hand. A few moments later, my niece succumbed to her ailment.

Intriguingly, dad had instructed the maid to keep the house spic and span in anticipation of welcoming visitors the following morning. Had he foreseen the events of that fateful Black Monday?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Put state's interests above politics

Power-starved political parties can go to any extent to fetch votes. Bengaluru has emerged as the biggest tech hub in India. Professionals from all over the country are employed by companies based in the city. The decision of the Karnataka Government to reserve a significant number of jobs in management and non-management categories for locals may compel several firms to shift their headquarters to some other state. Notably, courts have struck down such legislation in the past. The government must give precedence to the growth of the state over regional politics.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

UGC shows the way

The UGC's decision to ban unhealthy food items on campus is commendable. However, the consumption of processed food is not the only reason behind the rise in obesity among students. The youth nowadays lead a sedentary lifestyle. Youngsters, rather than playing outdoors, tend to spend much of their time scrolling on their phones. Very few of them engage in physical activities. Besides imposing a ban on junk food items, the UGC should make it mandatory for students to spend at least an hour a day on physical activities. It must also direct all colleges and universities to arrange the necessary equipment and facilities to that end.

VIKRAMJIT SINGH, AMRITSAR

Let them make an informed choice

Refer to 'Give healthy options'; the UGC directive to prohibit unhealthy food items on the premises of higher educational institutions, while well-intentioned, requires a more nuanced approach. Simply banning junk food may not be effective, especially since the diverse and vast definitions of 'unhealthy food' could also include culturally significant items like *samosas* and *chaat*. Change is better driven by awareness and informed choices. Educational institutions should provide nutritious food options at affordable rates. It is important to recognise students as health-conscious adults and promote healthy eating habits while allowing them to indulge in junk food occasionally. An outright ban might push students to seek the prohibited items outside the campus, undermining the purpose of the directive.

K KUMAR, PANCHKULA

Don't dictate what students eat

With reference to the editorial 'Give healthy options'; the diktat is completely ridiculous. The statutory body has no business deciding what students should eat or avoid. Even if students don't have access to fast food items on campus, they can easily purchase them from a nearby market. Statutory committees at colleges and universities are supposed to decide the menu and rates of food items available at canteens. Any interference in the food preferences of the students must be avoided. The UGC's directive certainly warrants a relook.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Puja just the tip of the iceberg

Apropos of 'The sad tale of an IAS probationer' (*Trysts and Turns*); the integrity of several state and Central-level competitive and recruitment exams has come under the scanner of late — from NEET to the civil services exam. The case of IAS probationer Puja Khedkar adds fuel to the raging fire. But from Puja to those arrested in connection with the NEET paper leak, the big fish continue to evade scrutiny. There is no mention of big names who probably had a hand in the leaks. It is important to keep in mind that the use of unfair means on such a large scale cannot take place in the absence of a nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and the powerful elite.

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

IAS selection standards declining

Refer to 'The sad tale of an IAS probationer'; despite securing a relatively low rank in the UPSC examination, she was picked for the IAS, raising concerns about the declining standards of the selection process. Besides, the case of IAS probationary officer Puja Khedkar highlights the presence of misfits in the civil services. Her case sheds light on the trend of people joining the services for personal gain rather than serving the public. Khedkar's extravagant lifestyle and the use of a red beacon on her car demonstrate her arrogance and disregard for the service. The government must take swift action to remove such misfits from the service. It is crucial to ensure that officers are committed to serving the public, not their personal interests.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

Vance can make a difference in the swing states



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

ON July 15, former US President and the Republican Party's presidential nominee Donald Trump announced that JD Vance, a 39-year-old Senator from Ohio, would be his running mate. Two days later, the party formally anointed him as its nominee for the Vice-President's post in the presidential elections to be held in November. Vance has been a Senator for only a year and a half. He is, therefore, a comparative political novice. Why has Trump chosen him?

Traditionally, a US Vice-President is always under the shadow of the President. Beyond his constitutional role as President of the Senate, the Upper House of the US Congress, a Vice-President performs whatever work the President assigns to him. His political influence is dependent on his relationship with the President. Vance's supporters perhaps convinced Trump that he would never do a Mike

Pence on him. Also, Vice-Presidents are not Washington power-brokers and seldom attract political attention in the US or abroad. This is all the more so in Vance's case as he is new to politics.

Vance is married to Usha Chilukuri, who has roots in India. Her parents, Krish and Lakshmi Chilukuri, migrated to the US from Andhra Pradesh in 1980. Krish is an aerospace engineer, while Lakshmi is marine molecular biologist and biochemist. Usha, born in 1986, grew up in San Diego, California, and went on to study at Yale Law School. Vance and she were in the same class. They fell in love and got married in 2014. They come from entirely different backgrounds but share a very strong bond. They have three children.

Usha has had a distinguished academic career. She studied history at Cambridge University. She was a law clerk for US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and Judge Brett Kavanaugh. She was a lawyer with a well-known legal firm but gave up the job on Vance's selection by Trump as his running mate.

Vance's nomination for the Vice-President's post has attracted substantial media attention in India because of his wife's parents' Indian origin. There is no evidence on record to



RUNNING MATE: JD Vance is a carrier of the Trump torch and may pose no threat to the political ambitions of the Republican presidential contender's sons. REUTERS

show that Usha has an affinity for India, though she remains, by all accounts, a Hindu. While some second-generation Americans of Indian origin develop an enduring interest in the country of origin of their parents, the primary drive of others is to fully immerse themselves into the American life. For some, this includes politics, where a few have distinguished themselves in both parties. It is, therefore, always wrong to assume that every second-generation American with Indian roots has a natural inclination towards India. First-generation Indians generally take a greater interest in

Vance's supporters perhaps convinced Trump that the 39-year-old would never do a Mike Pence on him.

India's causes and have developed strong lobbies to influence the US system.

Vance came to US national attention in 2016 when, at 32, he published a largely autobiographical book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, which was made into a movie in 2020. He vividly and insightfully described the poverty, deprivation and retrogressive culture of the hill folk of Appalachia, which was and remains arguably the most backward part of the US. He dwelt on the traumas of his childhood and youth amidst family violence, alcoholism and drug abuse. His mother was an addict, and his early years were chaotic but they mirrored what he noted was

the life of the hillbillies. As he puts it evocatively: "Chaos begets chaos. Instability begets instability. Welcome to the life of the American hillbilly". He finally found stability in the home of his maternal grandmother who was a tough character and had moved with her husband to Middletown, Ohio, in the early 1950s. That was the era when America was a great manufacturing country. The hillbillies had left Appalachia but carried their traits with them which largely prevented their upward mobility.

Vance joined the Marine Corps and spent four years in it. He was posted to Iraq in the Corps' Public Affairs Unit. After leaving the Corps, he graduated from Ohio State University in 2009. He had definitely moved out of the hillbilly trap when he was accepted by Yale Law School in 2010, but he had still to be socialised in the ways of successful American professionals. It is here that Usha stepped in. He notes in his book that he couldn't have fought the 'old demons' without her. After Yale, he worked as a lawyer but later joined a venture capitalist firm in California which was owned by the arch-conservative Peter Thiel. It was during these years — when Trump was President — that his views drastically changed. From being a strong Trump critic, he moved to the far right in his

views. It is a matter of conjecture if he did well in his venture capital business. He decided to run for the Senate in Ohio on the Republican Party ticket in 2022. Despite his past nastiness to Trump, the former President obviously saw potential in him and endorsed him. He got the Republican nomination for the Senate and won the election.

Vance has taken far-right positions on abortion and immigration, condemned Trump's prosecution, firmly supported Israel and wants Europe to spend on its defence. He has reportedly said that he does not care about Ukraine. But Trump has not chosen him for these views, which largely coincide with his. He may really want Vance to sway, even if marginally, impoverished voters in the swing states who may be inspired by his life's success. These small margins may become crucial if the election turns out to be a close contest.

That seems currently unlikely, with the Democrats in disarray and the support for Trump growing after the assassination attempt. But there is no certainty in elections and a young Vance, with a background totally different from Trump's, will be useful to him. He is a carrier of the Trump torch and may also pose no threat to the political ambitions of the ex-President's sons. But that is in the future.

Anti-incumbency, Cong surge to test BJP's mettle in Haryana polls



DEVESH KUMAR
RESEARCHER, CSDS



HARISH KUMAR
PROFESSOR, MDU

THE outcome of the Lok Sabha elections in Haryana, where the ruling BJP and the Congress won five seats each, has set the stage for a tight contest in the Assembly elections later this year. As parties vie for victory, key factors in the parliamentary elections, shifting caste dynamics and the evolving political equations in the state demand close attention.

Local issues took precedence over national ones in the recent Lok Sabha elections in Haryana. The 'Modi factor', which the BJP heavily relies upon, appeared less potent in mobilising the electorate. The charisma of PM Narendra Modi and the promotion of the party's state-level achievements did not resonate with many voters. The party also struggled to consolidate the vote of *labharthis* or beneficiaries of Central schemes. This, coupled with a decade of the BJP's rule, created strong anti-incumbency sentiments. The Congress capitalised on issues like unem-

ployment, inflation, misconduct with women wrestlers and the Agnipath scheme. The scheme significantly impacted a section of the voters, as Haryana is a major recruitment hub for the armed forces. Moreover, discrepancies in the Parivar Pehchan Patra, a family ID card meant to streamline welfare schemes, hurt the BJP. The party also faced a backlash from farmers, who were ruthlessly deterred from entering Delhi to put forth their demand for a legal guarantee of MSP (minimum support price).

The caste vote indicated two important shifts. One, the traditional Congress voter base is intact and has achieved significant consolidation. Two, the Jat voter has begun to support the Congress once again. Eyeing the sizeable OBC vote and sensing anti-incumbency, the BJP had replaced Manohar Lal Khattar with Nayab Singh Saini as the CM months before the Lok Sabha elections. While Khattar registered an emphatic win in his constituency, the replacement of the CM face bore no major results. According to the Lokniti-CSDS data, one in every two OBC voters voted for the Congress, a 29 per cent increase from the 2019 General Election. This indicates a shift in the BJP's core voter base. While the party



SPLIT: Several constituencies of Haryana didn't witness big victory margins in the 2024 General Election. PTI

retained its upper-caste vote, including Brahmins, Punjabis and Rajputs, it lost its Scheduled Caste (SC) vote to the Congress. Traditionally, the SC vote has been split between the BJP and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). But this time, a majority of the Dalits backed the Congress. The minority vote also favoured the Congress, suggesting that the anti-BJP sentiment has coalesced into a broad social coalition for the Congress.

The Jat community, accounting for about one-fourth of Haryana's population, has historically dominated state politics. As a key social group, they hold considerable leverage. The Lokniti-CSDS data indicates

A shift towards a two-party system in Haryana was evident in the recent Lok Sabha elections.

that the Congress successfully mobilised Jat voters, with two in every three Jats voting for the party — a 31 per cent increase from the 2019 elections. One strong indication of this consolidation is that the grand old party won all seats in the Jat belt, including Hisar, Sirsa, Sonapat and Rohtak. Arguably, this shift not only highlights the declining influence of regional parties like the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) and the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) — which often rely on the Jat vote — but it also shows the growing dissatisfaction with the BJP among the Jats.

A shift towards a two-party system in Haryana was evident in the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP has

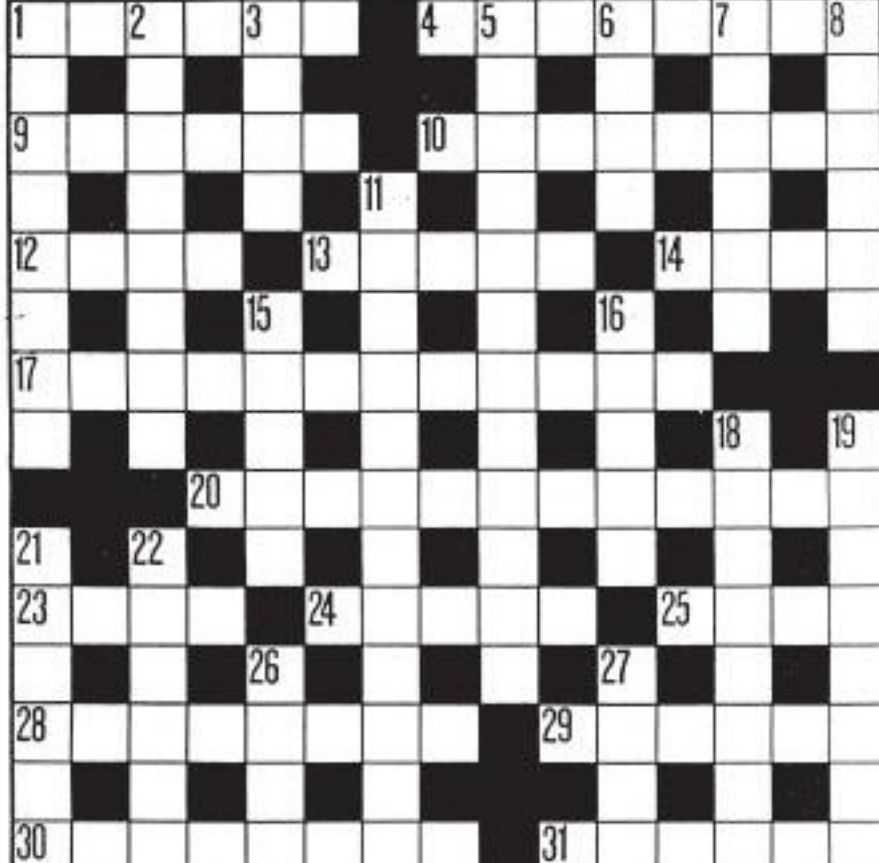
minimised the space for regional parties, which initially helped it gain a foothold in the state. The BJP entered Haryana politics as a lesser partner to the Lok Dal and the Haryana Vikas Party. Over time, however, the BJP built a consistent voter base, pushing these parties to the brink of oblivion. For instance, in the 2024 elections, both the INLD and the JJP suffered significant defeats, with a combined vote share below 3 per cent. It appears that Haryana, much like Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, is moving towards a two-party system if the regional parties continue to perform poorly.

All these factors have implications for the Assembly elections. Firstly, most local issues remain unaddressed. The party that understands and addresses these issues will likely prevail in the Vidhan Sabha polls. Secondly, the Jat voter in Sirsa and Hisar — previously INLD strongholds — has favoured the Congress. It remains to be seen what manoeuvres the INLD and its offshoot, the JJP, will use to reclaim their space in these constituencies at the Assembly level. Thirdly, despite their poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections, the INLD and the JJP have a significant presence at the Assembly level. They must engage with the elec-

torate in ways distinct from the Congress and the BJP to remain relevant. Thirdly, this election did not witness victory margins above one lakh votes, barring Rohtak, Karnal, Sirsa and Faridabad. In other constituencies, voters did not decisively vote for a single party, and, resultantly, the votes were split. This makes room for parties like the INLD and JJP to find ways to outmanoeuvre others. Ruling out any alliance, the Aam Aadmi Party has decided to go solo and contest all 90 seats in Haryana.

The alliance between the INLD and the BSP raises questions about its effectiveness in securing its core voter base — the Jats and Dalits. It remains to be seen whether this coalition will yield dividends for the parties or if these votes will once again be divided in the Assembly elections. In a recent interview, newly elected Sirsa MP Selja Kumari hinted at infighting in the state Congress. A weak leadership at the state level could translate into losses for the party. However, one thing is crystal clear: the Congress, which managed to perform well in the Lok Sabha elections, has the potential to sustain this momentum in the Assembly polls. To do so, the party must engage in introspection, identify its shortcomings and address them effectively.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Pester (6)
4 Duplicious (3-5)
9 Simple, unsophisticated (6)
10 General handyman (8)
12 Unite by treaty (4)
13 Intimidated (5)
14 Massive breakwater (4)
17 State of affairs (6,2,4)
20 Compensate for a painful necessity (5,3,4)
23 Distinctive atmosphere (4)
24 Stipulations (5)
25 Catch sight of (4)
28 Supercilious (8)
29 Formal proposal for debate (6)
30 Revealing (8)
31 For the time being (3,3)

DOWN


1 Buildings to house soldiers (8)
2 Forlorn (8)
3 Film of heroic scale (4)
5 Very enjoyable experience (5,2,1,4)
6 What becomes of a person (4)
7 Sewing thread (6)
8 A discouraging influence (6)
11 Active Mexican volcano (12)
15 Finely ground meal (5)
16 Plant with daisy-like flowers (5)
18 Locate precisely (8)
19 A precious metal (8)
21 Wealthy tycoon (3,3)
22 Make a journey (6)
26 Lacking effervescence (4)
27 Morose (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Mamba, 4 Debauch, 8 Air, 9 Guinea pig, 10 Inherit, 11 Wagon, 13 Gravel, 15 Extort, 18 Blend, 19 Hauteur, 21 Scapegoat, 23 Too, 24 Satisfy, 25 Repel.

Down: 1 Meaning, 2 March Hare, 3 Auger, 4 Dainty, 5 Beeswax, 6 Cap, 7 Egg on, 12 Goose step, 14 Endless, 16 Tumult, 17 Choosy, 18 Basis, 20 Utter, 22 Act.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

4	8	1	7	3	6	5	9	2
2	6	9	1	8	5	3	4	7
7	5	3	9	4	2	6	8	1
5	4	8	2	9	3	1	7	6
9	7	6	4	5	1	8	2	3
1	3	2	8	6	7	4	5	9
8	1	5	3	2	9	7	6	4
6	9	7	5	1	4	2	3	8
3	2	4	6	7	8	9	1	5

CALENDAR

JULY 20, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Aashadh Shaka 29
- Shravan Parvishle 5
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 6.00 pm
- Vaidhriti Yoga up to 12.08 am
- Purvashadha Nakshatra up to 1.49 am
- Moon in Sagittarius sign

FORECAST

CITY	SATURDAY MAX	SUNDAY MIN
Chandigarh	36	29
New Delhi	37	28
Amritsar	38	28
Bathinda	39	29
Jalandhar	37	30
Ludhiana	38	27
Bhiwani	37	29
Hisar	36	27
Sirsa	41	30
Dharamsala	30	20
Manali	27	18
Shimla	25	16
Srinagar	31	19
Jammu	35	26
Kargil	30	15
Leh	30	13
Dehradun	32	25
Mussoorie	23	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Taking on terrorism

PM Modi's decision for full deployment in Jammu is a welcome step aiming to ensure the safety of the citizens

In a decisive move to bolster security and address rising concerns over terrorism, Prime Minister Modi has ordered a comprehensive deployment of security forces in the Jammu region. This strategic decision underscores the government's commitment to ensuring peace and stability in one of India's most sensitive areas. Jammu has been a focal point in the nation's ongoing fight against terrorism. The region has experienced a series of violent incidents in recent years, prompting heightened vigilance and response from the security forces. The Prime Minister's recent directive comes amid increasing reports of terrorist activities and attempts to disrupt the region's stability. Recently four army personnel were killed in Doda calling for immediate measures to bring such incidents to a halt. The full deployment will see an increase in the number of troops and resources allocated to the Jammu region. The operation will involve not only the deployment of additional army personnel but also enhanced coordination between various security agencies. This includes intelligence agencies, paramilitary forces, and local law enforcement.

The deployment strategy will concentrate on several key areas. Firstly, there will be an emphasis on enhanced surveillance and intelligence gathering to preempt and disrupt terrorist activities before they occur. Secondly, security forces will establish increased patrolling in vulnerable areas to deter potential threats and provide reassurance to the local population. Lastly, efforts will be made to engage with local communities to gather vital information and build trust, which is essential for effective counter-terrorism operations.

No wonder, Prime Minister Modi's decision has got support from various quarters, including political leaders, security experts, and the general public. The government has emphasised that this move is part of a broader strategy to address the challenges posed by terrorism and ensure the safety of the citizens in Jammu. In a statement, PM Modi highlighted the importance of maintaining vigilance and resilience in the face of such threats. He reassured the public that the government's primary objective is to safeguard lives and maintain peace in the region. The full deployment in Jammu represents a significant step in India's ongoing efforts to combat terrorism. It is expected that the increased presence of security forces and improved coordination will help in curbing terrorist activities and restoring normalcy in the region. As the situation evolves, the Government's commitment to a robust security framework will be closely watched. The deployment's effectiveness will depend on the successful execution of the strategies outlined and the ability to adapt to emerging challenges. But it would be a clear signal to the terrorists that India will not tolerate any mischief in its territory.



Devotees perform rituals at Amman temple during the Tamil month of 'Aadi', in Chennai

Finding focus in an age of information overload

The relentless influx of information highlights the futility of hoarding content and the ill effect it has on our intellect and well-being

In my weekly routine of phone and computer upkeep, there is a ritual that I detest – clearing my inbox. My mailbox is inundated with dozens of notifications and newsletters from sites that I have subscribed to. I don't understand the logic of getting so many letters delivered to me when I don't find time to open more than half of them. Yet I desist from unsubscribing to them because all the emails carry loads of matter and meaning, gallons of insight and information, and heaps of dispensable literature. In my over-enthusiasm to stay up to speed with the times, I invite an excess of knowledge which eventually gets junked because my mind and memory are not commensurate with the incoming barrage. With barrels of scattered information already laid to waste in the brain and fresh bulks languishing in the inbox, I have begun to see the futility of hoarding them. The writer and columnist in me is forever greedy to add fresh knowl-



edge in the hope of widening my horizons, but I am now beginning to burst at the seams with an overload. There is a lot out there to absorb into the intellect, and the attic is smarting, unable to withstand the pressure. All that finds a parking space on the internet is meant to grab attention and impact the reader, and how easily we have fallen prey to the enticements of the information age! We are now in an endless cycle of grazing and chewing anything that we see on our screens. Our decision-making is based on external influences rather than on our convictions. Midway through research, we deviate and branch out to something unrelated, and then

we are all over the place, ferreting about, lost and unsure of what we had wanted in the first place. And oh, how does one deal with the digital amnesia that follows all the binge-reading of fluffy, oversimplified material created with the only intention of grabbing eyeballs and garnering views? We don't read anymore; we skim through shorts. American journalist and writer Nicholas Carr, in his best-seller, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* highlights how the internet is changing us superficially. He writes that browsing through huge quantities of information often results in shallow processing, preventing us from deeply

understanding the subject. It's time to know what I need and what I don't as a professional writer, compassionate human and rational thinker. I need to bring focus and mindfulness into my reading and information-gathering exercises so that I don't bombard my senses with junk. Why do I need all the facts, figures and findings that exist on the information highway? I must learn to curate and consume stories that strictly contribute to my growth. Trying to catch up with every incident, comment and development around the world in the fear and guilt of missing out is overkill. Not all that I find there is nourishment to my mind and soul; neither will they enhance my life experience on the whole. If only I can be discreet and prudent enough henceforth, I will perhaps be saved before I become a rubbish dump of useless narratives. *(The author is a columnist and author based in Dubai; views are personal)*



ASHA IYER KUMAR

Modi 3.0: Banking sector optimistic about reforms

Over the years, Indian banks have grappled with scams, loan defaults, and rising NPAs. Recent Govt initiatives have led to significant recovery and a notable reduction in NPAs

The re-election of the Narendra Modi government at the centre has raised hopes for concrete steps to be taken towards making the banking sector more transparent and efficient. In recent years, Indian banks have faced more ups and downs than perhaps any other country's banks. Indian banks have been plagued by numerous scams, loan defaults, frauds, increasing non-performing assets (NPAs), and wrong policies of loan waivers, leading to their sinking or facing huge losses. While previous central governments took some steps to address these issues, their half-hearted implementation did not yield the desired results. Fortunately, the Modi government took swift action to address the irregularities in the banking sector, leading to a gradual improvement in the banks' condition.

Many banks are not only recovering from losses and moving towards profits but also bringing scams under control. Many fraudsters' assets have been seized to recover loans, banks have been recapitalized, and the burden of NPAs has been significantly reduced. Isn't it a positive situation that NPAs, which were 12.47% between 2013 and 2017, have gradually reduced to 3.2% in September 2023, even though the government's recapitalization of banks played a crucial role in this reduction? The question now is whether this current state of improvement in banks will continue in the future or will the adage "The fool returns home" prove true. Indian banks are witnesses to the fact that they have been sinking or suffering huge losses both before and after independence. This turbulent state compels us to ponder that until the reform process continues for a long time, a permanent solution to the problem is not possible. A recent publication by senior writer Shri Pal Jain, *"Bharatiya Bankon Ka Badalta Chehra"* (The Changing Face of Indian Banks), analyzes these various aspects in detail. It provides a detailed account of scams, mega-fraudsters, fraudulent tricks, cybercrime in banking, the rise and fall of Yes Bank,



the web of NPAs, etc., both before and after independence. Additionally, it critically discusses the echoes of bank privatization, the economics of agricultural loan waivers, demonetization, the Jan Dhan scheme, the autonomy of the Reserve Bank, the increasing popularity and risks of digital banking, etc. After independence, both private and public banks existed in the country, but numerous scams and failures occurred within them. Nonetheless, public banks remained a key driver of economic growth and business expansion. Private banks generally did not even open accounts for ordinary people. The nationalization of banks in July 1969 led to increased access to banks for the general public. During this period, many banks merged, which led to some positive outcomes. However, gradually, corruption, bribery, and political interference in public banks led to the issuance of huge loans to genuine and fake companies, many of which went unrecoverable or partially recoverable. This resulted in massive losses for both public and private banks. In the early 1990s, liberalization policies were adopted, and shortly after, private banks like HDFC, ICICI Bank, Yes Bank, etc., became popular due to their use of modern technology (credit operations, debit

“THE MODI GOVERNMENT HAS TURNED PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES, IN WHICH THE KEY CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESERVE BANK'S SUPERVISION CAN BE SEEN

operations, fast clearing of checks, insurance, mutual fund opening, etc.). The new products, schemes, and modern technology of private banks posed stiff competition to public banks. This forced public and other private banks to adopt new products, schemes, and modern technology. As a result, some improvement in the condition of public and private banks was recorded, but the wave of liberalization also saw a continuation of scams, bribery, corruption, and political interference. Events like the Harshad Mehta, and Ketan Parekh scams, and the sinking of banks like Global Trust occurred during this period. In the first term of the Modi government, a major crisis arose due to scams in PNB Bank, PMC Bank and other cooperative banks, Yes Bank, and the flight of mega-fraudsters to foreign countries. The burden of NPAs of banks reached record levels. In this context, the commendable initiative of merging smaller banks with large public banks to reduce their number was taken. Meanwhile, India's trade continued to grow rapidly, maintaining liquidity in banks. The Reserve Bank's supervision was made more robust. Demonetization, the Jan Dhan scheme, housing schemes, and significant boosts were given to Atmanirbhar Bharat, manufacturing, and other sectors. In the meantime, the COVID-

19 pandemic struck, giving a severe blow to the economy. However, within a few months, the Modi government made concrete efforts to regain control over the economic front. During the pandemic, transactions via digital banking increased significantly, breaking all records worldwide. UPI is making its mark not only in India but also abroad. Despite this, the health of banks cannot be considered worry-free. Sporadic bank scams are still occurring, digital banking frauds are on the rise, and the network of cyber criminals in banking is constantly expanding. This is causing serious damage not only to banks but also to account holders. A foolproof control over this issue has not yet been established. Shri Pal Jain correctly stated in the conclusion of his book, "Currently, most banks are moving towards profits. The Modi government has turned problems and challenges into opportunities, in which the key contribution of the Reserve Bank's supervision can be seen." However, until corruption, lending based on fake documents, and infiltration of cybercriminals into banking are stopped, the dream of bank strengthening and fool-proof security will remain half-fulfilled. *(The writer is a senior journalist and author of two books; views are personal)*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

YET ANOTHER TRAIN ACCIDENT

Madam — It is shocking and heart-breaking to learn about yet another "heart-attack" train accident in India. This latest incident occurred in Uttar Pradesh on 18 July 2024. This time, the Dibrugarh Express, traveling from Chandigarh to Dibrugarh, derailed near Jhilaahi Railway Station in Gonda, Uttar Pradesh. The derailment of 10 to 12 coaches underscores the severity of this tragic accident. The immediate assistance provided by villagers is a noble and commendable act. It is high time for the relevant Indian railway experts to convene and brainstorm foolproof solutions to prevent accidents such as train collisions, derailments, fires, rail-track crossings, signaling errors, and trains running late, which jeopardize the safety of passengers and other trains. These measures are crucial to saving lives, properties, and assets. We suggest implementing an additional charge of Re.1 on every train ticket as accident insurance. This small fee could significantly aid commuters from poor and middle-class families in the event of an accident, providing financial support if the family's breadwinner is lost. Additionally, it would contribute to government revenue. We hope the relevant administrators and the army will promptly provide the necessary assistance, including medical care, financial support, hospitality, and alternative arrangements for the stay and expenses of those accompanying the hospitalized victims. **PV Srinivas Sreelekha** | *Secundrabad*

HIGHER EDUCATION REVAMP

Madam — The government has planned to double higher education intake by 2030. This initiative, however, might do more harm than good given that the Indian organized sector currently lacks the capacity to absorb such a large influx of job seekers. While a less educated person can adapt more easily to employ-

Controversial bill withdrawn



The criticism from business and industry forced the Karnataka government to put the contentious reservation bill for

Kannadigas in private firms on hold. The Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories, and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, was cleared by the state cabinet. According to the bill, "any industry, factory, or other establishment shall appoint 50 percent of local candidates in management categories and 70 percent in non-management categories. "It's baffling that Karnataka, India's tech hub and one of the best-performing states in terms of ease of doing business, has introduced this regressive bill. NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Service Companies) has cautioned the Congress government that the restrictions could force companies to relocate as local skilled talent becomes scarce. Karnataka would be well advised to quietly abandon the bill. **Bhagwan Thadani** | *Mumbai*

ment in the unorganized sector, a graduate often develops a distaste for it, potentially becoming a highly frustrated and alienated individual. A possible solution would be to limit college enrollment and instead open thousands of new polytechnics, where humanities courses are mandatory in every semester. Without such measures, the frustrations of unemployed youths may lead to severe consequences for both individuals and the nation. To avoid widespread frustration and potential social issues, the government should limit college enrollment and establish more polytechnics with mandatory humanities courses. **Devesh Vijay** | *Delhi*

CPR IS A LIFE SAVER

Madam — CPR – or Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation – is an emergency lifesaving procedure performed when the heart stops beating. Immediate CPR can double or triple chances of survival after cardiac arrest.

No one dies of cardiac arrest if attended in a timely manner. A video of the incident was shared on social media platform X and quickly went viral, garnering millions of views and countless praises from netizens. The doctor's actions were hailed as a testament to the importance of quick response and lifesaving skills in emergency situations. According to reports, the man collapsed on the floor, prompting the doctor to spring into action and begin administering CPR. With passersby watching in amazement, the doctor asked others to call for emergency services at the airport. Her efforts paid off, as the man began to show signs of revival. The timely medical assistance is a dear life. This was how Ewan Chatfield, who almost felt dead, was resuscitated after being hit by a cricket ball in New Zealand a long time ago. Everyone must be trained to give CPR. **Jayanthy Subramaniam** | *Mumbai*

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN


TRANSCENDING DAILY TRIFLES

We can rise above minor disruptions in life by adopting spiritual path



Ravindra Nath Tagore prays for strength to raise his mind high above daily trifles. Why does such an exalted personality do so? Because daily trifles do capture our minds. Aren't we, souls, small, ignorant, helpless and unsafe in absolute terms?The word trifle is defined as something of little value. Trifles are matters that are not very important and those that do not merit a lot of consideration. Still, we are defeated repeatedly by them. Why? Because, as stated earlier, we are small, very small in the overall context, whatever we may feel we are. Sure enough, daily trifles bring us down. We go in cyclic thinking. Our minds drag us to small matters.

What is the solution? The first step is to accept that this happens and is very common. What we consider important may appear insignificant to others, but they are very important to us. Then, as our role model did we must pray for help. It makes a lot of sense for us as small entities. And help is available. We are not helpless in absolute terms; God is there to help. But we have to take His shelter; God will not force Himself on us. Why? Because that will be a violation of our free will. Then, we must avoid cyclic thinking. Can thinking of the same thing repeatedly provide solutions? Solutions come from other sources, mostly from God, if we step outside ourselves. We must not lose to our minds, which unfortunately, are our worst enemies, as warned by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Geeta, "One should uplift self by self; shouldn't degrade self, because otherwise self will be enemy of self." (6.5) Control over the mind requires practice and detachment. (6.35)These are general instructions. Let me take up some of the most common daily trifles. Someone is not well in the family. Surely, one would be disturbed. But one must go beyond it. There will be duties like getting medical help. What more can be done? Many of us do pray, but the prayer should be more for guidance than just cure. Why? Because major sicknesses are the results of our impious/sinful past acts. God will not act interfere in it, but God can guide us to deal with it effectively. God does also help if one is a devotee of God. Are we? There is nothing to despair, guidance is a great help. The next matter which keeps the mind occupied is financial trouble. Mostly,



it is a paucity of funds, which hurts. The 'Karamphala Principle' is very clear. We get parents, birthplace, minds, looks, intelligence, wealth and lifespan according to what we deserve based on our 'Karmas' in our past lives. Can anyone explain otherwise about someone getting richer by billions in a short period? If it was hard labour, this was impossible. So we have to accept this reality and try to manage with what we have. Yes, wastage in showing off, etc. can be surely avoided.The third trifle, if we can call it as such, is being in trouble.

We should swear to ourselves not to act foolishly from now onwards. Troubles will still come but they will be less. Here also God can help, but, as pointed out earlier, we must take shelter from God. Then, not only any trouble but God promises to get us out of all troubles. (18.58) But again there is a rider. We must not continue to act in wrong or bad ways. The fourth problem that gets almost all of us is getting attached to results. This is illogical because what can we control? Is God not the sole controller? We have been advised by Lord Krishna to strictly stick to our role, i.e. to act dutifully. (2.47) Because what we will end up with is not just based on what we have done recently, but earlier like last life. I have given just four examples, but the underlying philosophy is to act properly from now onwards and remain in shelter in God. Then, daily trifles will not bother me so much. We will be able to get over them soon. What do I do? I seek guidance and help from God for anything that bothers me. Surely, God has taken charge of my life. Yes, God is micromanaging it.

(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

The critical role of family planning in women's health



The awareness about contraception can significantly enhance women's health and contribute to better population management in India

World Population Awareness Fortnight, starting from July 11th, brings attention to the fact that India is the most populous country in the world, having surpassed China last year. According to UN projections, India's population is expected to peak at 1.7 billion in 2064, beyond which it will decline. Out of 4 births each second across the world, one birth occurs in India. It is important to understand what can be done to balance the resources with the requirements of the population in the country. With only 2.4% of the world's land, India supports 17.76% of the world's population.

Nowhere is a discussion on contraception and mother and child health services more relevant and meaningful than here. Demographers use a parameter called Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which is the number of children a woman has in her lifetime. The TFR, which should be 2.1 for the population to remain steady, has already dipped below 2 in 2022. But keeping it within that range will require constant efforts to increase the awareness of the youth and adolescents towards these matters. Moreover, family planning offers many more benefits beyond the prevention of pregnancies. Uttar Pradesh ranks first among the states in India with a population of 257 million and a TFR of 2.18 (2015-16). It is relevant to mention here that our country was the first to launch an official family planning program way back in 1952. In the decades that have followed, the options have increased and so have the availability and accessibility.

With the basket of contraceptive choices available at all government hospitals free of cost, social marketing of contraceptives, and home delivery of contraceptives by ASHAs in rural areas, accessibility to these methods has improved. This has translated to an increase in the Couple Protection Rate by 13%, which is 67% at present, and a decrease in unmet need for family planning of 3.5%, which now stands at 9.4%. The country has made substantial progress in the delivery of family planning services across the country. The reach of family planning services has extended from target couples to eligible couples to all women and adolescent girls and should extend to all men of reproductive age.

Their share in decision-making and supporting women in using these methods makes it imperative for them to have this information as well. They can make an important contribution. If the present discussion gives a message that each couple should be forced to use a contraceptive to limit family size to stabilize the population, that is not true.

Family planning methods should help to fulfil the unmet needs of 9.5% of couples and help many others plan pregnancy at a proper time. According to the Guttmacher Institute, India Country Profile, 2022, between 2015-and 2019, there were a total of 485 lakh pregnancies annually in India, of which 44% were unintended. Of these, 2/3rd of these unplanned pregnancies ended in abortion. It is these couples who are in dire need of contraception.

These abortions could have been avoided had they received counselling and proper contraceptive measures at the right time. Contraception is not just a method of preventing unwanted pregnancies. It is a means to provide freedom to couples to exercise their reproductive rights. The freedom to choose when to plan a pregnan-



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cy. It essentially allows responsible voluntary decision-making based on correct knowledge, the right attitude, and access to quality services, which together promote the welfare of the family unit and contribute to the social development of the country. Contraception prevents unwanted pregnancies and many more unwanted situations that follow. For married couples, it allows them to time their pregnancies and help determine the number of children in the family. It also helps in timing the births, particularly the first and last, about the age of the mother, which is particularly important because teenage pregnancies and pregnancies at a maternal age of 35 years or more carry their risks. Each of these aspects is very important for the welfare of all family members. So, family planning has to emerge from whispers in private quarters to a basic human right and an important aspect of family health and social welfare. Contraceptives are primary prevention for pregnancy and primordial prevention for high-risk pregnancies.

These high-risk pregnancies, if not detected in time and managed properly, can lead to serious complications and even deaths. At the individual level, the morbidity and mortality of the mother and newborn associated with an unplanned pregnancy can be avoided. If all couples had access to family planning services, it would help reduce maternal deaths by 25% and infant deaths by 20%.

Apart from deaths, the diseases associated with HRP's (20-30%) are also prevented. High-risk pregnancies are those pregnancies where the mother/baby has an increased risk of adverse outcomes. This could be due to anaemia, high BP, or high sugar levels during pregnancy. Pregnant women with obesity, twin or breech pregnancy,

history of preterm labour, or cesarean section are also HRP's. This is particularly true for teenage and elderly pregnancies because they have a higher share of morbidity. Moreover, pregnancies beyond the age of 35 have a high risk of congenital anomalies. So, preventing these births improves the quality of the population and reduces the burden on parents in particular and society in general. It also reduces early and late fetal deaths.

Women's health also benefitted from the improvement of nutritional status and the reduction of complications by addressing modifiable risk factors before the next conception, like weight reduction, management of medical illnesses, and allowing a reasonable gap of at least 3 years between two deliveries. Proper use of contraceptive methods would also reduce the need for abortions and thus decrease abortion-related complications like septic abortions and even death.

This issue is most sensitive for unmarried girls who are forced to seek abortion services at unrecognized centres and are unable to seek normal pregnancy care. This also calls for greater awareness about emergency contraceptive pills. Good health of the infant and siblings, proper care, nutrition, and reduced vulnerability to diseases are all seen in families with a limited number of children. Hence, contraceptives play an important role in the overall well-being of the family. Thus, the importance of contraception for the health of women and children is clear and government facilities, NGOs, and private providers are all working to offer and improve family planning services.

The availability of better client-friendly methods, from daily pills to once-a-week pills, lactational pills, self-administered three-monthly injections, devices work-

ing for 10 years, along good follow-up facilities, have made modern women's lives easier. What remains is to connect the dots so that maximum benefits can be reaped from the services. What also needs to be worked upon is the change in attitude of not only the clients but also the caregivers. The clients need to work upon the hesitation in accessing these services and the caregivers need to refrain from underscoring the importance of family planning services. Let us all reflect on our roles as stakeholders in this solvable problem which is so important for our health and progress. In conclusion, the discourse on contraception and maternal health underscores the critical need to prioritize reproductive rights and access to family planning services.

As we bridge the gap between rights and reality, it is imperative to foster an environment where informed choices and comprehensive education empower individuals and couples.

Collaborative efforts among government bodies, NGOs, healthcare providers, and the community are essential to ensure that family planning services are accessible, acceptable, and utilized effectively.

By doing so, we not only enhance maternal and child health but also reduce the risk to women arising from unplanned pregnancies, high-risk pregnancies, and abortion-related complications which are entirely preventable. So, let us all contribute to the broader socio-economic development of our nation. The journey towards a healthier, more informed society begins with each of us advocating for and embracing the significance of contraception in our collective well-being.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine in MLB Medical College, Jhansi UP. Views are personal)

How restaurants can save water and promote sustainability

Initiatives like the 'Blue Star Rating' demonstrate how restaurants can conserve water, writes SONIA GROVER and NATHANIEL BHAKUPAR DKHAR

A restaurant, a place to tantalize one's taste buds and enjoy conversations with friends and family, is the picture that comes to mind, yet no one can imagine that these restaurants can also be a place to conserve a huge amount of water and inculcate water-conscious behaviour. Water often plays a supporting role, unnoticed yet indispensable. Water is needed for everything from kitchen operations to guest services. The world is increasingly becoming conscious of environmental sustainability, and the restaurant sector is one of the main ones where water conservation practices could result in huge water savings. We are witnesses to the recent water stress situation in Bangalore city, where residents had to face a severe water

crisis, and there is almost a perpetual shortage of around 500 million litres every day. Limited water sources, a depleting groundwater table, and erratic monsoon patterns have all conspired to bring Bangalore to this crisis. Demand-side water management strategies are needed to salvage the situation and balance the disproportion of water demand and supply gaps. This common urban water stress scenario calls for every demand sector, including the hospitality sector, to shoulder the responsibility of water conservation. Mission Life, launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, called for lifestyle-related changes for environmental conservation.

Mission LiFE puts an individual and collective duty on everyone to live a life that is in tune with Earth and does not harm it. As part of this mission, a global call for ideas and papers (GCIP) was launched, and the best 5 entries were awarded to pilot test their ideas. One of the award-winning ideas led by Dr. Sonia Grover focused on - Promoting water conservation in restaurants through the 'Blue Star Rating' system. The team pilot tested this idea in a few restaurants in Delhi that were selected on a random basis in the North Delhi and the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) areas of Delhi. Restaurants were in different categories, including fine dining, casual dining, and state canteens. The two main

tasks of this project included developing a star rating system to grade and score the restaurants based on the water-saving interventions adopted by the restaurants. These included both technical and behaviour change-related interventions. This rating framework is called the 'Blue Star Rating'. This was developed because ratings serve as a powerful tool for quantifying and monitoring interventions toward water-saving practices. This includes behaviour change by providing feedback, promoting awareness, fostering healthy competition, incentivizing action, leveraging social influence, and informing policy decisions, all of which ultimately lead to huge water savings and a ripple effect. The second important



task was to visit the restaurants to identify water-saving potential through simple interventions such as low-flow aerators, which facilitate reducing the flow rate of water from faucets. They achieve this by mixing air into the water stream, which maintains the pressure while using less water. This results in decreased water consumption without compromising the functionality of the faucet. It's one of the

most cost-effective solutions to save water in both commercial and residential settings. For handwashing taps, it was observed that flow rates at some restaurants were as high as 15 litres per minute. By installing these aerators, the flow rates were reduced on average by a range of 30-60%, which is a significant saving. In addition, for some taps, the flow was regulated by adjusting the pressure valves to optimize the flow. Also, visible leakages were fixed to save the water. With just these few interventions, around 5000 litres per day of water were saved in just less than 50 restaurants. Delhi has around 1,00,000 eateries, both organized and unorganized. If all of these restaurants strive towards water conservation

with such simple solutions, the amount of water saved can help us tide over the water stress situation to a significant level. If a Blue Star Rating is placed in the system, restaurants can be encouraged to take more water-saving interventions that are feasible and economically beneficial for them. Together, this sector can elevate water conservation, which also makes business. For restaurants, adopting water-saving practices not only helps to mitigate environmental impact but also reduces operational costs. Water savings easily translate into monetary benefits accrued due to reduced utility bills. Simple yet effective measures like low-flow faucets and repairing leaks promptly are small adjustments that yield signif-

icant savings over time. In addition, sensitizing staff ensures the sustainability of the interventions undertaken. By championing sustainability through various interventions, restaurants can inspire consumers to consider the environmental implications of their choices. Restaurants can also be a platform for learning by engaging diners through information, education, and communication (IEC) collateral to raise awareness about the restaurant's water-saving initiatives, which can foster a sense of community around sustainability.

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