Editorial



Limit and excess

Creamy layer should be kept out, but the ceiling on quota is artificial

he Patna High Court judgment striking down enhanced reservation for various communities in employment and education marks yet another instance of the strict application of the 50% ceiling on total reservations by the judiciary. The verdict has invalidated the Nitish Kumar regime's decision of last year to amend its quota law to raise Backward Classes (BC) reservation from 12% to 18%, that of Extremely Backward Communities (EBC) from 18% to 25%, and those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from 16% to 20% and 1% to 2%, respectively. This took the total reservation level to 65%. Applying judicial precedents that have now crystallised into a legal bar on reservations exceeding 50%, the court has inflicted a huge blow to the Bihar government's plan to utilise its Caste Survey findings to expand its affirmative action programme. The government may have erred in its policy approach – armed with caste-wise population numbers - when its preamble to the amending law said it aimed to achieve "proportionate equality". The court agreed with the petitioners challenging the increased quotas on a key point: that adequate representation does not mean 'proportionate representation', as clarified in the famous nine-judge verdict in Indra Sawhney (1992). If any attempt to raise the quota level earmarked for any section to be in proportion to the State's population results in the total reservation percentage exceeding the permissible limit, it is liable to be unconstitutional.

However, it is unfortunate that the court was so zealous about the reservation ceiling, that it rejected the State's argument on the existence of special circumstances. Indra Sawhney did allow the quota ceiling to be exceeded in "extraordinary situations". It suggested that the population living in remote or far-flung areas may require to be treated in a different way. The court seems to have taken that geographical remoteness is the only special situation to justify an enhanced quota and denied the benefit to Bihar. It is difficult to believe that a State which is backward in most parameters of human and social development should be denied the use of its executive and legislative power to expand its social justice programme. The court surely saw merit in the argument that there was no in-depth study before enhanced reservation was implemented. This raises the question whether the survey was indeed quite exhaustive when it gave a caste-wise break-up of the population and their economic conditions. While there may be a case for pruning the BC or EBC list based on the progress made over the last few decades, it might not be just to stymie every attempt to enhance the numerical representation of historically deprived sections on the ground that it exceeds the quota ceiling.

Money and muscle

Whatever AIADMK's reasons for the

boycott, ECI must ensure fair polling ssembly by-elections seldom throw up surprises. In Tamil Nadu, close to three out of four by-polls since 1977, when the AIADMK first swept to power, have gone to the ruling party (or its allies). The July 10 by-election to the Vikravandi constituency, located in the relatively backward Villupuram district of the northern part of the State, might not break this pattern, but the main Opposition, the AIADMK, has added a new dimension by announcing a poll boycott. The ostensible reason was its fear that the ruling DMK would "indulge in enormous use of money and muscle power...", just as in the Erode (East) by-poll in 2023. But, clearly, the AIADMK, which drew a blank in the 2024 general election, is wary of failure again. The DMK, the PMK (as a constituent of the BIP-led NDA), and the Naam Tamilar Katchi are in the fray. The AIADMK could also be trying to woo back the PMK. In any case, the boycott does not behove a serious party. But whatever the AIADMK's rationale, its stated explanation is a challenge for the election authorities, who will have to ensure a free and transparent bypoll. Previous by-elections have been marred by the flow of gifts and money. In Erode (East), the AIADMK had even alleged that the DMK had confined sections of elec-

tors in election offices during the campaign. There is a widespread perception that the laws with regard to bribery as an electoral offence are no deterrent to political parties, especially those in power. While it is not difficult to sharpen the laws, the question is whether they will be enforced in a fair manner. So, it is up to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to now erase these misgivings. The most powerful weapon that the ECI has against recognised political parties is the power to freeze their symbols. But, this has never been used in Tamil Nadu even when allegations of electoral offences surfaced. In the past decade, on two occasions when the AIADMK was in power, the ECI was tough when it rescinded, in 2016, the polling process in Aravakurichi and Thanjavur during the election to the State Assembly. And, in April 2017, a few days ahead of polling, it cancelled the R.K. Nagar by-poll over money power and the offering of allurements to the electorate. It is another matter that when the elections to the three seats were held later, the candidates who were in the news earlier for the wrong reasons, emerged victorious. Unless the ECI sends out a strong message that there will be no tolerance of bribery, there will not be much change on the ground. Also, the electorate should not be swayed by either money or freebies. In this regard, civil society organisations too have a crucial role to play.

Parliament's changed bench strength spells more hope

here is a great sense of expectation from the 18th Lok Sabha, with the inaugural session scheduled to commence on June 24. The hope is that the new House will be different in its working and its deliberations during its tenure. The anticipation arises from the reduced numerical presence of the governing coalition's lead partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the increased strength of a combined Opposition, led by the Congress, than what it was during the previous two editions of the Lok Sabha.

After a hiatus of a decade, a government is a coalition, headed by the leader of the single-largest party, and now dependent on crucial support from two regional allies, the Janata Dal (United) and the Telugu Desam Party. Though, technically, the BJP helmed the National Democratic Alliance government, between 2014-24, the situation then was different as the lead party had comfort in bench strength, an element missing for the present.

More space for the Opposition

The verdict handed over by the people in 2024 is clear. The country requires a stronger Opposition, which can put forth views that are in contrast with the policies and programmes of the governing coalition, and blunt the ability of the lead party to vigorously push its agenda without facing resistance. As new members of the 18th Lok Sabha take oath, the combined Opposition strength stands a little over 230, while the governing coalition with over 300 members, tips the scales precariously in its favour.

This change in the constitution of the new House gives rise to the hope that there would be greater accommodation on behalf of the government towards concerns of the Opposition. During the past decade, Members of Parliament opposed to the government complained that behind the wall of majority, the BJP's parliamentary managers conceded little space. The instances often cited to back this claim were the non-acceptance, in Parliament, of notices for adjournment or discussions on issues such as the border situation since the bloody clashes with China, and attendant matters.

On the other hand, the government's insistence on performance measured in terms of productivity on legislation became a barometer for the efficacy of Parliament. While both Houses of Parliament remain the only place to legislate laws for the country, the tendency of the governing coalition's parliamentary managers to secure passage without adequate scrutiny and debate become a bone of contention with the Opposition. The sheer presence of its greater numbers permitted the government to follow the latter portion of the adage that the 'opposition can have its say, the government will have its

The norm of subjecting proposed legislation to parliamentary oversight in the form of scrutiny by committees of jurisdiction became scarce. Three decades ago, Parliament decided to expand the committee system and introduced an additional layer of reading of the Bills. It served



K.V. Prasad Delhi-based senior journalist

Parliament well, permitting Members across the aisle to deliberate on Bills in a non-partisan and dispassionate manner and offer recommendations to fine-tune proposed legislation. The rationale of conducting committee meetings away from the public glare or providing access to the media during its deliberations was to prevent the proclivity of members to grand-stand on party lines. Unanimity was the mantra.

Committees have been transacting a load of business in examining issues and hearing suggestions from domain experts which become integral in arriving at recommendations on a subject under study. For instance, the Opposition cited the three controversial farm laws that were cleared without referral to the Committee, leading to protests and eventually forcing the government to withdraw them.

The Opposition's contention was that an examination by the committee of jurisdiction and its consultation process would have provided the government a well-rounded view. This opportunity was missed. The system of parliamentary oversight cannot be equated to placing Bills in the public domain and inviting suggestions, which are then vetted by bureaucratic processes. The committee work begins after the Ministry concerned drafts a Bill incorporating, if need be, suggestions flowing from the public.

Both Houses have separate Rules of Procedure and Conduct. While following these meticulously is expected, Parliament also functions on time-honoured conventions. For instance, when the Minister makes a suo motu statement on any issue in Rajya Sabha, the Chair can permit members to seek clarifications, a convention that is unique to the House.

While many advocate the need for a debate between contesting candidates during elections on the lines of the U.S. presidential candidates, the unique practice of holding the elected government of the day is at play each day during Question Hour. Ministers come prepared to take questions from Members, which reflects the extent of the grasp of the subject of those seeking information and the one who is duty-bound to respond. The schedule of the calendar allocates Ministries on specific days including the Prime Minister's Office. In the last 10 years, the Prime Minister has not made an intervention even as a junior Minister has responded. Another practice given a go by is the Prime Minister making a statement after his foreign travels, a task sometimes delegated to the Minister of External

The post of Speaker

The first test of the governing coalition and the combined Opposition in Parliament will be when Members of Parliament of the new Lok Sabha will be called upon to elect the Speaker and custodian of the House. The governing coalition has the numbers to place its own person even though the Opposition may seek to test the waters. However, the second test will be on the election of the Deputy Speaker, a constitutional post that

remained vacant during the five-year tenure of the 17th Lok Sabha. Citing convention and tradition, the Opposition expects the position to be offered to it in the current House. During the past four decades, there have been exceptions when a member belonging to a party outside the government was elected. In 1985 and then again in 2014, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's M. Thambidurai secured the honour.

As for the proceedings, the new session will offer the Opposition ample opportunity to critically evaluate the policies and programmes of the government, which will be put forth during the address of the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, to Members of both the Houses sitting together. The ensuing debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address offers an opening for the Opposition to pick up and analyse threadbare issues of concern without getting hemmed by the topic being germane. In a way, the Motion can be likened to be an omnibus resolution.

Significantly, just days after the Lok Sabha results, the chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Mohan Bhagwat articulated his thoughts which lay emphasis on consensus building and suggesting that the Opposition must be viewed as a political opponent and not an adversary.

Points of friction

In the run-up to the inaugural session of the new Lok Sabha, points of friction between the governing coalition and the Opposition cropped up on two occasions. The Congress objected to the manner in which the statues of Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar was shifted to a newly constructed and designated spot called 'Prerna Sthal" (or an inspirational place) within Parliament's precincts and also the decision to appoint BJP's Bhartruhari Mahtab as pro tem Speaker.

The first decision, it contended, was arrived at without due process established in Parliament, while the second decision, on the pro tem Speaker ignored the convention that senior-most members in the current House should have been appointed to complete the formalities of the swearing-in of new Members of Parliament. The Speaker, Om Birla, dismissed the first by stating that consultations were held and 'that there was no need to indulge in politics on this'. In the second instance, the Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Kiren Rijiju, went public criticising the Congress for politicising the appointment.

By calling on the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge earlier, the Parliamentary Affairs Minister indicated that in parliamentary democracy, the governing coalition would follow time-honoured traditions. As days progress and regular sessions begin, the role will require dexterity to underscore that the spirit of accommodation. While the governing coalition should be in the forefront to take every shade of opinion along, the Opposition needs to recalibrate its strategy to extract the best by taking recourse to parliamentary tools on the anvil. And, the onus will be on all sides to maintain civility in debate.

Create the space for governance with a green heart

s a new term begins for the government and the Lok Sabha, it must have green concerns close to the heart. While we have never had a government that truly put the environment first, the last one, which was in pursuit of its 'development' agenda, proved to be actively inimical to the interests of the environment. For more than a dozen years, Environment Ministers have been concerned primarily with the welfare of mining, oil, coal, highways, and power industries. India stands on the cusp of severe environmental degradation, which can only be arrested by the conscious adoption of green policies even as the country pursues the goal of becoming a middle-income economy. These are the areas that need to be addressed urgently.

Greater vulnerability

Climate change is something India's leadership mentions often but does little to engage with (with the limited exception of promoting the solar energy industry). Even as energy consumption soars, no steps have been taken to consciously pursue an agenda of cutting down emissions. More importantly, the remediatory aspects of climate change which include building resilience, food security, and access to essentials have fallen far behind in priorities. As floods, famines, heatwaves, wildfires, water shortages and droughts become increasingly common, contingency plans must be put in place to protect vulnerable populations and diminish harm. From updating building guidelines to preserving natural storm barriers such as mangrove forests, to establishing funds for evacuation and rehabilitation, these are the tasks that the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has had no time for recently.

First, forest cover, India has one of the world's lowest levels of green cover per capita. It has only 28 trees per headcount of the populace, in contrast with Canada's 8953 or even China's 130. Qualitatively important forest cover has



In the 18th Lok

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A conscious focus on green policies is crucial as environmental issues in India impact the survival and the health of millions

decreased significantly in the last 20 years, and the less said about urban forestry the better. The damage to our forests has been covered up with questionable accounting, which includes plantation forests and tree cover in urban centres. Recent legislation such as the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, which was legislation ramrodded through the outgoing Parliament, needs to be rolled back and robust new protections put in place.

Second, unliveable cities. The metropolitan centres of India have overgrown any plans that were laid for them. Delhi, Mumbai and a large swathe of tier 2 and tier 3 cities across the Gangetic belt now have unacceptable levels of air pollution, destroying the lifespans of their residents. Bengaluru and Delhi are running out of water, and the poor have to queue for hours to have access to the bare minimum. The rivers that brought life to cities, such as the Adyar in Chennai or the Yamuna in Delhi, have become open sewers. Green spaces and water bodies in cities have been built over, which has created heat islands. Smaller cities have more manageable problems, but without timely intervention, will reach the same crisis levels as the metros. Sewage treatment specifically requires a major national overhaul as Indian cities treat only approximately 28% of the sewage they

Destruction in the Himalayas

Third, concerns in the Himalayas. Climate change has had outsize repercussions in the mountains of India. Glaciers are rapidly receding, and in some places, have disappeared. Up to 80% of their volume is forecast to disappear in this century. Rainfall and temperature patterns have changed beyond recognition. This impacts the water and food security of not just the people of the mountains but also of much of North India. When thousands of Ladakhis fasted and protested to demand governmental action they were ignored – perhaps because they held no

votes. Similar concerns arise for wetlands – whose importance has never been greater- and other marginal landscapes which are critical for biodiversity as well. Fourth, public participation. At the root of many of these problems is the Indian government's age-old refusal to listen to stakeholders and affected persons. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) mechanisms have become mere checkboxes to be ticked for all projects. Protests are swept aside, criticism is ignored, and the absence of a meaningful Opposition has resulted in rapid, ill-considered steps being taken. The Char Dham Highway project is an example. Passed through amidst a barrage of small EIAs, the grandiose scheme has caused irreparable harm to the river valleys of Uttarakhand. The deforestation and erosion caused has created additional unforeseen risks, best exemplified by the tunnel collapse of November 2023. More importantly, the sanctity of the EIA Notification of 2006 has been watered down over the last five years with hundreds of amendments. EIA mechanisms need to be elevated to statutory status, so that they are beyond such sabotage.

Restore genuine conservation

Fifth, greenwashing. Ill-advised policies, which have been driven by commercial interest, such as green credits and compensatory afforestation, have taken the place of genuine conservation efforts. Sustainable development does not mean that only commercially profitable steps may be taken by the government. Enforcement mechanisms and bodies also need more teeth so

These are not luxury concerns. They impact the survival and the health of millions. The absence of these issues from the election manifestos of the major political parties was bitterly disappointing. But it is not too late. If the government is to truly be the steward of the people, it must start by taking a hard look at the physical health of the country.

as to ensure genuine environmental rule of law.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The examination system

The stream of irregularities as far as the conduct of all-India competitive and prestigious examinations by the National Testing Agency

is disheartening for young students (Page 1, "Govt. removes NTA chief, hands over probe to CBI", June 23). From the NEET-UG fiasco and UGC-NET

cancellation to the NEET-PG postponement, the central government must address the concerns of young people. The government should overhaul the NTA's

systems. What is happening The NTA has ended up now is no blemish but the playing with the lives of creation of a deep scar on India's education system. spent their precious time Shihab Kattathar, Mangaluru

innocent students who have and energy in preparing for these examinations. The

events are extremely dismaying and gloomy. There needs to be a thorough investigation. K. Sudha Rani, Secunderabad

Opinion

Indian Railways and safety challenges

he dust and din have not settled since the tragic accident involving the GFCJ container train (goods train), which, while travelling at high speed, rammed into the 13174 Agartala-Sealdah Kanchanjunga Express, resulting in 11 deaths and approximately 40 injuries. Amidst the uproar, it is very important to examine some critical points.

Thanks to focused measures like closing unmanned level crossings and emphasising track maintenance, the safety record of Indian Railways in terms of fatalities and injuries has certainly improved. However, comparing this data to past records to paint a rosy picture is misleading. Modern systems and tools make achieving a zero-fatality record an attainable goal, and this is what the Railways should be pursuing. Moreover, the Union government's substantial investment, allocating nearly 25% of its total capex to railways, makes funding all safety works well within the Indian Railway's reach. The non-availability of resources cannot be a red herring

A statutory inquiry by the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) is under way, and the cause and responsibility for the accident will soon be determined. It is almost a foregone conclusion that the crew of the GFCI container train, the station master, and perhaps even the signal maintainer will be held responsible for ignoring the stipulated Automatic Signal territory protocol. This pattern of assigning blame to lower level functionaries repeats with each serious accident.

There are other issues which may or may not be routine and beg more attention. First, the information management and communication of Indian Railways. Even as facts about the accident were still emerging, the Chairperson of the Railway Board prematurely declared the container train crew's disregard of signals as the *prima facie* cause.



Sudhanshu Mani

Retired General Manager/Indian Railways, Leader of Train 18/Vande Bharat project and independent rail consultant She also stated that both crew members had died. While the former is proving to be only partially true, the latter was an insensitive and erroneous statement as the assistant loco pilot has survived.

When questioned about the slow rollout of Kayach, an indigenous signalling system that also prevents collisions, she cited limited capacity in the supporting industry as a main reason. If industrial capacity is lacking, it is the Indian Railway's responsibility to encourage and nurture the allied industry with meaningful assurances so they invest in capacity building. Notably, the Railways decided to adopt the Kavach system after extensive trials over 1,400 kilometres on the Southern Central Railway nearly three years ago, preferring it over the established European system, ETCS Level II. The project has been a work in progress since then. Such slow execution of a project indicates a lack of focus on safety works.

If the Indian Railways is still not confident of the system's efficacy or speed of implementation, why plan for its adoption? If that is indeed the case, there is no harm in installing ETCS Level II in some important sections while Kavach matures.

We have heard that Kavach is under implementation on the Delhi-Howrah and Delhi-Mumbai sections, but the target for completion has been missed. It is pertinent to refer to two recommendations from the CRS' report on the Vizianagaram train accident last year. The report emphasised the priority implementation of Kavach in Automatic Signalling territories, as they are prone to collisions, and suggested faster installation in locomotives and trains ahead of ground installations to increase the probability, if not guarantee, of preventing collisions. The Railways should fixate on the trunk routes and Automatic Signalling territories for faster installation of Kavach, aiming for

4,000 to 5,000 km/year, which is achievable. Why are differing views on the protocol to be followed by station masters and crews in the case of Automatic signal failure emerging? This issue was criticised by the CRS in the said report, highlighting badly drafted rules that lead to ambiguity about what to do in the case of Automatic signal failure.

Indian Railways, like many government entities, is overstaffed. However, there are some safety-critical categories where work is intensely continuous, such as loco crew, train manager, station master, pointsman and signal maintainer. Any vacancies in these categories mean stress and overwork for the existing staff. Carrying such vacancies to save some expenditure is self-defeating. Although there are nearly 20,000 vacancies for loco pilot/assistant loco pilot positions, Indian Railways issued a notice for recruiting only 5,658 heads earlier this year. When the issue was raised strongly after this accident, this was revised to 18,799 heads, clearly showing a cavalier handling of an important matter.

A big question is whether the accident was an aberration or if similar near misses are commonplace in the affected section. If the enquiry shows that such incidents were indeed frequent, it would point to a grave management failure. A related issue is the inaction in employing AI-enabled applications to improve safety post mortems and provide actionable alerts. Extensive digital data from station data loggers and microprocessors on locomotives and trains can be effectively managed by AI, filtering out the irregularities to precipitate the grave ones and projecting them regularly to the very top of railway management.

One hopes that the enquiry report will delve more into managerial issues this time, such that a clear path toward a safe, accident-free Indian Railways can be charted out.

Power dues remain unresolved

The power struggle between Telangana and A.P. has yielded no conclusive solution

STATE OF PLAY

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he protracted dispute over power dues between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh has come to the fore yet again.

BRS president and former Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao raised the issue in his letter to the Judicial Commission headed by Justice L. Narasimha Reddy, which was formed to investigate alleged irregularities in Telangana's power purchase agreement with neighbouring Chhattisgarh. He recalled the power woes faced by Telangana during its formative years justifying his government's decision to enter into a power purchase agreement with Chhattisgarh to meet the requirements.

Mr. Rao stated that according to the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, Telangana was entitled to 53.89% and Andhra Pradesh to 46.11% of the power generated in the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh, based on power consumption statistics from five years before bifurcation. The ratio was to be followed for 10 years, but the share allocated to Telangana was insufficient. While there was a shortfall of 2,700 MW, the situation worsened with Andhra Pradesh not supplying over 1,500 MW violating the provisions of the Reorganisation Act. There was a non-availability of 900 MW of power from gas-based stations. On the whole, there was a shortage of 5,000 MW power leading to a severe crisis in Telangana.

The crisis worsened when Andhra Pradesh took over the Sileru power unit and failed to supply the agreed power. Besides, Mr. Rao alleged that



Andhra Pradesh canceled power purchase agreements with private power generation companies to deny Telangana its share.

Continuing dispute

His letter comes against the backdrop of a continuing dispute between the two States over the dues payable by the other since the bifurcation of united Andhra Pradesh in June 2014. The Telangana government has been claiming that its power utilities should get around ₹17,828 crore from Andhra Pradesh utilities, while the neighbouring State asserts that Telangana owes ₹3,441.78 crore in principal and another ₹3,315 crore in late payment surcharges for power supplied post-bifurcation.

The issue was represented to the Union Home Ministry as well as in the Southern Zonal Council meetings by the two Telugu States even as the Telangana government presented papers in support of its contentions. It said that the total receivables from Andhra Pradesh power utilities was ₹17,420 crore while dues payable to Andhra Pradesh Power Generation Corporation were to the tune of ₹4,887 crore leaving a balance of ₹12,532 crore receivable by Telangana.

The issue escalated when the Andhra Pradesh government lobbied the Union government, leading to the Union Power Ministry's intervention. The Ministry directed the Telangana government to pay ₹6,756 crore to Andhra Pradesh for the supply of power post-bifurcation and ordered that the payment should be made within 30 days from the issuance of the order.

The Union Power Ministry

was in consultation with the Finance Ministry to give a direction to RBI so that the accounts of the Telangana government could be deducted from the amount that should be paid to the neighbouring State. The Union Minister drew flak from Telangana which claimed that the Union government had not ensured implementation of the assurances given in the Reorganisation Act, but had decided to intervene in power dues issue against the interests of Telangana. The Telangana government on its part, challenged the Union Ministry's decision in the High Court which in turn quashed its orders.

"In our opinion, it is emi-

nently desirable that the dispute between them is resolved amicably, preferably through mediation," Chief Justice Alok Aradhe and Justice N.V. Shravan Kumar said. Nearly a year after the judgment, the two States have yet to reach a consensus on power dues. Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy who took over the reins in December has reaffirmed his commitment to resolving the long standing disputes. With Mr. Revanth Reddy, one time associate of TDP president N. Chandrababu Naidu, inclined to resolve the disputes and a regime change in Andhra Pradesh where Mr. Naidu led TDP coalition taking over the reins after their victory in the polls, hopes are rekindled again over the scope for the two States to settle the issues in a mutually agreeable manner in the coming days.

India among a select few countries that have not conducted the Census

Sharing company with India are countries undergoing invasions, civil wars or economic crises

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DATA POINT

<u>Jasmin Nihalani</u>

he last census conducted in India was in 2011 and the decennial counting measure has been postponed indefinitely since 2021. Census numbers play a vital role in identifying beneficiaries for a myriad welfare schemes which could include specific ones such as building schools for tribal children to the large Public Distribution System (PDS). The absence of the census is bound to have grave

consequences. The BIP-led government has repeatedly asserted, including in Parliament, that Census 2021 had to be postponed due to the pandemic. But India stands only among a select few countries that have not conducted the latest Census - 44 of 233 nations. Of the 189 (81%) that managed to conduct their latest rounds, 143 did so after March 2020, the period when CO-VID-19 started playing havoc across countries. India shares the dubious distinction of not conducting the census with conflictridden countries such as Ukraine (invaded by Russia), Yemen, Syria and Myanmar - impacted by civil wars, the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the economic crisis-affected Sri Lanka besides several sub-Saharan African countries that have also undergone turmoil.

Chart 1 shows the year in which the census was last conducted in 233 countries. Among the ten most populous countries, India and Nigeria are the only two yet to conduct a census. China, the U.S. and Indonesia were able to conduct their latest census round in 2020. Pakistan, ranked fifth, conducted its census in March 2023.

Among BRICS nations (originally defined), only India has not conducted the census with others having done so during or after the pandemic – Brazil (August 2022), China (November 2020), South

Africa (February 2022), Russia (October 2021). Among neighbours, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan and Bangladesh have conducted censuses.

Extensive digital

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An excerpt from The Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, published in 2011, emphasises the need for a census. "... India is a welfare State. All these (welfare schemes) require information at the grassroots level... (Census) is the only source of primary data at village, town and ward level...".

Table 2 lists a selection of survevs that need census data to determine their samples and some schemes that require updated population figures to determine the number of beneficiaries. For instance, the consumption survey 2022-23, which collects data on the consumption of goods and services to understand expenditure patterns and standard of living, used the 2011 census for sampling. The National Family Health Survey 2019-21, which highlights districts where health services are inadequate, also depended upon the 2011 figures. Schemes such as the National Family Security Act, which identifies beneficiaries, who are entitled to receive subsidised food grains, are still being implemented using 2011 figures. Calculations by economists Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera and Meghana Mungikar estimate that at least 100 million people have been excluded from the scheme as coverage is still based on the 2011 census.

on the 2011 census.

Even a relatively smaller scheme such as Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS), which aims to provide quality education for ST children, will miss out on many areas. In 2022, every block with more than 50% of the ST population was targeted to have an EMRS school. As this calculation was done based on 2011, many blocks that fit the criteria in 2022 may have missed out. Similarly, blocks which fit the criteria earlier but did not in 2022, will get an EMRS school which they may not

need now.

Counted in bad company

The data for the chart were sourced from the statistics division of the United Nations.

Data for the table was sourced from the respective survey reports, CAG audit reports and the NFSA website

Approximate count: Women walk in front of a 'population clock' showing India's estimated population, on World Population Day on July 11, last year, in Mumbai.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

INDIA'S POPULATION भारतकी जनसंख्या

1 4 2 4 5 3 1 7 4

Chart 1: The chart shows the year in which the latest census was conducted in 233 countries. Countries coloured as ● are yet to conduct the latest census. Nations coloured ● did it before the pandemic, while those coloured ● did it during or after pandemic

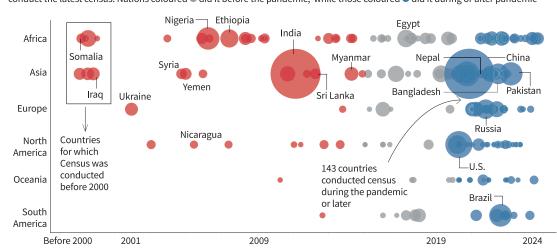


Table 2: Surveys that need census data to determine their samples and some schemes that require undated nonulation figures

Year in which census was conducted

Table 2: Surveys that need census	s data to determine their samples and some schemes that require updated population figures
Name	Use of census
Consumption survey	The sampling frame for rural sector is the list of villages as per Census 2011
National Family Health Survey	The 2011 census served as the sampling frame for the selection of villages in rural areas
PLFS	List of 2011 population census villages constituted the rural sampling frame
Sample Registration System	The statistical report uses sample from Census 2011 frame
Household social consumption on education	The total number of sample first stage units (census villages in the rural sector and blocks in the urban sector) were allocated to the States and UTs in proportion to population as per Census 2013
Key Indicators of Social Consumption in India: Health	For the rural areas, the list of 2011 Census villages constituted the sampling frame
National Food Security Act	The Act covers nearly 2/3rd of the country's total population on the basis of estimates done using Census 2011 figures.75% of rural and 50% of urban population is entitled to receive highly subsidised foodgrains
National Social Assistance Programme	Central assistance to States and UTs under NSAP is determined on the basis of BPL population of the respective States/UTs. Estimated number of beneficiaries are calculated using population figures as per Census 2001 and the poverty ratio determined by the erstwhile Planning Commission in 2004-05
Delimitation of constituencies	The Social Studies Division provides the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) Census figures to the Election Commission for delimitation of constituencies and reservation of seats for the SCs and STs

OM THE ADOHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 24, 1974

Little support for Pak bid against India at Islamic meet

Kuala Lumpur, June 23: Since the beginning of the conference, Pakistan has been canvassing for a resolution that could cite the Indian explosion as a threat to the security of smaller countries in the sub-continent and of other non-nuclear nations.

But countries like Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Egypt opposed the move.

They considered that India could not be singled out. It was agreed that a discussion in general terms on all nuclear tests could be had on the agenda.

At the officials' meeting, Pakistan wanted the

conference formally to call upon the five nuclear powers to give an assurance of security to non-nuclear nations around India.

Pakietan said that if all the five powers were

Pakistan said that if all the five powers were not prepared to give a joint assurance, then individual nations should be approached.

The Pakistani delegation spokesman today denied a report that Pakistan sought to condemn India for the nuclear test. He also deplored "tendentious reporting" of the conference by some news agencies in regard to Pakistan's proposed item on strengthening the security of non-nuclear States. Neither the conference nor its committees had yet taken up Pakistan's proposed item for substantive consideration, he added.

Out of 30 delegates, only a few countries touched on the nuclear test.

Pakistan's Defence and Foreign Minister, Mr. Aziz Ahmed said Pakistan's concern over the Indian test did not arise merely on account of its own security or of regional disequilibrium.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 24, 1924

Rumours contradicted.

Bombay, June 24: The Board of Directors have learnt of the several unauthorised and unjustified rumours about the Tata Iron and Steel Company's position and about the intention of the Board to reduce the capital of the Company. The Board have this day completed arrangements for further finance in this Company, and with the co-operation of the shareholders and the investing public, the Board are confident that the necessity for reducing the capital of reconstructing the Company will not arise.

Text&Context

THEMOHINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Amount infused by FPIs in Indian equities in June

results in Indian equities, driven by expectations of continued policy reforms. PTI

Number of infra projects hits by cost overrun in May

each entailing an investment of ₹150 crore or above, were hit by a cost overrun of more than ₹5.71 lakh crore in May this year, according to the MoSPI. PTI

The funds needed to repair the damage by Cyclone Remal

monetary assistance from the Centre for rehabilitation of people and for the repair of damages caused by Cyclone Remal. PTI

Domestic exhibitors to participate in the garment fair

Domestic players and foreign buyers from more than 50 nations will participate in the garment fair, beginning on June 25, according to the Apparel Export Promotion Council. PTI

Number of people killed in North Gaza in Israeli strikes

The Palestinian Civil Defence said it pulled approximately the same number of bodies from a building hit by an Israeli strike in an eastern neighbourhood of the Gaza City. AP COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What are the duties of a Speaker?

What does the office of the 'Speaker *pro tem*' mean? What does the Constitution state? Who elects the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha? How can the impartiality of the Speaker's office be preserved? What are the main roles of the Speaker?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

he President has appointed seven-time MP Bhartruhari Mahtab as the 'Speaker pro tem' of the 18th Lok Sabha. The election of the full-time Speaker is scheduled for June 26. There are also reports of the Deputy Speaker being offered to one of the allies of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a post that has been held by the Opposition since the 10th Lok Sabha (1991).

Who is Speaker pro tem?

Article 94 of the Constitution states that the Speaker of the Lok Sabha shall not vacate his/her office until immediately before the first meeting of the Lok Sabha after its dissolution. This is to ensure that the office of the Speaker is never left vacant. Hence, Om Birla who was the Speaker of the 17th Lok Sabha continues in that post till June 24 when the first meeting of the 18th Lok Sabha is scheduled. Article 95(1) of the Constitution provides that when the post of Speaker and Deputy Speaker is vacant, the President shall appoint a member of the Lok Sabha to perform the duties of the Speaker. This would be the situation when the first meeting of a new Lok Sabha commences.

Hence, the President appoints 'Speaker pro tem' under this provision till the full-time Speaker is elected. The term 'pro *tem*' means 'for the time being' or

'temporary'. This term is not found in the Constitution or rules of Lok Sabha but is a conventional term which finds mention in the 'Handbook on the working of Ministry of Parliamentary affairs.' As per tradition, one of the senior-most members of the Lok Sabha is selected by the government, who is then administered oath by the President. The Speaker *pro tem* administers oath of office to other MPs



Important role: Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan with MP Bhartruhari Mahtab on March 28.PTI

and presides over the election of full-time Speaker. In the 18th Lok Sabha, Bhartruhari Mahtab of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been appointed as Speaker pro tem.

How are the Speaker and Deputy **Speaker elected?**

Article 93 of the Constitution states that the Lok Sabha shall choose two members to be its Speaker and Deputy Speaker. The election of the Speaker is held on a date fixed by the President. All the Speakers in independent India have been elected unopposed. The election of Deputy Speaker is held on a date fixed by the Speaker.

What is the role of the Speaker?

Apart from the conduct of business, the Speakers perform two important constitutional functions of certifying a Bill to be a Money Bill (over which the Rajya Sabha has limited role), and deciding on disqualification under the Tenth Schedule for defection. In discharging these roles in the past, the Speakers have invariably favoured the ruling dispensation, something that should be avoided.

The Lok Sabha rules provide the Speaker with the powers of referral of Bills introduced to Standing Committees and suspension of members for grave disorder up to a maximum of five days. Referral of Bills to committees have

declined from 71% during 2009-14 to 16% during 2019-24. With the return of a coalition government, it is expected that the Speaker would refer important Bills to Standing committees for scrutiny. There were also large-scale suspensions of Opposition MPs during the winter session of 2023. Such suspensions affect the robust functioning of Parliament and should be carried out with restraint.

What are the conventions?

In Britain, the Speaker once elected to his/her office, resigns from the political party to which he/she belonged. In subsequent elections to House of Commons, he/she seeks election not as a member of any political party but as 'The Speaker seeking re-election'. This is to reflect his/her impartiality while presiding over the House. Somnath Chatterjee, who was the Speaker of the 14th Lok Sabha acted independently by not resigning from the post despite his party's (CPM) direction after it had withdrawn support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government during a confidence vote in 2008. While the Tenth Schedule allows a Speaker to resign from their political party on being elected to their office, it has never been done by any Speaker till date. Resignation from their political parties on being elected as Speaker could be a first step towards demonstrating independence.

The Deputy Speaker is an important constitutional officer who steps in during the vacancy or absence of the Speaker. The convention of offering the post of Deputy Speaker to the Opposition started in the year 1991. Thereafter, till the 16th Lok Sabha this has been followed without a break. It was a travesty of the Constitution that no Deputy Speaker was elected in the 17th Lok Sabha.

The healthy convention of the post being held by Opposition should return in

the current Lok Sabha. Rangarajan.R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He currently trains civil-service aspirants at 'Officers IAS Academy'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

The President has appointed seven-time MP Bhartruhari Mahtab as the 'Speaker pro tem' of the 18th Lok Sabha.

Article 94 of the Constitution states that the Speaker of the Lok Sabha shall not vacate his/her office until immediately before the first meeting of the Lok Sabha after its dissolution

The Deputy Speaker is an important constitutional officer who steps in during the

Speaker.

vacancy or absence of the

How is methanol procured and used as liquor?

Was the Kallakurichi incident the first time that methanol poisoning has come to light?

M. Kalyanaraman

The story so far:

he Kallakurichi illicit liquor tragedy that has so far claimed more than 50 lives is entirely familiar in its cause, sequence of events, and aftermath. Such tragedies happen periodically across India in various States. Almost all the postmortem reports of the victims attribute the cause to methanol consumption.

How are ethanol, methanol made? Ethanol is legal liquor for consumption. It is produced biologically whereas methanol is produced from fuels such as coal in India. Molasses, which are a by-product of the sugar making process, form the starting material of distilleries that are often located close to sugar factories. They produce rectified spirit which is distilled further to produce edible extra neutral alcohol that in turn goes into making Indian Made Foreign Liquor, a lucrative cash cow for State

governments. During ethanol production in responsible distilleries, methanol is also produced but is carefully removed since the processes are highly controlled.

Methanol is produced from coal and other fossil fuels. While ethanol can be made edible, methanol is poison. Even very low concentrations of methanol can be toxic, often fatal. However, it is needed to produce a range of products that are highly useful. Paints, for instance, can't be produced without methanol.

Is methanol easy to procure? Just like ethanol, methanol is a highly controlled substance. Rules in Tamil Nadu ensure the manufacturing, transportation

and storage are all licenced, monitored

and the quantity and quality audited. In northern Tamil Nadu, much of the methanol used in industries is sourced from Andhra Pradesh. Ground reportage suggests the existence of a lucrative methanol pilferage racket operating enroute and at the end-user side as well.

It is possible that methanol formed

during the crude distillation process, adopted by the bootleggers at Kallakurichi, wasn't removed, leading to methanol poisoning. However, the widespread nature of contamination and scale of the Kallakurichi tragedy suggests that methanol was procured and supplied separately, either as part of a brew or alone in a diluted form. Given that illicit liquor has been produced and distributed widely here over many months, possibly years, methanol use was not a one-off event that happened only this fateful week at Kallakurichi.

Why is methanol used?

Most of the hooch tragedies in India occur due to methanol contamination in liquor. Street wisdom, or belief rather, may well be that the relatively inexpensive but potent poison that is methanol, if diluted enough, could provide the same effect as ordinary liquor - a state of intoxication or 'kick' for consumers.

Prosecutors in the 2015 Malvani, Mumbai hooch tragedy case in which

more than 100 people died and some 75 were injured argued that all the accused had entered into a criminal conspiracy, and deliberately procured and supplied poisonous methanol. Lawyers defending the accused argued that their defendants would not knowingly add methanol. It made no business sense. And bootleggers, just like in Kallakurichi, live amidst the community. They provide a service that is much in demand and wouldn't want to kill their own folk. The additional sessions judge S. D. Tawshikar, in the Malvani case, acquitted 10 of the 14 accused but convicted four. The judge did not find anyone guilty of violating the Poisons Act of 1919. The four were convicted of criminal conspiracy, and culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

What needs to be done?

The periodic occurrence of methanol poisoning suggests the need for strong central legislation that can work with State legislation. Various laws such as the Poisons Act that involves State governments can tighten the methanol supply chain. The implementation of laws holds the key, especially when there are plans to ramp up the production of both ethanol and methanol for use as cheaper, eco-friendly alternatives to petrol and diesel for transportation.

The NITI Aayog has talked of ramping up methanol production from two metric tonnes to 20. Keeping methanol and ethanol separate and not allowing any pilferage should be a national priority.

THE GIST

The Kallakurichi illicit liquor tragedy that has so far claimed more than 50 lives is entirely familiar in its cause, sequence of events, and aftermath. Almost all the postmortem reports attribute the cause to methanol consumption.

Methanol is produced from coal and other fossil fuels. While ethanol can be made edible, methanol is poison.

The periodic occurrence of methanol poisoning suggests the need for strong central legislation that can work with State legislation.

THE HINDU



Is the European Union's 'chat control' law undermining online privacy?

The EU's proposal to thwart child sexual abuse online could potentially create a backdoor for authoritarian governments to snoop on citizens. Some tech companies, along with trade associations, and privacy experts have all vehemently opposed the regulation

Poulomi Chatterjee

The story so far:

he European Union's proposed 'chat control' law has become a bone of contention between members of the bloc. First proposed by the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson in May 2022 as part of the bloc's push to combat child sexual abuse online, the framework of the bill has now come under fire. earning itself a derisive term "Chat Control". France, Germany and Poland have particularly refused to accept a clause that allows for mass scanning of private messages by breaking end-to-end encryption. Some tech companies, along with trade associations, and privacy experts have all vehemently opposed the regulation. On the other hand, the Interior Ministers of Spain and Ireland have supported the proposal. Separately, a network of organisations and individuals, advocating for children's rights in Europe, have lashed out at EU leaders for failing to tackle child sexual abuse online.

What are the concerns of those against the proposal?

Scanning end-to-end encrypted messages has remained a controversial issue. That's because there is no way to do this without

opening risky backdoors that can be accessed by third parties who can exploit the vulnerability, in turn ending the promise of end-to-end encryption.

Tech firms that have tread the encryption bypassing path have have often been made to retreat. In 2021, Apple announced NeuralHash, a feature that could automatically scan iCloud photo libraries of individual devices for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Employees and activist groups expressed concerns over the loss of privacy. A year later, Apple said it had abandoned the initiative. Another looming issue the iPhone maker recognised in the process was how authoritarian governments could potentially misuse the feature by using it as a tool to target individuals who oppose the regime.

Erik Neuenschwander, Director of user privacy and child safety at Apple, admitted this in a note saying, "It would [...] inject the potential for a slippery slope of unintended consequences. Scanning for one type of content, for instance, opens the door for bulk surveillance and could create a desire to search other encrypted messaging systems across content types."

When bringing in a similar clause through the U.K.'s Online Safety Bill, lawmakers attempted to make way for client-side scanning of private and

encrypted messages. The proposal was postponed after receiving pushback from encrypted messaging app owners like WhatsApp and Signal. The duo threatened to leave the U.K. if such a law was passed. In its final stages, in September, 2023, the House of Lords considered the potential security threat that the clause would bring saying it would not implement scanning until it was "technically feasible."

What is the status of the EU's chat control law?

On June 30, a new draft of the proposal is set to be be reviewed. Legislators have left the idea of scanning text messages and audio, and are instead targetting shared photos, videos and URLs with an adjustment to appease the naysayers.

Another tweak in the making could be people's consent in sharing material being scanned before being encrypted. But this compromise has been largely called out as a farcical one. A report by Euractiv which has been confirmed by internal documents shows that if a user refuses the scanning, they will simply be blocked from sending or receiving images, videos and links hardly leaving them with a choice. Despite these measures, EU's enforcement of such regulations have seen exemptions to the rule. In November 2023, the European Commission

reportedly published a proposal to amend the regulation on a temporary derogation of the E-Privacy Directive against CSAM. Under the regulation, specific online communications service providers were allowed to sift through or scan messages to detect, report and remove online CSAM and content that solicits children. The regulation is set to expire in early August. The initial plan on the table was to simply extend this regulation for another three vears. But, according to media reports. plans for further extensions were stalled in February this year.

Meredith Whittaker, President of Signal app called the measures to assuage concerns as "cosmetic", and has signed a joint statement along with a group of over 60 other organisations like Mozilla, Proton, Surfshark and Tuta, voicing out her concerns. Ms. Whittaker has echoed her earlier warning saving Signal will leave the U.K. rather than undermine end-to-end encryption.

A blog, co-authored by Riana Pfefferkorn, a research scholar at the Stanford Internet Observatory and Callum Voge, director of government affairs and advocacy at the Internet Society, notes, "If government surveillance is a concern in an established democratic entity like the EU, what hope is there for beleaguered democracies like Turkey, India and Brazil, much less autocracies?"

If 'good boy' means 'a boy who is good' and 'city boy' means a 'boy who is used to city life', logic suggests that a 'whipping boy' should be someone who likes to whip - someone who enjoys whipping or beating others. This, however, is not the case; he is someone who gets whipped. In everyday contexts, the expression is mostly used to refer to someone who gets blamed for everything that goes wrong in an organisation or a household. Someone else may have made the blunder, but it is the poor individual who gets blamed; he is punished or reprimanded for no fault of his. The word can be used with people

S. Upendran

replaced by 'scapegoat' and 'fall guy'. As usual, it was the poor coach who became the whipping boy for the team's terrible performance in the tournament.

and things. The expression 'whipping boy' is not heard very often; it has been

Are soft drinks

Don't go with the team, you always end up being the whipping boy when they make mistakes

What is the meaning and origin of the term 'whipping boy'? (K.C. Roshni)

bad for your

health?

In the past, a boy from a poor family was usually chosen to be with a prince; this companion participated in all the daily activities of the prince. Like the prince, he lived a life of luxury - he dined on good food, wore good clothes, and perhaps what is more important, he studied along with the prince. He was given a free education. The problem was whenever the prince committed a mistake, it was the poor boy, and not the prince, who was punished. He was the one who received a beating from the master! Hence the term 'whipping boy'.

How is the word 'accost' pronounced? (K. Madhusudhan, Gulbarga)

The word consists of two syllables: the first sounds like the 'a' in 'china', while the second is pronounced like the word 'cost'. This word of Latin origin is pronounced 'a-COST' with the stress on the second syllable. It comes from the Latin 'accostare' meaning 'come up to the side'; so, when you 'accost' someone, you approach an individual. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to suggest walking up to a stranger in an aggressive manner and speaking to him rather rudely. Do not use the word to mean 'to greet someone'. You usually accost someone you are not familiar with.

On her way to court, Revathi was accosted by three gang members.

Is it okay to say 'cool drink'? (C. Vaidehi, Trichy)

Yes, within India, it is perfectly acceptable. When we go to someone's house, we are often asked if we would like a 'cool drink'. What the host wishes to know is whether we would like to have a cola of any kind – Pepsi, Fanta, Coke, etc. Native speakers of English, on the other hand, do not refer to this kind of drink as 'cool drink'. The terms that they commonly use are 'soft drink', 'soda', 'soda pop', etc.

Would you be interested in a soda pop? upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to

The 137th edition of the Wimbledon Tennis Championship starts on July 1. Here is a quiz to test your knowledge on its history

Soorya Prakash. N

QUESTION 1

Who are the singles winners who won both in the amateur and open

QUESTION 2

Who is the only player to have won all three types of titles —singles, doubles and mixed doubles, four or more times in the open era?

QUESTION 3

Which two players figured in the longest match to be held in Wimbledon history which went on for 11 hours, and five minutes spread over three days?

QUESTION 4

Who are the two players in the

open era to win the Gentlemen singles without losing a single set in the entire tournament?

QUESTION 5

Name the two pairs of players in the open era to have won six doubles titles together (most for any pair) at the Wimbledon doubles Championships?

QUESTION 6

Who is the only male player to have won four mixed doubles titles in the open era, each with a different partner?

QUESTION 7

Who became the first brother-sister combination to win a Grand slam doubles title together at Wimbledon in 1980?



Visual question:

Who receives the round plate and what is its name? GETTY IMAGES

Questions and Answers to the June 21 edition of the daily quiz: 1. A book which is a part of a popular best-selling series was released on this date in 2003. Ans: Harry Potter and the

2. This Prime Minister, who was sworn in on June 21, 1991, was the first Congress PM outside the Gandhi-Nehru family. Ans: P.V. Narasimha Rao 3. The day the UN adopted June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. Ans: December 11, 2014

4. The Summer Solstice marks the event when the Sun is at its southernmost position to Earth's equator. Is the statement true. Ans: It is false. It will be at the northernmost position

5. This American whistleblower became a naturalised Russian citizen in 2022. Ans: Edward Snowden

Visual: The Ferris wheel debuted at this place. Ans: World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago Early Birds: K. N. Viswanathan | Sadhan Kumar Panda| Kuldeep Soni| Abhijeet Prakash| Abhinav Raj



Supersede:

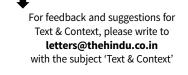
take the place or move into the position of

Synonyms: replace, supervene, supplant

Usage: This edition supersedes the

Pronunciation: bit.ly/supersedepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˌsuːpəˈsiːd/



thehindubusinessline.

Safety first

It should be a top priority in the Rail Budget

he Kanchenjunga Express accident on June 17 — the third major collision episode in a year — raises questions on whether the Railways has gone a bit off-track on safety. While the Railways' safety record has improved over two decades, there has been a recent reversal. Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw informed the Rajya Sabha in July last year that the number of 'consequential accidents' — those entailing injuries and loss of life — had fallen from 473 in 2000-01 to 48 in 2022-23. But the number of such accidents climbed from 22 in 2020-21 to 48 in FY23.



Derailments increased from 17 to 36 over these two years, after having fallen from 350 in 2000-01. The recent rise in derailments and collisions calls for a systemic response. It is only too easy to pin the blame on field staff, whereas the entire chain of command should be held to account. The Railways needs to adopt a dual-track approach to safety — have the right technology in place, and improve its management of human resources. The Kavach anti-collision software, which gets a train to stop when a loco pilot fails to apply the brakes, has been installed in just 1,465 route kilometres and 139 locomotives, despite its having been rolled out in February 2016. The Railway Minister informed Parliament this February that tenders had been awarded for Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Howrah sections. Surely, Kavach is a complex technology, requiring the software integration of railway stations, track and locos. It costs ₹50 lakh per km and ₹70 lakh per locomotive. However, it could have been speeded up on high density routes. It is not clear why only three OEMs have been approved so far. If Kavach is to proceed at a snail's pace, the Railways must evolve other tech options.

While such systems are meant to negate 'human error', it is also important that scope for the latter is reduced. Errors could occur when staff performing critical tasks requiring hours of concentration — such as loco pilot, assistant loco pilot, guard, station master, signal staff — are stretched on account of their inadequate numbers. The Railway Ministry's response to a recent RTI application reveals that of the 2.7 lakh posts lying vacant in the Railways as of last June, 1.5 lakh are in the safety category. The Centre, however, seems to have woken up to the seriousness of the issue. Almost coinciding with the latest mishap, the Railways said it would recruit nearly 18,800 assistant loco pilots soon. This effort should continue.

Meanwhile, a December 2022 CAG report on derailments observes that there are shortfalls ranging from 30 per cent to 100 per cent in inspections by track recording cars. The upcoming Budget should push track renewal, while looking into why allocations of over ₹17,000 crore for FY24 on this count were not fully spent. The emphasis on 'customer amenities' can wait. With a gross budgetary support of ₹2.5-lakh crore likely to come its way, the Railways should work towards being safe rather than flamboyant.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Indian football must raise its game

ndian football is facing significant challenges. With the recent sacking of Igor Stimac and the drop in FIFA rankings from 121 to 124, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) has numerous battles to contend with. One of the primary crises is the lack of true leadership within the team. With Sunil Chhetri retiring and Stimac being dismissed, AIFF faces a tough task in cultivating a new set of

The national team's poor performance in the World Cup Qualifiers has also eroded the

trust of its fans. While the fandom for Indian football isn't huge, there was significant excitement when the Indian Super League (ISL) was introduced in 2014. However, the ISL now struggles to find suitable sponsors, and the search for broadcasting partners is equally challenging. Even Copa America, La Liga, and Ligue 1 are

currently without broadcasters in India.

These issues highlight two major points: Indian football must redefine its focus to be both result-oriented and profit-oriented. To achieve success on the field, the team needs to show steady progress in world rankings and consistent victories in championships.

This will help regain fan trust and support, potentially increasing the number of

supporters. The AIFF must also improve marketing strategies to draw attention to the Super Cup, Durand Cup, and ISL. Without efforts to popularise these championships, the growth of football in India will be severely limited.

Although cricket dominates the Indian sports scene, strong campaigns are necessary to elevate the profile of football within the country. By prioritising both performance and profitability, Indian football can aspire to a brighter future.



LINE & LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

ndia's Budget will soon be presented. It shares the global budget problem: how to spend more while taxing less and borrowing less.

The pre-Keynesian answer to this was to spend less, period. The post-Keynesian answer, because budgets have become primarily instruments of politics, is to tax more, or borrow more or, as is often the case, do both.

Spending less is considered bad manners. It's also politically foolhardy, as Modi with his prudent fiscal policies has discovered. There's always a rival promising the moon.

But there comes a time when you can't do either — borrow more and tax more. So you go back to the original pre-Keynesian solution, spend less.

The question is whether governments the world over, and in India in particular, have reached this stage. It certainly looks that way to me.

This fiscal impasse now exists even in one-party 'democracies' like China and Russia which don't have to tackle the populism of rivals. The rude way of saying this is that governments the world over are broke.

What all this means for the future is unclear. But I think much of it depends on how wedded politicians are to the Keynesian solution which was actually a highly specific answer to a highly specific problem at a very specific point in time. It was never meant to be a carte blanche to governments to use expenditure as a way to persuade voters to vote for them under the guise of development and

Just to remind readers, Keynes was addressing the problem of excess industrial capacity. His solution was intended to revive demand for industrial products when it slumped deeply.

But in due course it became the answer to the prayers of politicians who only wanted to buy votes, albeit in an intellectually acceptable way. Left wing economists - pardon the oxymoron cheered them on.

Personal income taxes are unconscionably high, if not in terms of rates certainly in terms of incidence. The CBDT needs to take a course in the sociology of household incomes which have been stagnating for a decade.

But now the time has come to ask if the political prayers should be left unanswered. The answer is yes, they should be. But, quite tragically, they can't and won't be. This is the mega dilemma of 21st century — aamdani athanni, kharcha rupiah (income eight annas, expenses one rupee).

So regardless of how much central banks wring their hands about it, high (and higher) inflation is now a permanent scourge of political parties. They are damned if they do and damned if they don't. That's the impasse.

Targeting inflation was thought to be a solution but it has turned out to be just a diversionary game, like pushing on a string. It's not going to help as long as governments don't rein in spending.

DON'T MISS THE BUS

Modi now has exactly the same choice which confronted Rajiv Gandhi in 1985 and Deve Gowda in 1997: how to raise the growth rate via the private sector.

Rajiv cut taxes but increased deficit financing even while reducing public investment in the Seventh Plan. Deve Gowda also cut taxes but kept the deficits under control. He also encouraged the private sector to invest, which it didn't.

This is the problem Modi has to tackle now. In fact his job is much easier today. He has already cut corporate taxes to 22 per cent and further to 15 per cent for new investments.

That leaves personal income taxes and indirect taxes. The former are unconscionably high, if not in terms of rates certainly in terms of incidence. The CBDT needs to take a course in the sociology of household incomes which

have been stagnating for a decade. Basically what's happened is that the fixed costs of a household are now so high that a mere tweaking of the slabs will not do.

Along with slab adjustments the rates must also be redone to 20 per cent for all incomes up to a crore and 40 per cent beyond that. Nothing else. Keep it low, keep it simple and deploy the redundant tax officials somewhere else, maybe on the borders.

As for indirect taxes or GST, they are not based on any economic logic. Too many things are not taxed at all which means other things are taxed too much.

A single rate of 15 per cent applied to all but 10 per cent of things will work wonders. The problem is to work out a way of getting there. It will be the Big Bang we are waiting for but it's not something a Union Budget can manage

But it should be done quickly because Modi will not, in all probability, win a fourth general election. This is his golden opportunity to fix the tax system in a way that endures for 30 years, like the personal income tax rates of 1997 Budget have done, and GST will do.

Kya Modi hai toh mumkin hai?

Law on the heels of illegal deepfakes

There are laws to manage deepfakes, but one that augments individual's right to compensation is also needed

Akshava Suresh Aravindini Uma Magesh

ondering why you received a call from a deceased politician endorsing a political candidate or why Virat Kohli was marketing a betting app? Welcome to the world of deepfakes, where voice calls, videos and images duplicating features of dead or living individuals are possible with Generative AI. The proliferation of deepfakes has jolted governments worldwide to address the threat of deepfakes by introducing new legislation or via amendments to existing laws. Given its ability to generate realistic synthetic media, deepfakes affect individuals through breach of privacy, identity theft, fraud, defamation, misinformation, etc. A report notes that 99 per cent of deepfakes target women and more than 98 per cent are pornography.

CURRENT INDIAN LAWS

India's existing legal regime provides various laws to manage deepfakes. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) has provisions such as Sections 509 (acts intended to insult the modesty of a woman), 499 and 500 (criminal defamation) and 153A (spreading hatred on communal lines) to prosecute deepfake crimes.

Similarly, the Information Technology Act punishes publishing or

transmitting sexually explicit or obscene materials involving adults or children vide provisions 66E, 67, 67A, and 67B. Sections 66C and 66D prevent identity theft and impersonating any person using a computer to cheat, respectively. These provisions attract imprisonment and/or a fine.

To address deepfakes, MeitY issued an advisory asking intermediaries to remove deepfake content within 36 hours of reporting. Specifically, Rule 3(2)(b) of the IT Rules mandates intermediaries to take down any graphic, profane or impersonating material (including morphed images) within 24 hours of reporting. Another recent MeitY advisory mandates intermediaries and platforms to label under-trial/unreliable AI models, identify AI-generated or modified content and inform users of the AI model's unreliability before subjecting them to the AI's output.

The upcoming Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) aims to protect personal data stored in digital form. Where an individual's facial images, voice or other personal data are used without consent, the person can approach the Data Protection Board of India, to be established under the DPDPA. Unfortunately, DPDPA excludes the use of publicly available data from its ambit, with no provision for compensating the individual for harm caused by misuse of their data.



WORRISOME. The proliferation of deepfakes is jolting goverments

Therefore, while an individual can lodge a complaint resulting in civil/criminal penalties against perpetrators, provisions for compensation are limited under Indian

CELEBRITIES AND DEEPFAKES

The judiciary is proactively addressing the rising commercialisation of a celebrity's persona (name, image and likeness) via deepfakes, without the celebrity's authorisation. In Anil Kapoor's case, the Delhi High Court recognised the growing concern around deepfakes and their interplay with the right of publicity. In May 2024, the Delhi High Court passed an interim order restraining the chatbot that responds like Jackie Shroff to protect the economic value held by him.

POSITIONS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

The US Congress recently introduced FRAUD Act) that recognise every individual's right to protect their persona. The US is currently facing an influx of deepfakes-related suits. A recent plaint alleged misappropriation of a deceased stand-up comedian's voice. The EU has imposed transparency obligations on AI providers through the AI Act and the GDPR regulates unauthorised usage of personal data.

The application of deepfakes is not problematic in its entirety since it can have varied commercial applications example, in training, marketing, sales, support services, etc. Start-ups with applications to create deepfakes have attracted investments of \$187.7 billion in 2022, which is expected to grow tremendously.

Where deepfakes are employed illegally, the individual must be empowered to rectify the harm. Besides providing civil and criminal penalties for deepfakes, the individual's right to publicity and compensation should be augmented by law, unambiguously. Until then, if you are signing an agreement to "lend" your image or voice to generate synthetic media, ensure you state the dos and don'ts of how your persona is portrayed.

Suresh is Partner, and Magesh is Associate, JSA Advocates & Solicitors

• BELOW THE LINE



Rate cut 'showdown'

In a riveting showdown within the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), two external members are vociferously championing a rate cut, clashing head-on with the internal members who are wary of food inflation risks

The June meeting minutes reveal Ashima Goyal and Jayanth R Varma

pushing for a 25 basis point cut and a shift to a neutral stance, arguing that growth is below potential and a tight policy could stifle future growth. Goyal warned, "Reducing unemployment is crucial for stability," while Varma stressed that prolonged restrictive policy could harm growth in 2025-26. However, Governor Shaktikanta Das and his allies remain firm, citing persistently high food inflation. Das cautioned against "hasty actions" and emphasised the importance of aligning inflation to the 4 per cent

With the next MPC meeting in August, the tension mounts. If one more member supports the cut, Das will cast the deciding vote, a first

since MPC's inception in 2016. The stage is set for a dramatic monetary policy battle.

The helmet saga

The recent train accident in Bengal saw Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw rush to the spot. And to reach the site, the minister took a bike ride. Pictures and videos of the minister riding pillion through villages and the tough terrain went viral. And Vaishnaw was once again the talk of town for his hands-on

However, there was one thing that the minister forgot, wearing a helmet while taking the bike ride. In Bengal, the double helmet rule is mandatory, which means that the pillion also

In Kolkata, if a rider or pillion is found without a helmet, then he/she is required to pay a fine of ₹1,000 to the traffic police.

Yoga Day protests

Day, and celebrating the much-hyped programme of the Centre was a given mandate, one minister — apparently already on the back-foot following 'negative' press due to some recent happenings in his ministry — decided to back out of a pre-scheduled programme, citing 'personal reasons". The Yoga Day event in question was to be held at a multi-purpose hall of Delhi

However, students continued their protests at the venue raising slogans against the education minister and alleged irregularities in the various competitive exams, apparently

forcing the change in plans. Will Kejriwal walk free?

In the latest twist to the high-profile Delhi Excise policy case, the High Court overturned Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's bail order after a successful challenge by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). Granted bail by the trial court, Keiriwal's brief taste of freedom was short-lived. The ED, not one to back down, appealed the decision the very next day, and the High Court swiftly put a pause on the bail order. All eyes are now set on subsequent developments in this case.

Our Bureaus

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The elusive small wild cat

A compelling read on caracal, the mysterious feline

BOOK REVIEW.

Ananda Banerjee

ach day social media churns out thousands of stunning animal and nature photos — wild tigers in every conceivable pose, snow leopards, elephants, rhinos, common and rare birds of all hues. But it is extremely rare to see a photo of a caracal, known locally as Siyah Gosh, from India's wild places. Even at the Rantĥambore National Park, a magnet for both hobby and professional wildlife photographers, where there are 30-40 of these cats.

One of the 15 wildcat species found in the country, the elusive and enigmatic caracal, with characteristic tufted black ears, rarely make an appearance before the camera. But when it does it makes headlines. Like in February, when a caracal was photographed swimming in the river Chambal, by a tourist on a

The cat was crossing over from Morena, Madhya Pradesh to the Rajasthan side. In the recent past, an extensive survey in MP could not find even a trace of the cat and without a credible sighting for over 10 years the caracal was presumed to have gone locally extinct. The image not only renewed hope for the species in MP, but this was also the rarest behaviour to be ever recorded on

DEFINITIVE WORK

Caracal: An Intimate History of Mysterious Cat, by Dharmendra Khandal and Ishan Dhar, is the first and definitive work exploring the caracal's biology and ecology, the fascinating history with humans, and the changes in its distribution over time in the country. Khandal and Dhar's meticulous archival research combined with extensive field work makes this a compelling natural history read.

Khandal has been a key member of the single largest camera trap exercise (2016-2020) for detection of caracals from any habitat in India. In these pages one will also find a treasure trove of art works on the caracal through the ages — like the exquisite Mughal miniatures (Akbar's court paintings) and wall paintings from Kota, Dungarpur and Sirohi to mention a few. And on the lighter side there are some amazing stories of some 'Caracal Diplomacy' as well as from AkbarTutinama – Tales of a Parrot - 52 fables illustrated in 250



Title: Caracal: An Intimate History of Mysterious Cat Authors: Dharmendra Khandal and Ishan Dhar

Publisher: Tiger Watch **Price**: ₹3,850

miniatures where a Siyah Gosh deceives a lion.

According to the authors, the caracal was historically prized both on account of its perceived rarity and for its great utility as an animal of the hunt. "Rarely have we humans forged such a close association with a particular animal and yet known so pitifully little about it. In this book, we have pieced together all the information meticulously gathered, to construct as accurate a portrait as possible of the wild caracal in India..."

The caracal is one of the world's most extensively distributed small wild cats ranging all the way from Southern Africa to Central India. In India, the caracal was extensively used as a coursing animal from at least the 14th century until the mid-20th century. Yet, many naturalists also elaborated on the caracal's "rarity" in the wild in India since at least 1671 and continue to do so today. For a species of cat so widely distributed from Africa to Asia, with India as its easternmost extremity, the caracal is frustratingly rare and it has never been possible to actively search for and locate one in the wild in India; sightings are usually fortuitous. This is quite surprising, considering it is the fourth most widely distributed cat species, found in 30 per cent of all nation-states. For the long-term camera trap exercise, the cat moves at the most unearthly hour

— 2 to 3 am. This book is a heavyweight and an expensive one but a must have for your natural history collection.

The reviewer is an an award-winning writer, environmentalist and artist

Social connections do matter

While it's known that positive relationships keep us happier and healthier, this book tells how to get better at it

BOOK REVIEW.

Ambi Parameswaran

hat is the secret of happiness? Money. Fame. Success. Think again. "In 1938, Harvard researchers embarked on a decades-long study to find out: What makes us happy in life? The researchers gathered health records from 724 participants from all over the world and asked detailed questions about their lives at two-year intervals. Contrary to what you might think, it's not career achievement, money, exercise, or a healthy diet." The most consistent finding that they unearthed through 85 years of study was: Positive relationships keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer [CNBC Makeit, February 10,

How do you develop better relationships? It starts with communication and making a connection. If we know how to communicate better we can build better social connections and better social connections can bring us health and happiness. We may lament that 'I am trying to communicate but he/she is just not listening'.

My former boss and mentor had a great observation 'The onus of the communication is on the communicator'. Think about it. We can go home saying that my boss does not understand me. Or my customer does not appreciate what I am saying. And have a disturbed sleep. Instead, if we spend time trying to figure out where they are coming from and tailor our message accordingly, we may actually manage to make a connection.

Becoming a better communicator is easier said than done. You may say that

I am an introvert. I don't know how to make casual conversation. I am shy. Well help is at hand. In his book *The* Laws of Connection veteran science journalist David Robson has presented 13 laws that can help us all become better at making connections. The book is presented as 13 chapters, each dedicated to one law of Robson.

THE EIGHTH FACTOR

The first chapter presents the famous California State Department of Public Health study done in the early 1960s. It showed that there are seven ingredients for good health: don't smoke, drink in moderation, sleep seven to eight hours, exercise, avoid snacks, maintain a moderate weight, eat breakfast. These are known as 'Almeda 7'.

The research continued and by 1979 an eighth factor was discovered, 'social connection'. People with greater number of ties were around half as likely to die as people who had smaller networks. [In my book All the World is a Stage I have explored the benefits of better networks for personal branding, so I am a convert].

The first law of connection that Robson presents is build better connections by 'Being consistent in your treatment of others'; show interest in others successes, show interest in their opinions, wait for the other person to speak and listen more, talk less.

The next law presents a way of looking at relationships 'create a mutual understanding with the people you meet; ignore superficial similarities and instead focus on your internal worlds, and the peculiar ways that your thoughts and feelings coincide'.

The third law demystifies the 'introvert fear'; others will like you as much as you like them or more, don't be shy, practice your social skills to build

The Laws Connect-

Title: The Laws of Connection: 13 Social Strategies that will Transform

Author: David Robson **Publisher**: Canongate Books **Price**: ₹1,812

MEET THE AUTHOR

David Robson is an award-winning science writer based in London, specialising in medicine, psychology and neuroscience.

your social confidence.

The fourth law starts with an interesting anecdote about Edgar H Hoover, the legendary head of the US FBI, and his comment 'Watch the Borders'. I will not spoil it for you, but the law says 'Check your assumptions; engage in perspective getting' rather than 'perspective taking' to avoid egocentric thinking and misunderstanding'.

The fifth law breaks down the need to engage better 'demonstrate active curiosity, engage in self-disclosure, and avoid novelty penalty, to build mutual understanding and contribute to the merging of our minds'.

The sixth law rounds up the first part of the book which is on building connections; this law says 'praise people generously, but be highly specific in your words of appreciation'.

AND, SIX MORE LAWS

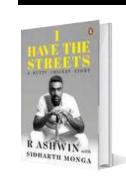
The second section moves from building connections to maintaining connections. In this section we get to read about Robson's six more laws that deal with 'Truth, Lies and Secrets', 'Avoiding Envy and Enjoying Confelicity [rejoicing in the joy of others; I learnt a new word here, it is the opposite of schadenfreude]', 'Asking for help', Healing Bad Feelings' 'Constructive Disagreement' and 'Finding Forgiveness'. The last chapter is the thirteenth law, 'Reach out to people who are missing in your life', and a quick summary of the other 12 laws.

The book, a slim looking paperback, appears easy to read but as this reviewer started on the book, he realised this book is almost like a 'literature review' that is done as a part of a PhD thesis submission. Each chapter is loaded with numerous research articles and the notes mentions more than 400 research papers that the author had extracted his material from.

This is a great read for those of you wanting to figure out how to improve your social connections. But be warned, this is not a light read. You may want to read, and go back a few times to get the full gist of what was encapsulated in each of the 13 laws of connection.

The reviewer is a brand/advertising veteran, a certified CEO Coach and a best selling author of 11 books

NEW READS.



Title: I Have the Streets: A Kutty Cricket Story

Authors: R Ashwin and Sidharth Monga

Publisher: Penguin

How does a champion sportsman view the world? What drives him on and off the field? R Ashwin, one of the more articulate cricketers, tells his story



Title: India @100: **Envisioning Tomorrow's Economic Powerhouse**

Author: Krishnamurthy Subramanian

Publisher: Rupa **Publications India**

The book inspires a collective drive towards a future where India emerges as a dominant economic force.



Title: Sky High: The Untold Story of IndiGo

Author: Tarun Shukla

Publisher: HarperCollins

Based on years of research, the author presents a detailed account of how one dream, two media-shy friends and some great execution created an aviation behemoth.

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 24, 2004

Phone tariffs may fall as TRAI moots cut in ADC Telecom tariffs are likely to fall by 16-25 per cent with the Telecom Regulatory

Authority of India (TRAI) proposing to bring down the Access Deficit Charge (ADC) to between 2.2 per cent and 5.3 per cent of the revenue, instead of the present system of loading the charge on each call made by consumers.

Electrolux Kelvinator mulls delisting

Is Electrolux Kelvinator Ltd (EKL), the Indian arm of Swedish white goods major AB Electrolux, preparing to delist from the Indian bourses? Though the company and its parent have not made an official announcement, the market is abuzz with rumours that the company is likely to delist and that AB Electrolux is likely to make an open offer.

FCNR(B) deposit rates move northwards again

Foreign Currency Non Resident (Banks) deposit rates have started inching up once again. The hike has been to the tune of about 20-25 basis points across maturities. Bankers say that the increase in international benchmark rates (LIBOR or London Inter-bank Offered Rate), which has now moved to around 1.8 per cent from the 1-per cent range for a year, as a key for the rise.

Short take

Tech paving the way for a drought-resilient future

Deepak Sharma

and and water are becoming scarce by the year, and we are witnessing more frequent and severe droughts, desertification, and land degradation. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that 40 per cent of our population is suffering from the ill-effects of water scarcity, and by 2030, a staggering 700 million people could face displacement from drought.

Agriculture, ecosystems, and human life depend on efficient water management; therefore, technology becomes a key driver in this scheme of things. Technology enables us to lessen the impact of drought and lead the world into a more resilient and sustainable

The spread of drought can be countered through early detection with satellite imaging, remote sensing, ground-based sensors, and monitoring systems that provide useful data on indicators such as soil moisture levels, precipitation patterns, and water reservoir capacities. This makes it possible to create extensive drought early warning systems (DEWS) that can predict such conditions months ahead of their actual onset.

A further cutting-edge approach that is gaining popularity is the application of wastewater and water (WWW) technologies. IoT sensors, artificial intelligence and data analytics enable more responsive, efficient, and networked water systems and services for end-to-end management of the entire water cycle.

Desalination and water recycling help in boosting the availability of water in arid and coastal areas. Advancements in desalination technology, such as energy-efficient reverse osmosis systems and sophisticated wastewater treatment and purification systems help convert seawater and wastewater into potable water. These processes help diversify water sources thereby improving drought resilience.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

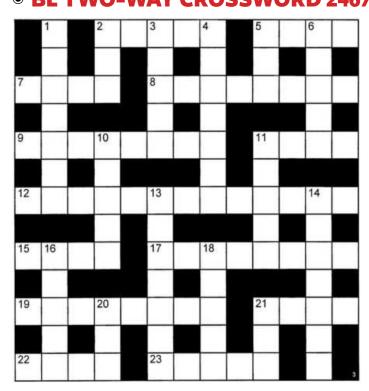
Effective drought resilience necessitates not only technology but also a conducive policy environment and active community engagement. To improve water security outcomes in rural and urban India, two flagship projects have been introduced: the Jal Jeevan Mission and AMRUT 2.0.

In addition to this, the government should encourage faster technological adoption at scale and create a fund for research and development while offering financial incentives in this direction.

To bring about drought resilience, a multimodal strategy should be formulated that combines technology, legislation, and proactive community involvement. Innovative WWW solutions are assuming greater importance as India works towards recovering 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. The reclamation of this land will go a long way in recharging water bodies, turning arid land lush green and supporting the growth of flora and fauna.

The writer is Zone President - Greater India and MD & CEO, Schneider Electric India

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2467



EASY

ACROSS 2. Top degree (5)

5. Water-raising

device (4) 7. Jagged rock (4)

8. An animal (8) 9. Lover's partner (8)

11. Masculine (4) 12. Resolution (13)

15. A grating (4) 17. Say who it is (8)

19. Awful (8) 21. Not long to wait (4) 22. Second-hand (4) 23. Ridiculed, made fun of (5)

DOWN

1. Cochineal red (7) 2. Obscurity (3)

3. Pleated frilling (5) 4. Crime against the state (7)

5. To place (3)

6. Wall picture (5) 10. Use the feet (5)

11. Choral composition (5) 13. Sack for correspondence (7)

14. Pass on something unwanted

(3-4)16. Cotton, film holders (5) 18. None excluded (5)

20. Blood-coloured (3) 21. Unhappy (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS 2. Leading position to kick off with (5)

5. Dancing shoe that found room in Bath (4) 7. Rough rock, start of calypso and other type of music (4)

8. An animal that would make a fuss

about our decapitation (8)

9. Woman loved a schoolteacher, perhaps (8)

11. Of his gender, a novice driver is taken in by me (4) 12. Resolution may put one off: I'm going

back to the country (13) 15. Pattern of crossed bars, note, to get shot of (4)

17. Say what it is, but deny it if changes are made (8)

19. In dog without a tail, to be half-blue is very bad (8)

21. Thus it is showing there's little time to wait (4)

23. Mast may thus be held in position to be made fun of (5)

22. At one time did, not to be new (4)

1. Ownership of vehicle claimed to be red (7)

2. With poor visibility starts fading out gradually (3) 3. Dressmaking feature he provides after dog

has turned up (5)

4. Crime and its cause after the end of Lent (7)

5. Place in gym, universally enheartened (3) 6. The French female spirit turns up, pictured on the wall (5)

10. Part of the step that begins study (5)

11. Church work for car test yet unbegun (5)

13. No feminine-sounding number of letters received (7) 14. Land the cargo and pass the buck (3-4)

16. Is staggering, that they should be danced! (5) 18. A quarter signal light that excludes none (5)

20. Left with a shade of embarrassment (3)

21. Social and Democratic leaders look down-in-the-mouth (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2466

ACROSS 1. Measurements 8. Interior 9. Acme 11. Tiled 12. Enacted 13. Inch 15. Mesh 19. Umbrage 20. Alibi 22. Idly 23. Outright 24. Nerve-centres DOWN 2. Extol 3. Stride 4. Rioter 5. Necktie 6. Spendthrifts 7. Distribution 10. Van 14. Cobbler 16. Bar 17. Refuse 18. Parrot 21. Ingle

NEW DELHI | MONDAY, 24 JUNE 2024

Focus on performance

New Lok Sabha must follow the basics

he first session of the 18th Lok Sabha, which begins today, presents a fresh opportunity to address the evident weaknesses in the functioning of the Indian Parliament. The new Lok Sabha is considerably different from the previous two, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had a majority of its own. Although the BJP-led Union government is comfortably placed at the moment, it depends on support from allies in the National Democratic Alliance for survival and pushing its legislative agenda. Further, the Opposition has a significantly bigger number this time. If it manages to hold on to the pre-poll alliance in Parliament, it will be in a position to question government policies more forcefully, which will eventually lead to better outcomes as intended in a parliamentary democracy. After 10 years, the House will also have a formal leader of the Opposition.

To define expectations, it will be useful to first highlight how Parliament has been functioning in recent years. According to the data compiled by PRS Legislative Research, the 17th Lok Sabha functioned for 88 per cent of its scheduled time. However, the annual average days of sitting declined significantly. On average, the Lok Sabha sat for 55 days per year, compared to 66 days in the 16th Lok Sabha. For comparison, the annual average number of sitting days for the first Lok Sabha was 135. The number of sitting days was partly affected by the pandemic, and 11 out of 15 sessions were adjourned early. The reduced number of working days had an inevitable impact on the business of the House. About 35 per cent of the Bills were passed with less than an hour of discussion. Notably, during the 17 Lok Sabha's term, members from both Houses were suspended on 206 instances. In the winter session of 2023, 146 members were suspended on account of misconduct.

Given the recent performance, it is reasonable to expect the 18th Lok Sabha to reverse the current trend. While the functioning of the House is the responsibility of the Treasury Benches, the Opposition will also be expected to play a constructive role. In the overall scheme of things, the Treasury side will need to improve on at least two counts. First, the number of days the Lok Sabha or both Houses sit in a year needs to be increased. This will allow members to raise relevant issues and draw the government's attention. Second, Bills should not be passed without a reasonable period of discussion. In the parliamentary system. the government always commands the majority, but that should not mean Bills are passed without discussion. While the government is always likely to have its way, it should allow the Opposition to have its say on all issues.

Further, in the 17th Lok Sabha, fewer than 20 per cent of the Bills were referred to committees, compared to 71 per cent in the 15th Lok Sabha. Parliamentary committees are an excellent mechanism to evaluate Bills and iron out differences among stakeholders. This mechanism must be used more effectively. In fact, it will benefit the government to have a wider discussion, particularly on sensitive issues. Discussion and consensus building help increase the political acceptability of an idea. Thus, in sum, it is to be hoped that the new Speaker of the House, the government, and the Opposition will work in a way that will minimise disruption and adjournment.

Tapping the wind

Govt support will help wind-energy projects

t is well recognised that harnessing offshore wind energy can accelerate India's energy transition. Introducing offshore wind in the renewableenergy mix can support power management during peak load hours in both monsoon and non-monsoon months. In this context, the Union Cabinet's recent decision to provide viability-gap funding (VGF) for implementing offshore wind-energy projects must be welcomed. The government outlay for this purpose is fixed at ₹7,453 crore, including ₹6,853 crore for installing and commissioning 1 gigawatt (Gw) of offshore wind-energy projects, and a grant of ₹600 crore for the upgrade of two ports to meet associated logistics requirements. The government plans to deploy offshore wind projects off the coasts of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. Both these states are considered wind-energy hotspots. Gujarat, for instance, experiences high offshore wind speeds between May and August. The capacity utilisation factor of offshore wind is estimated to go beyond 50 per cent during these months, increasing to nearly 70 per cent in July.

The push to increase wind-energy capacity aligns with India's commitment to combat climate change and reduce global warming, aiming to achieve 500 Gw of renewable-energy capacity by 2030, with wind energy contributing about 140 Gw. The country is endowed with a 7,600-km coastline and significant offshore wind-energy potential, and yet, there is not a single operational offshore wind farm currently. An assessment made by the National Institute of Wind Energy has identified a potential of about 70 Gw coming from offshore wind projects, spread across 16 offshore zones along the Tamil Nadu and Gujarat coasts. The government aims to tap into 37 Gw of this by 2030. Accordingly, the Union government floated the first ever tender last year to allocate seabed sites along the coast of Tamil Nadu for developing offshore wind farms.

Although the technology is commercially advanced, the cost of generation is high compared to other renewable-energy options. In this respect, introducing viability-gap funding is expected to address some of the cost concerns. It is hoped that support from the government will render the projects viable. The government will also support private firms in establishing the projects by investing in power evacuation infrastructure and offshore substations through Power Grid Corporation of India. While the cost of offshore turbines is higher because of stronger structures and foundations needed in marine environments, desirable returns can be achieved on account of higher efficiencies of these turbines after the development of the ecosystem.

The successful launch of the 1 Gw capacity offshore wind projects is expected to produce renewable electricity of about 3.72 billion units annually, resulting in an annual reduction of 2.98 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emission. Compared with onshore wind and solar photovoltaic energy, offshore wind technology can generate a relatively high amount of energy per unit of installed capacity. It also helps address the emerging land constraints for putting up large-scale renewable-energy projects. However, to increase the scale significantly, issues like the high cost of technology, lack of domestic supply chains and turbine models suited to local wind conditions, and complexities in securing approvals and clearances should be addressed. India will need to build on the learning of the initial projects.

When trade barriers are justified

In one rare situation, there is a case for some protectionism against imports from China ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



AJAY SHAH & ILA PATNAIK

full understanding of the adverse consequences of autarky (of government interference in cross-border activities of the people) is the hallmark of professional competence in economics. But the world is in an unprecedented situation today: The problems of Chinese macroeconomic policy are imposing an adverse impact worldwide. We believe there is merit in using Indian state power to create trade barriers against Chinese exports into India. These actions should be part of a full policy package that fosters Indian economic dynamism.

Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Under his watch, the "China model" has fully blossomed. This involves government control of the country, concentration of power in Xi Jinping, economic nationalism, a prickly hostility towards the West, an ever present danger of expropriation for private persons, a lack of personal safety for the elite, etc. At its best, such authoritarian regimes only generate short spurts of growth. Hence, over the 11 years of Xi Jinping's rule, the Chinese economy has fared poorly.

The once buoyant process of private investment has collapsed. The long-standing irrational exuberance around real estate as an asset class has turned into sustained declines in real estate prices with much vacant property. Foreign companies, investors, and individuals have been reducing their activities in China. High debt levels threaten systemic stability.

Despite internal economic weakness, there has been an arrogant approach in foreign policy. The military frictions on the border with Bhutan and India are an example of the nationalism that is in play. On the most important foreign policy question of the world today, China has tilted in favour of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. They have preserved the possibility of invading Taiwan.

From 2018 onwards, these developments kicked off fundamental changes to the nature of globalisation, which is termed "The Third Globalisation". In the second globalisation (1982-2018), countries in the periphery like China and India were given unconditional access to the core. In the third globalisation, the core has drawn a line: The privilege of economic integration for a country is limited when it has a hostile approach

on foreign policy or military matters. The wagons have circled around the core: The advanced economies and their allies do full globalisation with each other. But for countries which have military or foreign policy hostility, access to the core is curtailed. From 2018 onwards, a large number of restrictions have come up, in the advanced economies, against crossborder activities involving China. The four most important industries where these problems are unfolding are elec-

tric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, and microchips. The Chinese economy is faring poorly through a combination of poor domestic policy coupled with the actions of the advanced economies. At heart, there is not enough domestic demand. Many Chinese firms face a choice between cutting prices and closing down. Failure on economic performance has created an economic and political crisis for the regime. The government would like nothing more than to get firms to sell more, by exporting more, to stave off firm closure and ideally increase employment. It is hard for us in India But in China, there is deflation in the aggregate CPI (consumer price index) basket. Prices of the Chinese export basket expressed in dollars have gone down and are expected to go down further.

In time, these problems will get sorted out through economic and political change within China. In the meantime, this exceptional flood of cheap exports from a systemically important country comes with the danger of damaging the organisational capabilities of firms or entire industries in importing countries. This has led to exceptional responses. The advanced economies now have restrictions against Chinese imports that are mind-boggling. On June 12, the European Commission set tariffs against Chinese electric vehicles at 48 per cent, and the tariffs in the US will be 100 per cent. This is completely unlike many decades of experience, where developed-market tariffs have always been in single digits.

Given the difficulties faced in exporting to advanced economies, Chinese firms have naturally emphasised exporting to the rest of the world. The shares of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Latin America, and Africa in China's exports were 12.9 per cent, 5.8 per cent, and 4.2 per cent, respectively, in 2018; they are now at 15.7 per cent, 7.8 per cent, and 5.5 per cent, respectively.

This is the global context within which we should see the problem of surging Chinese imports into India. From 2018 to 2023, the overall growth of Chinese exports (measured in dollars) was 36 per cent. Growth in Chinese exports to India in this period was 53 per cent. We believe it is now wise for the Indian state to establish non-tariff barriers against Chinese exports and overseas production sites of Chinese firms. We recognise that this constitutes protectionism, and violates the tenets of sound development strategy. But in this special moment, with regard to one trading partner, we believe it is appropriate.

Alongside this, an array of actions is required to uphold the gains from international integration and improve the working of Indian firms. There are a large number of inverted duty structures which need to be removed. Of great importance is the long-pending goods and services tax reforms, which should go to a lower number of rates (ideally one), lower rates, and the integration of a broader base, particularly industries such as energy and railways. New non-tariff barriers against Chinese imports into India should be accompanied with numerous elements of liberalisation of engagement with all other countries. Through this, India should get the full gains from globalisation in all aspects (goods, services, capital, labour) with deep engagement with every country in the world but one.

It will take great professional capabilities in economic policy to surgically engage in protectionism with one trade partner only, and to accompany this with an array of complementary moves which reverse the conventional Indian protectionism against the rest of the world. The puzzle of 2024 for policymakers lies in establishing such a strategy.

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to comprehend the idea of inflation turning negative. Growing & sustaining a liquid asset

's India an inherently water-stressed country? This question comes up every summer, when many parts of the country face an acute scarcity of water. A categorical answer may be difficult because the issue has several dimensions, which are amenable to divergent interpretations. But water woes, surely, are not insurmountable.

India hosts the world's 18 per cent human and 20 per cent livestock population, with only 4 per cent

of its water resources. This can be seen as a sign of under-supply of this critical natural resource. Besides, per capita water availability, which over 3,000 cubic metres in the 1950s, has dwindled to just around 1,486 cubic metres, and is projected to decline further to a mere 1,367 cubic metres by 2031. This can be viewed as another indication of growing scarcity of water, given that 1,700 cubic metres is deemed to be the minimum requirement per person. If availability dips to below 1,000 cubic metres, which cannot be ruled out, it would be truly distressful. Many areas of the

country are, in fact, already facing such an alarming situation, or are heading towards it.

But there is another side to it, which is not so disquieting. Water is a renewable resource and nature has been rather benevolent in this respect. India, on the whole, receives annually around 118 cm, or around 4,000 billion cubic metres (BCM), of water by way of rain and snowfall. This is far higher than the global average of 100 cm. However, the bulk of this water comes in the four-month monsoon season (June to September) and runs down wastefully to the seas, causing floods and eroding precious soil in its wake. Only a fraction of this water gets conserved in surface water bodies, like reservoirs, ponds, and tanks, or percolates down to the underground water aguifers, for gainful use. Unfortunately, the country has failed to create sufficient water-holding capacity to make full use of this natural bonanza.

Going by the Central Water Commission (CWC) estimates, India's gross (read total) water storage capacity is only around 355 BCM. Of this, the utilis-

able capacity (live storage) is just about 275 BCM. This is too little compared to the estimated requirement of over 843 BCM. Even on full capacity utilisation, the stored water is sufficient to meet the needs of only around 170 days. Many other countries have created much larger capacities to ensure water security. Egypt, a low-rainfall country, for instance, has a live water storage capacity of 700 days. The US can store enough water to last for two years. If India can capture an adequate amount of rainwater, and

conserve it appropriately, it can meet most of its demand for water in both urban and rural areas, including that for crop irrigation.

The key to ward off water problems, therefore, lies in collecting, preserving, and judiciously managing rainwater. The mantra for doing so is: "Catch the rain when it falls, and where it falls." Policy planners had, in fact, not been unaware if this basic necessity. They had, very rightly, made rainwater harvesting an integral part of soil- and water-conservation programmes a long while ago. Rainwater harvesting was made mandatory for all new buildings with a roof area of more than 100 square metres way back in 2001. Experts feel up to 70 per cent of the water requirements of most households can be met through rainwater. Due emphasis had, in fact, been laid on rainwater collection in the National Water Policy, 2012, as well. Most programmes launched for soil and water conservation, irrigation expansion, and watershed development, involve in situ, as also ex situ, preserving rainwater. Funds are also regularly allocated for this purpose under the government's flagship programme, called Jal Shakti Abhiyan. Besides, rainwater harvesting has been a major component of the works carried out under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

However, the net gains from all these well-intentioned measures have been below par due to the poor planning and inapt implementation. The scheme under the MGNREGA is, in any case, a demand-driven and employment-oriented one, where the availability of labour varies from time to time, ruling out executing the proposed works on a regular basis, or in accordance with any pre-set schedule. Besides, the multiplicity of authorities governing various aspects of rainwater management, such as its capturing, storage, and distribution, and maintaining water-harvesting infrastructure, also mars the potential benefits from the effort and investment that goes into them.

Rainwater conservation needs planning on a geographically wider scale, keeping in view the entire watersheds, which can span administrative blocks, districts, or states. This is difficult to do under the prevailing structure of civic governance. What is needed is to make rainwater harvesting and water conservation a mass movement, and expand the overall water storage capacity. That would help consolidate water security and ensure year-round water availability.

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Was global trade a mistake?



MATTHEW ZEITLIN

n a cold November morning in 1999, Harold Linde, a member of the Rainforest Action Network, was trying to hang an enormous sign from a construction crane hundreds of feet in the air over downtown Seattle. After some spiritual assistance from "a circle of pagan witches on the ground' who were "sending prayers up," Linde and his friends succeeded in unfurling a 100-pound banner. It showed two arrows pointing in opposite directions, one labelled "Democracy" and the other "WTO".

This stunt, which kicked off the Battle of Seattle, a protest of the third ministerial $meeting\,of\,the\,World\,Trade\,Organisation$ (WTO), captures the combination of high idealism, drama, detailed organisation, radicalism and public relations savvy that defined a movement against the rising

 $tide\, of globalisation\, in\, the\, decades$ after the Cold War.

DW Gibson's comprehensive oral history One Week to Change the World gives a panoramic view of the multiday festival of dissent, from its authorised marches and semi-legal "direct actions" to its extremely illegal vandalism. There was even a concert.

The WTO's ministerial meetings were

that was fast becoming associated with a

As Gibson outlines, the WTO protests

in Seattle became a natural meeting point

for a wide range of leftist groups who felt

new digital economy that promised to

meant to advance the project of knitting together the newly liberalised world with a "harmonisation" of common rules internationally agreed upon food safety standards, for instance—to lower tradebarriers. Ambassadors and NGO officials from

accelerate globalisation.

around the world had assembled in a city

ONE WEEK TO **CHANGE THE** WORLD: An Oral History of the 1999 WTO Protests Author: DW **Publisher:** Simon & Schuster Pages: 354

Price: \$19.99

abandoned by the neoliberal turn

cemented by the Democratic president in

the White House. American union leaders

worried that cheap overseas labour would

concerned that trade liberalisation would

put downward pressure on blue-collar

wages and many green activists were

domestic environmental protections.

be used as a battering ram against

After Seattle, despite further meetings (with much more thought-out security) the WTO was not able to reach another major global trade agreement - and has not to this day. Still, it did provide a framework with its existing rules, and tradeliberalisation advanced in the years that followed, thanks

to China's incorporation into the global economic system. The country joined the WTO in 2001 and quickly became the workshop of the world. China's growing importance within the global economy also set the stage for the great blow to global trade that would arrive two decades later thanks to coronavirus pandemic.

FARM VIEW

Peter S Goodman's How the World Ran Out of Everything is an impassioned account of globalisation's rise and stall. Goodman, a long-time economics correspondent for The New York Times and The Washington Post, offers an expansive view of the modern supply chain, from the Port of Long Beach and long-haul truck routes to cattle ranchers in Montana and the travails of a Mississippi-based toy company trying to get a shipment from China in time for the holiday season.

At every point in the chain during the pandemic, workers faced deteriorating conditions and financial instability. Toilet paper, meat and other consumer goods shot up in price and declined in availability as container ships idled in ports. Goodman

argues that the crisis exposed the brittleness of a system that relied, for years, on "just in time" manufacturing, which shrank inventories. This system "worked" in terms of lower prices for consumers and higher market share for these giants. When the pandemic

combination of increased demand and fewer workers, while some middlemen, like the global shippers and meatpackers, were able to profit. Manufacturers also strained under the odd strength of the Covid-era economy. Americans unable to spend on restaurants and trips took to Amazon

struck, manufacturers with low

inventory couldn't deal with the

and began to vacuum up more stuff made cheap by international trade – televisions, basketball hoops, pastry blenders. "The result of this surge was chaos," Goodman

HOW THE WORLD **RAN OUT OF EVERYTHING:** Inside the Global Supply Chain Author: Peter S **Publisher:** Mariner **Pages: 406**

Price: \$30

writes. Lights flickered from power outages "as Chinese plants deployed every available production line". Goodman is not naïve enough to

think that globalisation can or should be reversed, or that companies

seeing political or business risk in China means a renaissance of American manufacturing.

While the global supply chain is unlikely to be dismantled, the ideology of globalisation is under attack practically and politically. "The US is moving towards a kind of nationalistic mercantilism," Chomsky tells Gibson. Joe Biden and Donald Trump are more similar to each other on trade policy than they are to predecessors in their own parties. Both presidents have shown more interest in using tariffs than in working out trade disputes through the WTO.

The late-20th-century project of integrating China into the global economy, in the hope that economic development would come hand in hand with political liberalism, feels at best misguided. Offshoring resulted in a predictable loss of US jobs, Goodman writes, and programmes designed to help Americans negatively affected by global trade were left underfunded.

What remains to be seen is whether the new policy responses can win over not just American activists and intellectuals, but also consumers who tend to prefer lower costs over all else and who far outnumber any particular group of truckers, cattle ranchers or union workers squeezed by the economic pressures of a long, lean supply chain. The WTO may have lost, but democracy will also have its say.

The reviewer is an economics and climate correspondent for Heatmap News ©2024 The New York Times News Service



{ OUR TAKE }

Friends in the neighbourhood

Greater integration with region will help India counter the Chinese overtures in South Asia

he first two major bilateral engagements of the new government in New Delhi — hosting Bangladesh Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina for the first incoming bilateral visit and sending external affairs minister S Jaishankar to Sri Lanka — were a signal that the Neighbourhood First policy remains a priority for India at a time when contestation with China across the region is on the rise. Both engagements were also meant to signal a theme of continuity following the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government.

Bangladesh remains India's most significant partner in the neighbourhood, and a raft of initiatives to bolster physical, energy, and financial connectivity have laid the foundation for closer integration of the economies of the two countries. Hasina's visit led to further steps in this direction, including the launch of new rail and bus services and an e-visa facility for Bangladeshi nationals coming to India for medical treatment. However, the most important development was India's decision to formally signal its interest in the \$1-billion project to restore and develop the Teesta basin in Bangladesh. China has had its eye on this mammoth project for years, and the Indian initiative will allow Hasina to deflect the pressure she is likely to face from Beijing when she visits China in the near future. In Sri Lanka, Jaishankar and President Ranil Wickremesinghe jointly launched a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) that was established for the Sri Lankan Navy in Colombo with an Indian grant. This will strengthen maritime security cooperation between the two sides months after Sri Lanka acknowledged the concerns of India and the US and blocked visits by Chinese surveillance vessels through a year-long moratorium on port calls by foreign research ships.

The relationship between India and China remains fraught, and Beijing has signalled through several steps that it is in no hurry to resolve the military standoff on the Line of Actual Control, which is into its fifth year. China's aggressive behaviour across the region, especially in the context of several border disputes, makes it imperative for India to speed up efforts to build closer relations within its neighbourhood and beyond, especially through steps that enhance maritime security cooperation and foster greater integration with regional economies. Such measures, as the leaders of the Quad nations have pointed out more than once, will increase the range of options available to democratic countries and greatly reduce the possibility of coercion being used as a tool of statecraft.

Illicit liquor economy points to social crisis

the tragedy of over 50 people dying after consuming illicit liquor in Kallakurichi in Tamil Nadu has turned the spotlight on alcohol consumption in the state. Excise revenue is a major contributor to state finances, and the government controls wholesale and retail vending of alcohol through state-run (TASMAC) utilities. This dependence on alcohol to fund state expenses has been criticised by civil society members and the Opposition in light of the deaths.

The easy solution prescribed by many to curtail illicit liquor deaths is prohibition. But does it really work? Prohibition ends up criminalising the production and distribution of liquor, and invariably facilitates a black economy that enables rent-seeking by criminals and their political patrons. Tamil Nadu has experimented with prohibition from 1937 onwards, only to realise that the moral claim that it is a pro-poor measure is false. It has found, instead, that it is the poor who suffer the most under prohibition.

In Kallakurichi, the bulk of producers and consumers were from the lowest strata of the society. Illicit brewing flourished because it contributed to the political economy. The consumers were mostly wage labourers, including conservancy workers with no surplus income or avenue for leisure, and could not afford the Indian-made foreign liquor (IMFL) sold in TASMAC shops. Better regulation through policing may help to stop the production and sale of illicit brew. However, the problem needs to be understood as a social crisis, and measures ranging from de-addiction and temperance interventions to the availability of cheaper but safe local brews need to be discussed. Moral outrage and an over-regulating State are unlikely to resolve this problem.

Sowing the seeds of farm-growth revival

Centre should focus on expanding land under irrigation, pushing greater adoption of horticulture by farmers, and raising agri-R&D spending in the country

he provisional estimate of the real gross value added for the agriculture sector in FY24 is just 1.4%. This has been attributed to the erratic monsoon last year, on account of the El Nino effect.

Against this backdrop, the

appointment of Shivraj Singh Chauhan as the new minister for agriculture has been widely welcomed. The reason is that the agriculture Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Madhya Pradesh (MP), during his tenure as chief minister from 2005-06 to 2022-23, witnessed an average annual growth rate of 7% against the all-India showing of 3.8%. Since agriculture is mainly a state subject, the new agriculture minister will have to take the states along if much-needed reforms in the sector are to materialise. The agriculture sector needs to grow consistently at an annual 4%.

The ministry he presides over does not include the department of animal husbandry and dairying and department of fisheries. So, the fastest growing and most promising sectors of the farm economy are not in his domain. However, he has the experience to influence the running of these two departments, too.

As per the Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019, agri-households earned only 37% of their income from cultivation, while 15% came from livestock activities and 40% from wages and salaries. Thus, the real challenge before Chauhan will be increasing income from cultivation. Even though the monsoon has been deficient by 18% till June 20, the good

news for him is that the monsoon this year is predicted to be normal. So, his first year in office may bring good tidings. There are three areas where his experience in MP may prove useful.

Siraj

Hussain

Shweta

Saini

There are numerous recommendations made by expert committees, including the Ashok Dalwai Committee, on doubling farmer income. Here are three important areas that Chauhan can focus on.

The first is to bring more area under irrigation. In 2015-16, the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchavee

Yojana (PMKSY) to expand the cultivable area under assured irrigation and use water more efficiently by following sustainable water conservation practices, among other goals. By

December 2023, out of the 99 priority projects identified under PMKSY-Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme in 2016, only 54 projects had been completed. Another 21 projects recorded progress of more than 90%, while 13 others recorded 80-90% progress. Chauhan has direct experience in pushing irrigation projects in his home state. It would be a significant contribution to Indian agriculture if he could work with the states and complete the unfinished projects. An independent evaluation of all 99 projects may also help in ascer-

taining whether the command area in the completed projects has actually received water. This is necessary as the benefits to agriculture come only when irrigation water reaches the farms. For this, the completion of canal works is critical. Micro-irrigation has remained confined to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. Chauhan must enhance its use in central and north Indian states as well. This would not only help in the prudent management of precious water resources that can result in productivity gains.

For Punjab and Haryana, diversification from paddy to other less water-consuming crops has been under discussion for decades. If the new agriculture minister can convince the finance minister to support Punjab and Haryana's crop diversifi-



The new agriculture minister must convince the finance minister to support states' crop diversification plans (HT PHC

cation incentive plans so that the area under non-basmati paddy is strategically reduced, it would be a landmark contribution to the country's agriculture sector. Business as usual in Punjab and Haryana may be highly detrimental to the future of India's food security.

The second area of importance is horticulture. Since the launch of the National Horticulture Mission (NHM) in 2005, India's horticulture production has gone up from 170.8 million tonnes (mt) to 352.23 mt. Madhya Pradesh has been a beneficiary of and contributor to the horticulture revolution in India. To illustrate, in 2004-05, it produced 0.535 mt of onion which rose to 5.1 mt by 2022-23. The state is the second-largest producer of onion after Maharashtra. Due to a crash in prices, MP experimented with a price deficiency payment scheme in 2018, which didn't prove successful. The biggest challenge in horticulture is the high fluctuation in prices and supplychain losses. If these can be addressed the consumption of fruits and vegetables can go up, and India's exports in these agri-commodities can be more reliable. Farmers, too, can earn more

than they do from cereals. The need for a robust cold chain network for perishables is well understood. However, private investment in creating pre-cooling facilities is not adequate. This must be sufficiently incentivised.

The third area that Chauhan must make a priority is the threat from the climate crisis, which can lead to lower vields in several crops. To address this challenge, investment in research and development (R&D) to generate climate-resistant varieties must be drastically raised, and farmers must be made aware of the need to shift to these varieties. India spends just about 0.6% of agri-GDP on research. Investment in agri R&D under the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) system boosted the country's capacity in rice, sugar, grapes, pomegranates and onion. If self-reliance and food security are to be achieved for 1.6 billion Indians, higher investment in R&D, both by the government and the private sector, is a must.

> Siraj Hussain is a former Union agriculture secretary, and Shweta Saini is an economist. The views expressed are personal

A behaviour code to run a House without discord

Achary

he new Parliament, meeting today, will see a coalition government headed by the same team that wielded untrammelled powers during the past two terms because of having a formidable majority in the Lok Sabha. That situation has changed. A political party that does not have a majority of its own will face serious challenges from the Opposition and, in exceptional situations, from its own allies. At times, there may be a snap vote in the House, which can take the treasury benches by surprise.

The Opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) who have been returned may harbour unpleasant memories: Mass suspensions, privilege cases, expulsions, and the denial of opportunities were common threads in the last House. With a formidable number on their side, the Opposition in the 18th Lok Sabha is likely to pose a major challenge to the

sanials likely to pose a major chanen government and, in particular, the Speaker. The government will have to change the way it deals with the Opposition. With over 234 members arrayed against the treasury benches, disciplinary methods followed in the past can be counterproductive. The Speaker will have an unenviable task.

Parliament works with greater efficiency when there is consensus on major issues. In competitive politics, it is very difficult to always build a consensus. A formidable majority often breeds arrogance and an insatiable desire to rub the adversaries up the wrong way. The parliamentary system will shrink in such an environment, like plants in extreme summer.

The millions who voted have conveyed an unmistakable message to the political class that crossing some lines has its perils. Winston Churchill famously said, "At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man walking into a little booth with a little pencil making a little cross on a little bit of paper – no amount of rhetoric or voluminous discussion can, possibly, diminish the overwhelming importance of the point". The overwhelming importance that Churchill referred to for the decision of those little men should not be lost on the leaders.

The question on everyone's mind today is how the new Lok Sabha will be run. This House is almost evenly divided between the treasury benches and the Opposition. People who have enjoyed the comfort of a stable, huge majority may find this situation uncomfortable. But they will benefit if they look at the past.

The Indian Parliament owes much to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister (PM), who nurtured the institution with care and passion. He would be present in the House during question hour on all days and inter-



Voters have made it clear to the political class that some lines must not be crossed

vene in debates whenever necessary, thereby creating a very healthy tradition. He sometimes supplemented the replies given by the ministers when he felt the House should be given more information and sometimes corrected the ministers when he felt the correct angle of the issue was not being highlighted by them. He attended Parliament when important issues were discussed and, in fact, he requested the Speaker to give more time to the Opposition because he believed his party members only praised him and it was the Opposition that told him what was happening on the ground.

An interesting incident involving the first Speaker of the Lok Sabha, GV Mavalankar, is part of the institutional memory of the Lok Sabha and is discussed as a measure of the highest esteem in which Nehru held the office of the Speaker. Once, Mavalankar sent Nehru a slip of

paper saying he would like to meet Nehru in his office. Instead, Nehru rushed to the Speaker's chamber and told him that the Speaker, being the highest authority in Parliament, should never visit the PM. Nehru would meet the Speaker in his chamber whenever the latter sought his presence. This was his way of establishing good parliamentary traditions.

The smooth running of Parliament, at any time, is more likely if the House elects a wise Speaker and the government appoints a seasoned parliamentary affairs minister. While the Speaker has to ensure the timely completion of government business in the House, he is also supposed to protect the interests of the Opposition. A wise Speaker will conduct the House to the satisfaction of both sides of the House. The members of the Opposition benches should be able to leave the House feeling that the Speaker was fair to them.

The parliamentary affairs minister is the bridge between the government and the Opposition. In this context, old timers may remember K Raghuramaiah, the parliamentary affairs minister under PM Indira Gandhi (1969-76). Although she had a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, Raghuramaiah would always be seen in the Opposition benches coaxing and cajoling the MPs to gain their support for running the House smoothly. Stalwarts such as AK Gopalan, Atal Behari Vaj payee, Hiren Mukerjee, Shyamnandan Mishra, Indrajit Gupta, Piloo Modi, Madhu Dandavate, and Madhu Limaye adorned the Opposition benches in those days. These great and often difficult men used to be brought around

by a tactful Raghuramaiah
Dialogue between the government and the
Opposition is essential for the smooth running
of the House. Such dialogue smoothens the
wrinkles in the relationship between the two
sides. To listen to others and to try and convince them is the surest way to promote the
democratic culture. Parliament is the most
powerful platform where this exercise is conducted. From the rough and tumble of India's
electoral politics, the people's representatives
need to move into the realm of mutual respect.

Vajpayee, an outstanding parliamentarian for all times, used to say "vichaaron ka sangharsh" (clash of ideas) is the essence of parliamentary democracy. All members of the House should keep this thought as the 18th Lok Sabha begins work.

PDT Achary is a former secretary general, Lok Sabha. The views expressed are personal

In the West Bank an economic collapse is looming & violence intensifying. Blatant disregard for @CIJ_ICJ rulings & UNSCR 2735 continues (After Saturday's attack on Gaza by Israel)

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Ganga needs a joint effort to regain its old strength

few days ago, I was at the Ganga Dussehra. As I stood there, chanting lines from Pandit Jagannath Shastri's Ganga Lahri, an incident returned to memory. I was on board an Assam-bound Rajdhani Express crossing the bridge connecting Garhmukteshwar and Gajraula. When the coach I was in reached the middle of the bridge, I offered prayers to Ma Ganga.

When I was done with the prayers, my co-passengers, a White couple, wanted to know what I was doing. I told them the river was the Ganga and that I had been offering my prayers to it. The man seemed taken aback. "Ganges, the great Ganges," he asked in amazement, while his companion made a statement that I will not repeat here for it pained me and may hurt the religious sentiments of others, too.

For ages, the Ganga for us has been a source of life, and salvation. When I see a river anywhere in the world, it reminds me of the rivers that run through Prayagraj, Kashi, and Mirzapur, where I spent my childhood. I see the Ganga as a metaphor of the purity of childhood.

However, the river is no longer considered pure and pious in scientific terms.

According to studies on pollution in the Ganga conducted by BD Joshi, a professor at the Indian Academy of Environment Science in Haridwar, the river's current Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD) level is 7 mg/l, which is extremely unhealthy. Also, solid waste content in the river when it reaches the foothills, was found to be 1,460 mg/l, which exceeds the threshold. The rise in solid waste has reduced the Ganga's transparency to 5%. Another study found that plastic trash in the river rose 25% between May and June 2024. From Rishikesh to Haridwar, fish numbers have dropped to 80%, and the number of species fell dramatically from 89 to 66. Crocodile populations have

People typically blame the growing number of tourists and pilgrims for the Ganga's woes, but there are other causes for this, too. These should be thoroughly debated in Parliament so that the government can develop an action plan.

plan.
At locations such as Kaushambi, just before
Prayagraj, people can now cross the Ganga on

foot. This is happening even after the Yamuna, with all its waters, has been subsumed into the Ganga. Only 7,000 cusecs of water from the Ganga and the Yamuna together currently flow forward. Though several other rivers join the

Ganga downstream, its water flows are dismal. This is why I dread the fate of Kashi, where I spent my childhood playing on the Assi Ghat. Mounds of sand have started appearing between Dashaswamedh and Sakka ghats. If the heatwaves continue, the situation could worsen. One reason behind this state of the Ganga is that it has not been dredged for quite some time.

This river requires regular, phased dredging from Haridwar to Ganga Sagar.

A lot of money has been spent to clean the Ganga at Varanasi, but what are the conditions today? Only 70-75 million litre per day (MLD) of the 467 MLD of sewage released by the city enters the Ganga untreated. But the Varuna river, the tributary from which Varanasi derives its name, brings with it 67 MLD of sewage discharged into it into the Ganga.

According to research conducted by a team from the Kashi Hindu University, all fish in the Ganga between Prayagraj and Buxar have been affected by pollution. Furthermore, vegetables and grains grown in the doab area (land between two rivers) irrigated by its waters are also contaminated. Hundreds of people, including myself, used to cross a pontoon Bridge to reach Ramnagar, which used to be a good market to buy fresh vegetables and watermelons cultivated on the banks of the Ganga.

A lot can be written on this topic, and much has already been documented. About 40 years ago, I wrote a cover story on the Ganga for a famous magazine, and even then, the figures were similarly appalling. Nature has been sounding the alarm for a long time, urging us to wake up. The fertile land of North India is unimaginable without the Ganga, the Yamuna, and their tributaries. Yet, despite changes in government, the situation has continued to deteriorate. The Ganga will be protected not by slogans, but by the collective efforts of society and the political system.

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







Contradictions rule but can also spur new ideas

Rightist political-economy ideas have got overturned globally. In India too. Yet, incongruities also offer hope. Will India's budget go beyond the synthetic constraints of a fiscal deficit?

hilosopher George Santayana said the world is in "perpetual caricature" of itself because, every moment, it is presented with a contradiction of what it is pretending to be. This holds especially true even for the knowledge universe, where an eternal cycle of conflicts and contradictions ensures that the graveyard of old ideas is always full, leaving behind a vacuum for new ideas to take birth. This never-ending sequence becomes the source, the wellspring, for renewal and endless optimism. As German playwright Bertolt Brecht put it, "In the contradiction lies the hope." But the path between the two is never easy because overcoming initial contradictions and reaching an eventual resolution requires the humility to accept incongruities, the courage to surmount the immediate challenge and to find solutions that bring forth new ideas which can stand on the shoulders of older ones. Corporate strategists, bean-counters and quant-heavy economists may be tempted to discard this as an abstract notion, but the world today is wracked by contrasting challengesextreme heat waves in some parts with flooding in others—and crying out for change. India too needs to acknowledge economic inconsistencies and find long-term solutions.

In the old economic orthodoxy, ideologies were dichotomous and did not bleed into each other. Right-wing politics, free-market evangelism and distrust of the welfare state all tended to cohabit under the same tent. These rigidities no longer hold true. For example, Italy under Giorgia Meloni ranks among Europe's highest social spenders even though the party in power, Brothers of Italy, is known as a rightwing—if populist—party. Or look at France,

where rightist political parties have grown popular despite the country's large social expenditure. Many Indian ideologues and planners who have been weaned on free-market thinking and insist that governments should remain small, have looked on in bewilderment as the US government has intervened in its economy through measures like industrial policy. Global studies have shown that many economies across the globe are doing much the same to assist domestic industry. It highlights how economic exigencies are forcing the acceptance of contradictions till new solutions emerge.

Many of these contradictions exist in India as well. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), despite its rhetoric of economic restraint aimed at middle-class voters, has in fact been pushing hard on the pedal of social-sector spending, including the delivery of free rations of foodgrain and cash transfers, apart from other benefits. Incongruities hit a high during this summer's general elections: the opposition was able to stitch together a cohesive coalition and win 234 seats despite ground-level differences and pollsters discounting them. The government should look closely at this world of rising contradictions to recognize a need for some new ideas. The Union budget, to be presented in July, offers the first opening of this exercise. Budget-making mustn't be held hostage by anodyne forces keen only on balancing the books, without making a meaningful economic impact. This may be an opportunity to look beyond the synthetic constraints of a fiscal deficit, or arbitrary limits on the debt-to-GDP ratio. These are important parameters, sure, but the current mix of contradictions demands an innovative budget with a sharp focus on employment creation and income generation.

GUEST VIEW

CEOs need to challenge hardset mental models to drive growth

This is key to spotting and exploiting new business opportunities as market conditions get tougher



is chief executive officer and managing director at Mphasis

t is no secret that businesses thrive when engineered for growth. For CEOs, the challenge is how to lead, sustain, recalibrate and drive growth not only when the times are good, but also when the going is tough or when core business expansion has stalled. By adopting a holistic growth mindset, CEOs can kick-start subtle but powerful shifts in work culture and risk appetite that permeate the entire organization to enable sustainable and scalable growth.

The past few years have brought several critical challenges, including the unprecedented covid pandemic and subsequent focus on economic recovery. More recently, the UK has faced a cost-of-living crisis, rising interest rates and an uncertain economic outlook. While it has so far avoided a recession, macroeconomic uncertainties persist, leaving business leaders cautious.

The lessons that have emerged have been invaluable. These challenges have highlighted weaknesses in old approaches and business models. It would pay to explore how to accelerate long-overdue changes in more difficult times like these. Mental models, representing how people view and interpret the world, can limit progress unless actively challenged. That is the secret sauce to driving growth regardless of the macroeconomic landscape

CEOs must reshape their old mental models to build agility and resilience for

navigating an evolving economic climate, societal changes and an unpredictable future. It is about identifying a seed of opportunity for transformation and growth amid any crisis and creating it themselves if it is not obvious. In practice, this can mean embracing innovation to reimagine an organization for a digital era, capturing cost and operational efficiencies and enriching the end-user journey based on customer demands. It involves flipping the 'back to-front' model to become customercentric, rather than service or productfocused, and leveraging data analytics, AI and machine learning to predict future customer needs

This strengthens customer retention, trust and companies' relevance in a competitive landscape (think, for instance, how Big Tech has entered the financial services market, compelling traditional banks to adopt more innovative strategies and undertake digital and service transformations to keep up). By adopting an attitude of continuous innovation, CEOs can position their $organizations for strategic \, industry$ co-creation, allowing flexibility to spot gaps and capitalize on profitable crossselling opportunities.

Build adjacencies for growth: A key principle of a growth mindset is to seek ways to expand into breakthrough areas and adjacencies to stay ahead of the curve. According to McKinsey, companies and their CEOs who successfully adopt growth mindsets are 2.4 times more likely to outperform their peers. Further, those that invest in 'growth pathways' into adjacencies by building on the core and innovating into 'breakout' businesses are 97% more likely to gain a competitive edge. For example, Swedish furniture giant Ikea expanded into new areas by empowering customers with integrated solutions, rather than reinventing itself to enter another business domain like the television market. It focuses on equipping customers with all the necessary items for their living rooms in a way that works

best for them, thereby adding value to their everyday lives.

Similarly, Netflix is betting on video gaming and is ahead of rival streaming services like HBO Max and Disney Plus when it comes to subscriber retention. However, like Ikea, its goal is to create an adjacency while leveraging its core product-video streaming. This ties in with founder Reed Hastings' view that Netflix competes with anything customers do to relax, including "drinking a bottle of wine." As video gaming grows rapidly, Netflix aims to retain its vast subscriber base by offering mobile

video games at no extra cost. The McKinsey report further reveals that businesses expanding into adjacent industries are "20% more likely to achieve greater growth." Implementing change and spotting growth opportunities requires CEOs to innovate, secure company-wide buy-in, devise a strategy and ensure successful execution.

Lead by example: Some key questions CEOs can ask themselves include: How can the core competency solve global business problems? Which supply chain parts need improvement? What are customers looking for, and what can be done differently to help solve their most pressing problems? In essence, businesses should aim to make themselves indispensable to customers, a win-win scenario because this can build new revenue streams.

Amazon exemplifies this approach. CEO Jeff Bezos applied tools—from inventory management to algorithmbased recommendation engines-that made it the world's digital bookstore as it moved adjacently towards electronics and toys and everything sold online. Amazon then disrupted more markets, from healthcare to payments, including launching a buy-now-pay-later product with Barclays and a home insurance comparison service in the UK.

As businesses look ahead and competition heats up, CEOs must lay the ground for resilient growth with smart, sustainable and future-proof strategies.

10 PEAKS AGO



Growth is never by mere chance: it is the result of forces working together.

JAMES CASH PENNEY

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why the super-rich and we pay the same for house help

MANU JOSEPH



'Decoupled

ome things that my relatives do every day are crimes in Europe. I was reminded of it when news broke that four members of the billionaire Hinduja family were held guilty by a Swiss court of treating their house staff badly, though the family rejected the charges and have reportedly appealed against the ruling. Like many wealthy people of Indian origin, and some diplomats, they had got house-help from India on pay scales that are generous by Indian standards but illegal in Europe. The prosecution said the Hindujas paid the staff about \$8 a day and that their work-days could be as long as 18 hours. The prosecution also alleged that family had "confiscated" their passports, which is a dramatic way of describing what I gather is a common practice. The accusations are a few years old. They returned to the news after a financial settlement was reached with the staff members but

the prosecution pressed criminal charges. It is likely that the Indian upper class sees all this as excessive because many of them, too, make poor people work for more than 12 hours on less than \$8 a day. In their defence, they would say that the cost of living in India is a few times lower than in Europe, so what household staff members are paid in India is not as bad as it sounds.

A prosecutor said that the family had spent almost \$10,000 a year on their dog, while paying low wages to their human staff. This could be true even in a typical upper middle-class Indian household. They may want to point out, though they would never do so in public, that do-gooders have a bad habit of comparing how much a family spends on their dog with how much they pay their domestic workers. The comparison is absurd. A dog brings a lot of joy to the family, and is even seen as a part of the family, unlike an employee.

The family did not deny the low pay, but said that the long hours' part was an exaggeration. They asked, as my neighbours would, that if a house-help watches a film at home with the children, is that work? Maybe it depends on the film in question. Also instructive would be whether the family's law firm would bill the two hours (or more) its lawyers would take if they watched the same film to ascertain whether the viewing was entertainment or work.

The Hindujas also pointed out that their domestic staff's compensation was not just the cash they received, but also accommodation and food. That is exactly what my relatives, too, would say. 'Accommodation' in an Indian household is usually a room that appears to be purposely impoverished. In | their servants? my colony, for instance,

the default 'servant quarters' is a windowless room fit for suitcases.

As a boy growing up in Madras, the most fascinating thing I heard about the world outside was that in the US, garbage cleaners would come in cars to clean the streets. That remains, till date, the most impressive thing I have ever heard about wealth. I eventually realized that the information, in word and

spirit, was a bit of an exaggeration. But the idea stuck that the best measure of a nation's wealth is the standard of living of its poor. Ideally, there should be a similar measure of an individual's wealth.

"How rich is that guy?"

"Oh, he pays his driver a lakh."

I really did think in my 20s that was how the world worked.

The rich are willing to talk about how much they spend on cars and carpets and homes. Wouldn't it be just as interesting to know how much the super-rich spend on

For some reason, you can get to know a lot of **Even humane** obscure things that the rich spend on, but never what writers who they spend on their staff. That is because most rich moved our souls people pay only as much as what the middle class pays had servants their household staff. My who were not colony probably has the per capita income of Switzerpaid more than land, but it pays domestic workers half of Europe's market rates minimum wage. I am not lamenting this. After all, I

> too pay my cleaner ₹5,000 a month for getting into acrobatic positions to clean for an hour every day, and a cook only around the same for working 90 min-

utes daily on meals. The rich keep talking about how they subsidize the poor. They do. But it is also a fact

that the poor subsidize our lifestyles by sup-

plying labour cheaper than in much of the world. Also, every strata of Indian society subsidizes the lifestyle of the strata above by working for exploitatively low wages. And in the end, we have a situation where Indian billionaires probably pay only as much as I do for domestic work.

No household can be impressive when it comes to the matter of paying its domestic staff. Historically, all the famously humane writers who moved our souls through prose had servants who were probably not paid more than market rates. Merchants and conscience-keepers paid their servants just about the same. Even if some people pay a bit more, it cannot be an impressive sum when spoken out aloud, especially if compared with the incomes of famous humani-

What are the consequence of the Hinduja family case? The wages of migrants won't rise; instead, wealthy Indian families living abroad may stop taking domestic workers from India, fearing trouble, ending a way of enriching poor Indian families. And wealthy Indian families in the West would have to hire local help, which must be a bit uncomfortable because those workers have such swag and that always diminishes the experience of being a master.



THEIR VIEW

Cooperative federalism can plug India's climate adaptation deficit

We need a comprehensive plan backed by resources at all levels and the 16th Finance Commission should make this a priority



NANDKUMAR SARAVADE &
SRINATH SRIDHARAN

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ndia has seen several transformative innovations in recent years. The development of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), particularly the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism, has made lives easier and worked in favour of the cause of financial inclusion. Similarly, the Public Distribution System (PDS) has ensured food security for the underprivileged and proved its mettle during the recent pandemic. These achievements underscore India's ability to solve complex problems through the implementation of ingenuity.

However, if one were to look at our looming challenges, the scariest appears to be that not enough is being done to deal with climate change. Such inertia, which seems most evident in climate adaptation, poses a severe risk to India's future, threatening to undermine all other progress.

With a vast and diverse geography, the impacts of climate change manifest in various devastating forms: erratic monsoons, extreme heatwaves, rising sea levels and increasing frequency of natural disasters like floods and cyclones. Not only do heat waves last longer and touch higher peaks, we also face the rising risk of wildfires in forest areas. Beyond economic concerns, climate change signifies an existential crisis for India, which is home to a sixth of humanity. The majority of our population is vulnerable to climate change-induced disasters. Additionally, India still largely relies on agriculture for employment and food security; this is a sector that critically depends on favourable climatic conditions to thrive.

Despite foreknowledge, India's climate adaptation efforts seem largely reactive. While there have been initiatives such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and its associated missions, their implementation has mostly been slow, fragmented and underfunded. The focus of the NAPCC is more preventive than adaptive. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change (PMCCC) meets infrequently and seems understaffed. Local and state-level adaptation plans frequently lack the necessary coordination and resources to be effective, leaving communities vulnerable to the escalating impacts of global warming.

Beyond quality-of-life issues, when people are unable to deal with extreme heat, economic productivity and livelihoods suffer. A large proportion of Indian workers have to work outdoors. Their safety, productivity and daily income are at stake. So far, there seems little-to-nil action on a cohesive climate-action framework for how we can cope with extreme heat waves, and almost no comprehensive data on illnesses caused by extreme weather patterns.

It is clear that the world, and India in particular, is going to get hotter, with heat waves potentially



becoming the new pandemics, leaving large numbers dead in their wake. Rainfall will become even more inconsistent both temporally and spatially, necessitating aggressive water conservation measures, the creation of strategic water reservoirs, inter-basin water transfers and groundwater replenishment through effective policies. Climate change-resistant crops need to be developed for every region's climatic conditions, with no further time to lose on long lab-to-farm cycles.

All of this will require developing a national awareness and action plan, involving experts, and incentivizing the private sector to create frugal and local solutions.

Domestically, India does not have formal climate legislation at either the federal or state level. To a large extent, the problem lies in our missing institutional design. While the central government drives most of the initiatives along with its financial powers, sub-national units lack the capacity and fiscal resources to take action, despite being tasked with implementing India's international pledges. Most state-level initiatives to implement India's global commitments, such as the big one on netzero carbon emissions by 2070, are driven under the State Action Plan on Climate Change. Most of these state action plans have lacked committed leadership and made little or no progress in the absence of resources.

While more states are starting to adopt Heat Action Plans (HAPs), there are concerns over the extent to which these are being implemented. For instance, only two of 37 HAPs currently in place in India conduct vulnerability assessments to identify and support affected communities. Further, HAPs include the need to develop and institutionalize

monitoring systems to ensure compliance. As the climate crisis and increasing urbanization start to produce more episodes of extreme heat, we must invest in long-term programmes for reforestation and urban green cover enhancement.

Climate action, including energy transition efforts, can only succeed if they are tied with development promises and communicated in a way that resonates with the country's masses. Currently, there appears to be a disconnect on this front: politically, India's core development agenda aims primarily at the poor, while the country's climate agenda seems directed at global event platforms and domestic elites. For India to see the impact of climate action, more businesses must be asked to effect changes across their entire value chains.

Is there political hesitancy at both the federal and state levels to integrate substantive climate action into public agendas? Is there a fear that it could alienate powerful industrial constituencies and disrupt the politico-industrial *status quo*?

It's a given that cooperative federalism is essential for the decarbonization of industrial assets as well as for the adaptation efforts needed to mitigate climate change. Therefore, climate adaptation needs to be taken up as an agenda priority by the 16th Finance Commission that was recently set up. It would demonstrate a national commitment to the cause.

The sooner governments at every level accept that development and other fulfillers of people's aspirations have to be designed in the context of climate realities, the smoother our path will be. Indian climate adaptation efforts need to show how innovation can assure survival and ingenuity can outshine denial. Let us treat climate action as a national security issue.

MINT CURATOR

Shorts as office-wear? It is no longer as unthinkable as it was

The norms of attire need to keep evolving but there's resistance too



SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEI is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist and oditor.

ssummer heats up, vitriolic debates in the US are peaking. I'm talking about the rift between men who wear shorts to office and those who consider these a workwear abomination. On the West Coast, especially in the tech sector, wearing shorts to work is perhaps unremarkable. But not in northeast US.

"It's a bizarre taboo for me," says Derek Guy, a menswear writer. "It's normal to wear shorts, and whether you can wear them to the office depends on the office." It may be a complete non-issue for, say, graphic designers. But banks and law firms are another matter. Yet, buttoned-up East Coasters are wondering if they can ditch the long trousers. They often point to global warming—last month was the hottest May on record. And women have long had the option of wearing floaty dresses to work. Why can't men show a little leg, too?

But then, whether Bermuda or cargo or athletic, pleated or denim or chino, shorts aren't just shorts, it would seem. Offices are rife with power dynamics and pecking orders, an ecosystem worthy of David Attenborough narration.

Which forms of dress are acceptable "comes down to norms, and belief systems about professionalism and how that intersects with gender, race, and body type and with other structures of power," says Ben Barry, dean at the school of Fashion at Parsons, The New School. There's class too. Shorts may be more closely associated with those doing low-paid physical labour.

Of course, the world of tech and startups invented its own rules. There, the power move is to dress like you don't care. But that too sends a signal. "It wasn't just that people were dressing down," says Guy, "It was a symbol that you only cared about meritocracy and that you did not care about the old ways... the only things that mattered were your skills and your ideas." Think of Mark Zuckerberg's hoodies or Sam Bankman-Fried's shorts-with-tube-socks combo

Although it's often said that women have more freedom of dress, Guy and Barry think that's been overstated. Women's skin tends to be sexualized in a way men's isn't; a woman showing "too much thigh" in an office is likely to be judged in moralistic terms. A woman might be able to get away with 'formal shorts' (something of an oxymoron) more readily than the average man, but a woman who eschews style to SBF-esque levels runs greater professional risk. And keep in mind that women didn't have 'office clothes' until relatively recently, as women worked mostly at home.



The US tech sector has made suits and ties seem fuddy-duddy изтоскрното

Yet, for men, at home or not, some version of the dark suit has dominated for centuries. Barry points to 18th-century-born dandy Beau Brummell as the one who made it fashionable. And professional clothes seem more resistant to change than casual attire. Even if a London barrister prefers baggy sweatpants on weekends, she'll still argue her cases in a white wig.

But the meaning of clothes does evolve. A century or so ago, a three-piece suit was called a lounge suit and seen as far less formal—a kind of 19th-century athleisure. Think of those grainy photos of men mountaineering in wool trousers, complete with jacket and waistcoat. And if the Patagonia vest was once a symbol of an outdoorsy lifestyle, it's now become something else entirely: a way for desk-bound men to signal their aspiration to spend time in nature, or just a way to display their membership in a particularly preppy tribe.

So, what about shorts? Showing skin used to be a no-no for men in offices. But as dress becomes more casual (a trend that's accelerated with the adoption of remote work) and mainstream men's fashion increasingly borrows from queer culture, says Barry, showing some leg is no longer seen as the same challenge to professionalism or masculinity. "I don't think it's a big deal to see a man's knees," says Guy.

Many younger workers agree with them. Older workers may push back on new fashions not for any practical reason, but because they feel threatened. Changing office fashions are a very visible signal that a new generation is gaining ground.

Back in 1971, Harvard Business Review surveyed readers on how they'd respond to a "capable young manager in a financial services company" who suddenly sports "long sideburns" and "bell-bottom trousers." Half said this hippie attire warranted a managerial sit-down, and another third said if his clothes irritated people, he should "change his ways or begin hunting for another job." That leaves fewer than one in five who said his groovy threads were purely his own business.

Today's office may no longer be quite as conformist as it was, but the front-line of fashion is always advancing. Who would have guessed back in 1971, for example, that half a century later we'd be dealing with naked dressing?

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THEIR VIEW

Ethanol: An eco-friendly fuel or another green mirage?

ADITYA SINHA



is an officer on special du

In the early 20th century, Thomas Midgley Jr, a chemist, introduced tetraethyl lead to gasoline, promising to revolutionize the automobile industry by reducing engine knock. It seemed like a miracle solution at the time, and Midgley was hailed as a hero. However, the dark side of this innovation soon became apparent as leaded gasoline caused widespread environmental damage and severe public health issues, including brain damage in children. This tragic episode reminds us that what initially appears to be a groundbreaking solution can have unforeseen and devastating consequences.

In our quest for cleaner energy, we have turned to ethanol, championing it as a green alternative to fossil fuels. On the surface, it seems like a perfect solution—renewable, ostensibly cleaner and easily integrated into our existing fuel infrastructure. But as we delve deeper, we must ask ourselves if ethanol is truly the environmental saviour it's touted to be, or are we being misled by yet another green mirage?

There are six main issues with mandating ethanol as fuel.

First, the life-cycle energy demand for ethanol production from sugarcane stands at 4.99 megajoules per litre. Although ethanol's energy return on investment (EROI or the ratio of energy obtain to what's spent on obtaining it) is 4.26, it pales in comparison with other biofuels. Its modest EROI indicates that ethanol production is not as energy-efficient as it might seem. Studies have shown that sugarcane cultivation's energy-intensive nature, coupled with ethanol's processing needs, significantly undermines its net energy balance.

Second, according to a study published in Elsevier's Bioresource Technology journal, ethanol's carbon footprint (CF) at 0.295kg CO2 equivalent per litre is lower than that of fossil fuels, but it may be misleading to call it eco-friendly. The production process involves significant emissions and its transportation and processing stages add to this carbon load.

Third, the most alarming, is the water footprint (WF) of ethanol: 1,344 litres per litre of ethanol produced. India's heavy use of groundwater for sugarcane irrigation worsens the blue water footprint, posing a major opportunity cost. This misallocation

threatens water security and jeopardizes food security. We thus face a dire trade-off between energy and basic human needs. The high WF contrasts with countries like Brazil, where sugarcane cultivation is primarily rain-fed, resulting in a lower WF. In India, where freshwater resources are

already scarce, using such a colossal volume of water for ethanol production is unsustainable and borders on the reckless.

Fourth, India's agricultural policy has long been dominated by rice and wheat because of the need to procure these two crops for the public distribution system. However, the Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare is now championing a crop diversification programme

under the RKVY-Raftaar scheme in Haryana, Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh. This initiative aims to shift crops from water-intensive paddy to sustainable alternatives like pulses, oilseeds, coarse cereals, nutri-cereals and cotton, addressing the country's pressing need for water conservation. Yet, the

recent push for enhanced ethanol production threatens to undermine this progress. Ethanol production is inherently problematic, as it can lure farmers back into cultivating water-intensive crops, creating a paradox that could undo our efforts to diversify and conserve water.

Its promise as a clean fuel may be outweighed by its hidden threats to food security and the environment

for maintaining soil structure, while frequent tilling unsettles the soil, making it prone to erosion. The heavy irrigation required ads to waterlogging and soil

Fifth, intensive sugar-

cane farming, character-

ized by monoculture prac-

tices, frequent tilling and

the heavy use of chemical

fertilizers and pesticides,

significantly degrades soil

health and agricultural

productivity over time.

Monoculture reduces bio-

diversity, which is essential

for sugarcane leads to waterlogging and soil compaction, further exacerbating erosion.

Sixth, diverting agricultural land for bio-

Sixth, diverting agricultural land for biofuel production poses significant risks to food security. Farm-land diversion can push up food prices by constraining supply. When agricultural land is repurposed for growing biofuel crops like sugarcane, corn or soybeans, it directly reduces the area available for cultivating food crops. This competition for land use can lead to decreased food crop production. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, the expansion of biofuel production has led to significant land use changes, often at the expense of food crops, resulting in reduced food supplies and increased prices.

With less land dedicated to food crops, the overall supply of food grains and other essential crops decreases. As a result, the supply-demand gap widens, leading to higher food prices. The World Bank reported in 2010 that food prices are seen to spike during rapid biofuel expansion, making it harder for low-income households to afford basic necessities. This price volatility is compounded by the fact that biofuel crop prices are influenced by both food markets and energy markets, making them more susceptible to fluctuations in oil prices and policy changes in the energy sector.

Thus, we must exercise caution before pressing the acceleration pedal on ethanol. Ethanol's promise as a green fuel might mask dire consequences. Let's not repeat history's mistakes.

These are the author's personal views.

WORDLY WISE

IF AGRICULTURE GOES WRONG, NOTHING ELSE WILL HAVE A CHANCE TO GO RIGHT.

— M S SWAMINATHAN

The Indian EXPRESS

∽ FOUNDED BY ∽ RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A SEASON OF CHANCES

Rainfall deficit in June is likely to be made up. Government should plan ahead, free agriculture from curbs

HARIF PLANTINGS ARE still to really take off, partly reflected in the Agriculture Ministry not releasing data on the area sown under different crops so far. The reason is the poor progress of the southwest monsoon, despite its arrival over Kerala and northeast India on May 30, two days and six days before their respective normal dates. The country received 3 per cent overall surplus rains till June 10. But the monsoon hasn't advanced much thereafter, with the all-India area-weighted rainfall during June 1-23 being 18.1 per cent below the historical average for this period. Also, while the southern peninsula has recorded a cumulative surplus of 10.5 per cent, the rains have been 25 per cent deficient in central and 58.2 per cent in northwest India. The Met department expects the countrywide rainfall for June now to be "below normal" (less than 92 per cent of the long period average), a downgrade from its "normal" (92-108 per cent range) forecast issued on May 27.

That isn't a great start to the monsoon season (June-September). Nor is it what a government beginning a fresh term would like – at a time of elevated retail food inflation (8.7 per cent year-on-year in May) and rural consumption under continuing stress. The monsoon will, hopefully, revive by the month-end. June, in any case, accounts for hardly 19 per cent of the season's total rainfall. The bulk of it happens in July (32 per cent) and August (29 per cent); these are also the peak months for the sowing and vegetative growth phase of the kharif crops. Most global weather models are pointing to the development of La Niña conditions during July-September and persisting through November-February. La Niña is known to bring copious rains to India and also colder and prolonged winters, which are good for both the kharif and the succeeding rabi crops. This is opposite of the just-ended El Niño, which contributed to last year's patchy monsoon and hotter temperatures in the months that followed.

What should the government do? It can wait and watch, but certainly plan. Some of the measures it has taken — allowing import of most pulses and edible oils at zero/low duty — are sensible. So is the hike in the minimum support prices of kharif pulses and oilseeds announced last week. These send the right signals to farmers to plant more area under these crops. But the government needs to also scrap the 40 per cent import duty on wheat, considering its own 16-year-low stocks and uncertainty over the next paddy crop. While the immediate focus has to be on augmenting domestic availability — preferably through freeing imports than curbs on exports and the trade — this is also the time to draw a longterm plan for the agriculture sector.

CEMENTING TIES

India and Bangladesh's resolve to strengthen connectivity, trade, defence links augurs well for stability in Indo-Pacific region

RIME MINISTERS SHEIKH Hasina and Narendra Modi have been relentless in advancing the bilateral relations between Delhi and Dhaka over the last decade and turning India and Bangladesh into valuable partners of each other. It is entirely appropriate that Delhi hosted Sheikh Hasina over the weekend for the first state visit by a foreign leader during PM Modi's third term. That Hasina was in Delhi barely two weeks earlier for the swearing-in of Modi and that the twoPMshavemet10timesoverthepastyearunderlinestheintensityoftheengagement.Theproductive consequences of the two leaders' commitment to overhaul ties have been hailed as marking a "golden chapter" ('sonaliadhyay" in the history of bilateral relations. The "vision for a shared future" unveiled by the two leaders on Saturday promises to build on these advances and turn the "extraordinary relationship" of the last decade into a "transformational partnership".

The two countries have promised to focus on the unfinished agenda of connectivity that includes the easing of visa procedures, freer movement of goods, cross-border energy and electricity flows, and the building of digital bridges. Bangladesh has also emerged as one of India's most important trade partners. Delhi and Dhaka now propose to commence the long overdue negotiations on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA). Free trade across India's longest frontier to the second-largest economy in the Subcontinent is an urgent regional imperative amidst the breakdown of the global trading order. As one of the world's fast-growing economies, Bangladesh is a natural partner for India in rearranging of the South Asian regional economic order. The transformation of the India-Bangladesh economic relationship lays a solid foundation not only for the sub-regional integration of the eastern Subcontinent but also for the Bay of Bengal littoral and the eastern Indian Ocean.

Hasina and Modi have also outlined the ambition to modernise the bilateral defence relationship that has fallen behind the pillars of commerce and connectivity. This would involve wide-ranging collaboration between the armed forces of the two countries, defence industrial partnership, and Delhi's support for the modernisation of Dhaka's armed forces. A substantive bilateral defence partnership will contribute to maintaining stability in the wider Indo-Pacific region through collaboration on disaster mitigation and building resilient infrastructure. Expanded regional and international collaboration between Delhi and Dhaka will also help promote the Global South's collective interests. The last decade in the Indo-Bangla bilateral relations has seen two strong leaders overcome the Partition's bitter legacies in the eastern subcontinent. While some issues like river water management remain to be sorted out, the shared vision for the future articulated by Hasina and Modi raises hopes for realising the full potential of the bilateral relationship.

FREEZE FRAME

EPUNNY



Adversaries again

Poll verdict could make government change optics. But it's unlikely to be amiable to Opposition



ASTHENDA government settles down, should we be expecting a departure from the past decade of acrimony and a one-sided show of strength? The more balanced composition of the Lok Sabha encourages that expectation. On the other hand, the dramatis personae remain the same. And ironically, despite his "third term", the Prime Minister will be the most uncomfortable person in the new Lok Sabha because of the triple shackles — the party's minority, demands of his allies and an Opposition that is nearly as numerous as his own party. He will need to be modest and moderate in comparison to his carefully cultivated larger-than-life image — a tall order.

Thus, post-elections, the key factors that have shaped politics for some time would remain unchanged — a party with hegemonic ambition despite truncated dominance, an Opposition clueless about politics of culture and a social sphere marked by emotional ruptures. So, we can expect only small compromises and big confrontations in the political arena.

To be sure, there will be some formal bonhomie. There will also be formal assurances of accommodation and cooperation, hopes of working together to make India great, pleasantries about federalism and of course, emotional eulogies to the Constitution. Virtues of coalition will be listed too. The Opposition may get more time and visibility, both in the House and in the media, without necessarily being able to strengthen the traditions of deliberation. But, in the realm of actual policies and use of state power, a substantive change is unlikely. If anything, there will be more direct con-

frontation between the main ruling party and the Opposition because the BJP would be licking its wounds, seeking opportunities to delegitimise the Opposition and the Opposition would be eager to flex its muscles because of its belief that the people have rejected the BJP. One dimension of these confrontations will be the silent decimation of the BJP's allies and the steady defections or splits in Opposition ranks as also the disunity within the INDIA bloc.

Initial optics notwithstanding, the Modi regime will soon return to its core features: Weaponisation of state power to suppress dissent, coupled with intolerance of routine opposition; delegitimisation of all institutions through their political capture and a well-de-

A disappointed electorate voted the opposition party to power in 2014. But the BJP instilled multiple texts into that victory, mostly retrospectively — Hindutva, national rejuvenation, the idea of new India. This time around, the BJP lost the majority, but being convinced of its historical burden, it is unprepared to concede that this was a warning against its bad governance, neglect of basic questions of livelihood and the arrogance of taking Hindu voters for granted. Therefore, it emphasises continuity and seeks to posit

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Narendra Modi.

'mandated' a third term for

fined majoritarian politics that encourages the societal sphere to stigmatise the minorities.

Therefore, current social and economic fault lines are most likely to produce confrontations between the government and various sections of the population. The first, and most immediate challenge will be to handle questions of unemployment and frustrations of the youth. Long-term policies of skill enhancement and glib talk of the future will not suffice. Another arena of confrontation will be that of Centre-state relations, producing sharper regional identities and regionalist demands. Third, mainly because of the success that Congress and the Samajwadi Party have tasted, questions of caste census and reservation will haunt politics. Fourth, it is entirely uncertain how the continued victimisation and marginalisation of the Muslim community will play out. But in the social arena, vigilante adventurism against the Muslims will continue with the state as a passive onlooker.

One could add more such instances of popular unrest resulting from pre-existing social issues, strengthening the opposition. Predictably, the government's response to the many confrontations will be a combination of high-handed treatment, emotional appeals deflecting the issues and setting one section of society against the other. This assessment is predicated on the assumption that having ushered in a new regime after 2014, the BJP will be unwilling to cede space to others. It will be equally unwilling to bow to democratic pressures. Not only does the leader of this government believe in fulfilling a mission, the main ruling party itself has, over the past decade, imagined that it is changing the destiny of this country. In part, this imagination received its electoral strength from the results of 2014 and 2019. In part, it could be said that this millennial and draconian self-image has always been Hindutva's view of its historical role assigned by destiny. But in the realm of competitive politics, now the BJP too has begun taking an exaggerated view of itself since 2014.

Elections are a mechanism through which rulers are assigned a limited responsibility and legitimacy, temporarily. But the lure of an electoral majority is such that rulers are tempted to expand the meaning of electoral outcomes and attempt to authenticate their inflated and egotistical ideas of what the people have said through an election. This over-reading allows

the ruler and his supporters to shift the meaning of competitive politics from being merely a choice-mechanism to authorisation for setting up a new regime, ostensibly for a stateenforced transformation in ideas and social relations. The BIP's many face-offs with sections of society, its unbelievable confidence in the correctness of its policies, its sub-democratic governance model practised over the past decade, disdain for dissent and anxiety over electoral setbacks are all part of this dual syndrome of attaching larger meanings to electoral victories and a deep-rooted ambition to change the character of India.

Since 2014, the BIP expanded the meaning of electoral outcome in order to convince its cadres and the general public of the larger national, if not outright divine purpose that lay at the root of why it was put in power. This may be called the superimposition of a mandate over an electoral victory. A disappointed electorate voted the opposition party to power in 2014. But the BJP instilled multiple texts into that victory, mostly retrospectively -Hindutva, national rejuvenation, the idea of new India. This time around, the BJP lost the majority, but being convinced of its historical burden, it is unprepared to concede that this was a warning against its bad governance, neglect of basic questions of livelihood and the arrogance of taking Hindu voters for granted Therefore, it emphasises continuity and seeks to posit the argument that the outcome of 2024 has "mandated" a third term for Narendra Modi.

There is an unavoidable awkwardness to this claim in view of the coalition BJP is forced to live with. That awkwardness will produce moments of farcical surrealism but also many tensions and distortions. An unfounded reading of the outcome will allow the BJP to continue with the three core features listed above and bring itself into confrontation with not only its allies and the Opposition but also with segments of the population.

In its eagerness to argue victory in the face of defeat, the BJP needs to remember that high nationalism and dreams of economic power may function as temporary painkillers, but its regime-level ambitions will only make politics more shrill, abusive and unproductive.

> The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science

Why Exam Scams Happen

They are a sign of mismatch between aspiration and opportunity

RUCHI GUPTA

WHILE CORRUPTION IN the recent NEET exam has rightly garnered attention, the real scam lies elsewhere. There is no question that NEET and exams for higher education and recruitment must be conducted with integrity. However, as our public discourse gets mired in the minutiae of investigations and individual culpability, the most important aspect of the issue is lost: a staggering 24 lakh students appeared to qualify for a mere 1 lakh seats.

The real scam lies in the fact that despite celebrations of being the fifth-largest economy, our systems are woefully inadequate to address the aspirations of our youth. Worse, we have foisted our failure onto them by linking this inadequate supply with the dubious categorisation of "merit," where all but a minuscule minority is squeezed out. The same issue recurs across sectors, from education to employment. The crux of the matter is the inadequate availability of opportunities, but we sidestep it by making it about our youth's lack of merit and periodically focusing on corruption cases involving officials and young people.

It would be disingenuous to label this as merely a legacy problem. What's more concerning is the palpable indifference towards addressing the urgent need to productively engage our youth, both economically and democratically. Instead of tackling the issue of limited opportunities, we have ratcheted up aspiration. Since our systems don't support

Our current solutions lack the bi-partisan, top-down, nationwide approach that is required. We celebrate little islands of excellence with no clear aim to make such opportunities widely available. We cannot lose sight of the bigger picture the need to expand quality educational and employment opportunities. As a nation, we need to demonstrate a sense of responsibility and empathy towards our youth. This calls for a multi-pronged approach.

the equal distribution of success and social status, we have superimposed the stupendous success of a few onto national pride and instead of acknowledging the singularity of their success, set them up as examples for our youth.

Simultaneously, we have propagated a narrow definition of success, limiting it to amassing wealth and power, while our education system and job markets have failed to provide sufficient avenues for students to legitimately fulfill these lofty aspirations. To counter this, we prop up "merit" as the criterion and celebrate the few who make the cut or have bucked the system in ways which are not available to most. For any society, restricting the attainment of success to a minority, is a recipe for fomenting discontent – a problem exacerbated in India as several young people struggle to secure basic formal employment.

The result is a vast number of disheartened youth who, despite working hard, are denied opportunities due to systemic bottlenecks breeding a deep sense of injustice and hopelessness. When some buckle under this pressure (as seen from the spate of suicide cases in Kota), we offer anodyne platitudes about how one exam doesn't matter. But the platitudes ring hollow because the available pathways for upward mobility are so limited.

The scale of mismatch between aspirations and reality for India's youth is massive. Yet, our current solutions lack the bi-partisan, top-down, nationwide approach that is required. We celebrate little islands of excellence with no clear aim to make such opportunities widely available. We cannot lose sight of the bigger picture – the need to expand quality educational and employment opportunities. As a nation, we need to demonstrate a sense of responsibility and empathy towards our youth. This calls for a multi-pronged approach.

First, responsible sections of the political class must rise above partisan divides to take cognisance of the scale of the problem and devise an institutional and societal response to this challenge. At the very least, this will require a massive infusion of public funds to expand quality education infrastructure and opportunities. Second, we must shed the dismissive and exploitative attitudes towards the working class and foster a sense of social solidarity. Third, India's elite needs to go beyond the self satisfaction that their success is contribution enough to the nation and aim to expand opportunities for our less advantaged youth.

Only such a decisive, sustained mission helmed by the highest leadership can instill hope and validate the aspirations of India's youth. Cancelling exams and prosecuting a few individuals is to dodge accountability and will exacerbate the youth's disillusionment.

> The writer is the executive director of Future of India Foundation



JUNE 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM IN GOLDEN TEMPLE

THE PRIME MINISTER, Mrs Indira Gandhi, paid a day's visit to Amritsar city, offered prayers at Harmandar Sahib in the Golden Temple. The head priest of the Golden Temple, Giani Sahib Singh, accompanied her up to Darshanl Deor where he read out the broad points of the memorandum he submitted to her.

BJP ON NSA

THE BJP NATIONAL executive unanimously opposed the latest amendment to the National Security Act, saying it was reminiscent of the Emergency period because of the severe restrictions it puts on civil liberties. Party treasurer Shanti Bhushan said it would certainly be challenged. He did not say if BJP would challenge it or an individual member.

JANSATTA EXPOSE

RAJENDRA CHATURVEDI, A senior police officer in Madhya Pradesh who was instrumental in the surrenders of bandit chiefs Malkhan Singh, Ghanshyam and Phoolan, has lodged a complaint with the state regarding the alleged "leakage" of a top-secret semi-official letter and its publication in *Jansatta* of the Indian Express group. In the letter, the DIG of Gwalior had complained that Chaturvedi's wife had tried to extort money from an American journalist for a set of Phoolan's photographs.

KERALA SRP SPLIT

THE SOCIALIST REPUBLICAN Party (SRP), a constituent of the ruling United Democratic Front in Kerala, virtually split when the two factions removed the chairmen of the rival faction and expelled some others from the party. While one group removed the Excise Minister N Sreenivasan from the party's chairmanship and expelled the general secretary, P Gangadharan, the rival faction expelled Janardhanan and his group's general secretary, K Gopalnathan for "anti-party activities".

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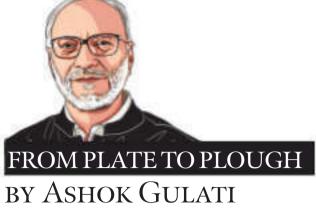
- THE GUARDIAN

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, JUNE 24, 2024

THE IDEAS PAGE

Filling the void in farms

As agriculture and rural development minister, Shivraj Singh Chouhan is an apt choice. He will need to recognise farming is not just food production and deal with challenge of climate change



IN THE RECENTLY formed NDA cabinet (Modi 3.0), Shivraj Singh Chouhan is an appropriate choice for heading the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (MoA&FW) as well as the Ministry of Rural Development. Given that most of the seats that the BJP lost in the recent parliamentary election were from rural areas, it gives a clear signal that all is not well in these areas. So, the BJP has to fix it quickly, and for that it needs to have a person with vast experience, who understands the problems of rural areas in general and agriculture in particular.

Chouhan fills this void quite nicely. He has been the longest-serving chief minister of Madhya Pradesh. With his commitment and compassion for agriculture and rural development, Madhya Pradesh saw an overall GDP growth of 7 per cent per annum, and agri-GDP growth of 6.8 per cent per annum during 2005-06 to 2023-24. No other state, with the sole exception of Gujarat under Narendra Modi as chief minister had such a combo making it the most inclusive growth model. Madhya Pradesh growth has been higher than the all India GDP growth of 6.5 per cent, and agri-GDP growth of about 3.6 per cent over the same period.

The challenge before him now is whether he can boost the all-India agri-GDP growth to say more than 5 per cent per annum and augment farmers' incomes? How can it be done?

Here are a few suggestions. First and foremost, he needs to recognise that agriculture is not just production of food, but a full food system that stretches from production to marketing to consumption. He has to increase productivity in the face of climate change which is increasingly threatened by extreme weather events. There is no better way than to invest heavily in creating a climate-smart agriculture, from heat-resistant varieties of various crops to farming practices that give "more crop, per drop" of water. This, in turn, means that he has to immediately raise expenditure on agri-R&D and extension to at least 1 per cent of agri-GDP, up from current levels of less than 0.5 per cent. The marginal returns on this are above 10 times as per latest research.

Second, he must ensure that farmers have access to the best technologies in the world as well as the best markets for their produce. Without that, neither productivity is going to catch up with global standards nor are farmers' incomes going to increase significantly. But, to enable farmers to get the best price for their produce, he has to convince his colleagues in the inter-ministerial group who would like to keep the prices of food low for consumers. It is this consumer bias in the policy framework that works against the interests of farmers. Export bans at the drop of a hat, stocking limits on traders, unloading government stocks at way below the economic cost of FCI to suppress market prices, suspending futures markets, are all tilted against farmers' interest. This is a big battle for Chouhan — let him start by open-



C R Sasikumar

ing up the export of onion, as Maharashtra onion-belt farmers are dead against the export bans which have hit their incomes badly. Thereafter, in a calibrated manner, he can go for the opening up of common rice exports with a 15 to 20 per cent export duty to recover the cost of fertiliser and power subsidies inherent in rice production.

Third, for other high-value fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, fishery and poultry, he has to coordinate with other ministries to build value chains from farm to mega cities and foreign markets so that farmers get the best prices possible. Inviting organised private sector or cooperatives/farmer producer companies to build these value chains is necessary. They can be incentivised on the lines of the PLI scheme that exists in industry, or what India did while building value chains for milk in the domestic market on the lines of the AMUL model. This will increase the farmers' share in the consumers' rupee. Let him start by taking over the TOP scheme (tomatoes, onions and potatoes) and fix their value chains so that producers and consumers both can benefit.

Fourth, if he has the capacity to convince the Prime Minister and other cabinet colleagues, the fertiliser subsidy amount should be transferred to his MoA&FW. Today, the fertiliser subsidy of Rs 1.88 trillion (revised budget estimate of 2023-24) is more than the total budget of the MoA&FW. And the fertiliser subsidy is parked in the Ministry of

First and foremost, he [Chouhan] needs to recognise that agriculture is not just production of food, but a full food system that stretches from production to marketing to consumption. He has to increase productivity in the face of climate change which is increasingly threatened by extreme weather events. There is no better way than to invest heavily in creating a climate-smart agriculture, from heat-resistant varieties of various crops to farming practices that give 'more crop, per drop' of water.

do with farmers. The policy of fertiliser subsidy, with almost 80 to 90 per cent subsidy on urea and about 20-25 per cent on DAP and MOP has massively distorted the N, P, and K balance. As a result, the ratio of grains to fertilisers, which used to be more than 10:1 in the 1970s, has dropped to about 2:1. On top of this, it must be noted that plants do not absorb more than 35-40 per cent of the nitrogen being supplied to them through granular urea. The rest is emitted in the environment as nitrous oxide which has 273 times the carbon equivalence for a 100-year timescale. It is like subsidising urea to create poison in the atmosphere. This subsidy needs to go directly to farmers' accounts, and fertiliser prices need to be freed. Digital fertiliser coupons can be issued to farmers of equivalent value and they can be given the freedom to use chemical fertilisers or bio-fertilisers or opt for natural farming. But it will need careful planning, which needs to start now so as to carry out this big-bang reform next year.

Chemicals and Fertilisers, which has little to

Also, a special package for Punjab-Haryana is needed to save them from ecological disaster. The list of issues is much bigger, but given the space constraint, let me stop here. If Shivraj Singh Chouhan can do even these, he will do a great service to Indian agriculture.

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER. Views are personal

BJP's coalition challenge

"Mr Netanyahu doesn't listen to the Biden administration. He has smashed through its red lines and went out of his way to pick a fight with it this week. But the situation is unsustainable — and diplomacy, not war, must be the answer."

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

The dominant party will have to tread carefully so as not to precipitate disenchantment among allies



E SRIDHARAN

THE NEW BJP-LED NDA government is the first of a type for India. It is a surplus majority coalition without a majority party, that is, a coalition in which there are parties in the council of ministers that are not necessary for a majority. This is different from a surplus majority coalition with a majority party, like the 2014 and 2019 governments, often called an oversized coalition. This is significant since each type of coalition has its own dynamics.

When no single party gets a parliamentary majority in an election, or loses a majority due to a split, there are two solutions. One is to form a single-party minority government dependent on external support from other parties which might be pre-electoral and/or post-electoral allies. In the Indian case, the two instances of single-party minority governments were the Chandra Shekhar government (1990-91) and the Congress government of 1991-96. The other solution is to form a coalition government of two or more parties. Let me define what the literature means by a coalition government; it counts member parties of the executive coalition — those in the council of ministers — as the coalition, and not the broader legislative coalition of supporting parties, preor post-electoral, which stay out of the government but offer external support to enable a majority in the legislature even if they were part of a pre-electoral alliance.

There are four types of coalitions. First, the minimal-winning coalition, which India has not had yet — this has only the minimum number of parties needed to attain a parliamentary majority, with no redundant surplus parties, thus making each coalition partner pivotal since the exit of even one means a loss of majority. This is based on the Rikerian assumption of parties being office/powerseeking; a redundant party means sharing power with an unnecessary partner reducing the power shares of existing partners. However, this view tends to ignore policyseeking motivations; additional partners might enable broader consensus-building to enable legislative changes towards policies that parties seek and hence could incentivise expanding the coalition though it would mean sharing power with more partners.

Second, there are surplus majority coalitions with no party having a majority. Here, while no single party has a majority, the largest party puts together a coalition government that has a surplus majority, that is, has parties over and above those needed for a parliamentary majority. This is usually because of pre-electoral alliances for which there are strong incentives in a first-pastthe-post electoral system where vote aggregation through such alliances is very helpful in getting the single largest number of votes in constituencies needed for winning seats. In a federal system, this incentivises state-level alliances. This, in a federal firstpast-the-post electoral system with multiple parties leads to diverse pre-electoral coalitions on a state-by-state seat-sharing basis in which the incentive to band together against the largest party leads parties to de-emphasise ideological and policy differences. Examples are the anti-Congress alliances of

the 1960s and 1970s which included parties of the left and right (including at one time an Akali Dal-Jana Sangh-CPI government in Punjab) and the 1989 seat-sharing arrangement in which V P Singh's Janata Dal was supported by both the BJP and the Left.

Third, there are surplus majority coalitions with a majority party — called oversized coalitions — for example, the BJP-led NDA coalitions in 2014 snd 2019 in which the BJP won a majority on its own but kept its preelectoral coalition partners in the ministry (executive coalition). This type of oversized coalition existed in West Bengal for several terms during the erstwhile Left Front governments when the CPI(M) kept its pre-electoral coalition partners in the ministry even though it had a majority on its own. Oversized coalitions, like surplus majority coalitions reflect the need for pre-electoral alliances and the anticipation that such allies will be needed for future elections and hence need to be accommodated. Fourth, there are minority coalitions, in which the parties fall short of a majority and are dependent on outside support from a wider legislative coalition, pre- and/or post-electoral.

There have been 12 coalition governments since 1977. Of these, none have been the classic minimal-winning coalitions in which each party is pivotal for a majority. Eight have been minority coalitions in which the executive coalition forming the ministry has needed external support for a majority. Three have been oversized coalitions with a majority party. These were the Janata Party, 1977-79, technically a single unified party with a majority, with a separate coalition partner in the Akali Dal, and the two BJP-led NDA governments of 2014 and 2019.

There has not been, until 2024, a surplus coalition without a majority party. While such a coalition is less stable than an oversized coalition, it is more so than a minimalwinning coalition or a minority coalition. However, in the India, three minority coalitions — NDA, 1999-2004, UPA I and UPA II lasted full terms due to at least partial lock-in effects on supporting parties due to statelevel alliances and/or due to the main national opposition party being the ideological adversary of the supporting party or its main state-level adversary.

The power dynamics in a surplus majority coalition favour the dominant party because usually no single partner is pivotal for a majority. In the present case, the largest party has 240 seats and can achieve the majority mark of 272 with the three largest allies having 16, 12 and seven seats, the rest being a surplus majority which offers an insurance policy in case some allies quit. The executive coalition (total of BJP plus nine allies) is 287, and with other five NDA partners is 293. Assuming at least partial lock-in effects for the above-described reasons on the smaller allies and taking 293 as the effective coalition, no ally is pivotal. To deprive the coalition of a majority of 272 it would need the exit of at least two allies, given that the four largest partners have 16, 12, seven and five seats. This would require considerable coordination in the normal course, including factoring in state-level repercussions, unless some serious crisis arises which precipitates broad disenchantment amongst the allies. However, the dominant party will also have to tread carefully in such a power configuration so as not to precipitate such disenchantment.

The writer is academic director and chief executive of the University of Pennsylvania Institute for the Advanced Study of India

The wisdom of Patanjali

Discipline and compassion are fundamental to the pursuit of yoga

THE MOST EFFECTIVE way of conveying something is through stories or parables. Our Puranas are filled with such parables. Maharishi Patanjali was a sage and one of our civilisation's greatest scientific minds who gave complete and authoritative texts on yoga, grammar, and ayurveda to help humans remove impurities from the mind, speech and body, respectively. No one understood the complexities of the mind better than Patanjali; hence I call his *Yoga Sutras* the "Science of the Consciousness". The *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* are a revolutionary text where, through simple yet profound sutras, the entire science of yoga is conveyed.

Here's a story about him. A long time ago, all the seers approached Lord Vishnu to tell him that even though he had given them the means to cure illnesses through ayurveda (when he had incarnated as Lord Dhanvanthari during the churning of the ocean of milk), people continued to fall ill. These were not just physical illnesses; people also suffered from mental and emotional illnesses that manifested as anger, lust, greed, or jealousy.

Lord Vishnu was resting on Adishesha, the serpent with a thousand heads. Bowing to the request of the *rishis*, he blessed them with Adishesha, a symbol of awareness. Adishesha then took birth as Patanjali. But there were three conditions before this precious knowledge could be passed on. First, the *sutras* were not to be narrated unless 1,000 people got together. Second, a screen would be put up between the teacher and the students and nobody was to lift the screen or leave during the sessions. Third, everyone had to stay in the hall until the recitation of the texts was completed. Patanjali stayed behind the curtain and

silently conveyed his knowledge to the 1,000 people who had gathered from the south of the Vindhya Mountains. He did not utter a single word but each student understood his teachings. Each experienced profound enthusiasm and a surge in energy. The students found it difficult to contain this vibrancy but they still had to maintain the discipline of not lifting the curtain or leaving the room.

It so happened that one little boy had to go out to attend nature's call. He thought he would leave quietly and return. Another boy in the room became curious, desperately wanting to know what the Maharishi was doing behind the curtain. Disobeying the Master, he lifted the curtain. Instantly, all 999 disciples present were burnt to ashes.

At that moment, the boy who had gone to attend nature's call returned. He explained his predicament and begged for forgiveness. Patanjali was compassionate and shared the remaining sutras with him. However, he said, "Since you have violated the law, you will become a Brahmarakshasa (a ghost hanging from a tree.) And the only way you can liberate yourself from the curse is to teach another student." Saying this, Patanjali disappeared.

Now, the Brahmarakshasa would ask a question to every passerby and if they could not answer him, he would eat them. He had no choice. For a few thousand years, he could not find a single person to whom he could teach the Yoga Sutras. Out of compassion for the boy, Patanjali himself was reincarnated and came as a student to the Brahmarakshasa.

The Brahmarakshasa taught only at night. Patanjali wrote the Yoga Sutras sitting on a tree since that was where his teacher, the Brahmarakshasa, sat. The teacher recited the sutras at night and Patanjali plucked the leaves from the tree, drew blood from his body and wrote. This went on for seven days. At the end, exhausted, Patanjali put all the leaves into a piece of cloth, set it down and went to bathe. When he returned, he found that a goat had eaten most of the leaves. Patanjali then took the cloth bag and the remaining leaves and walked away.

The Puranas do not give us any explanation for this story. It is for us to decode its meaning. Each student is unique, with varying levels of intelligence and understanding. The Master knows how and in what manner to impart knowledge to each student. You can say that the Master has different forms for each student. The form that the Master reveals to one is different from what he would reveal to another. Once someone asked me. "Do you love all of us equally?" I smiled and said, "No!" That came as a big shock because

everyone wants to be loved equally by the Master. "I don't love you equally because you are not equal. I love you uniquely because you all are unique and different. That doesn't

mean anyone is more or less than the other." To teach all thousand disciples, the Maharishi took his real form. He manifested as Adishesha himself, the 1,000-headed snake, and taught the 1,000 disciples individually. But to receive knowledge, the disciple had to have unconditional faith in the Master. Lifting the veil would mean expressing doubt in the Master. Through this, the Maharishi also establishes that to understand such deep knowledge, some rules and some discipline are necessary. Discipline is the first and foremost prerequisite for learning about yoga. Another interpretation of the story is that since the disciples couldn't see the master, their entire focus was on the teachings. The veil kept their small minds and perceptions from becoming obstacles to receiving knowledge. It shouldn't matter what the teacher looks like or who he/she is.

Why was one boy forgiven? This act shows the infinite compassion of the Master. He had to go through his karma. But the Master also gave him a way out of his karma. When he had lived through them, the Master himself came there as a student to free him from the curse.

The writer is a spiritual leader and founder of The Art of Living Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LACK OF WILL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Clean air for the young' (IE, June 22). The State of Global Air (SoGA) Report 2024 which referred to 2.1 million deaths from air pollution in India, including so many children under five is alarming. The annual recurrence of extreme and dangerous air pollution in Delhi, particularly in the winter, has exposed the lack of adequate planning both by the Delhi government and the Centre in the face of the challenge. Sadly, despite having the technological know-how to control air pollution, there is a lack of political will to frame and execute policy interventions to protect citizens from the ill effects of air pollution. This must change.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Clean air for the young' (IE, June 22). The air pollution-linked death rate in children under five in South Asia is 164 deaths/mn against the global average of 108 deaths/mn. While India continues to be the worst affected by air pollution-related health impacts, the part of the population facing high ozone exposure is also increasing in India. With

one billion plus populations each, India and China put together account for nearly 55 per cent of the total global disease burden from bad air in 2021. The SoGA report is a strong reminder of the growing health crisis linked with air pollution and the need to co-join the efforts to cut toxic emissions at the source and maximise the benefits of reducing public health risks.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

A BIGGER PROBLEM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial. 'Ouotas and equity' (IE, Jun 22). Politicians over the last seven decades have realised that reservation is the easiest route to usher in equity. They seem to think it absolves them of the responsibility of performing their core functions efficiently. The clamour for reservation indicates a lack of imagination and resourcefulness in our political executive. Bihar's social or economic backwardness is not because of the inadequacy of reservation but due to the built-in inefficiency in its governance mechanism. The Patna High Court's verdict indirectly proclaims this ground reality. Governance must come into focus. Shubhada H, via email

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

Heat tragedy in Mecca, and what makes Hajj pilgrims vulnerable

EXPLAINED

GLOBAL

ASAD REHMAN

NEW DELHI, JUNE 23

HUNDREDS OF Hajj pilgrims have died in the intense desert heat of Saudi Arabia this year, with temperatures in the holy city of Mecca reportedly reaching above 51 degrees Celsius at times during the days of the pilgrimage.

Although Islam was founded in the 7th century, Hajj is said to have been performed for much longer, and heat-related deaths have been recorded earlier too. However, climate change is making the pilgrimage increasingly difficult and hazardous, especially for the elderly who constitute a large section of pilgrims.

The pilgrimage

Hajj, literally, "to set out for a place", is one of the five pillars of Islam — every Muslim is supposed to undertake the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. According to the

Holy Quran, the beginnings of Hajj can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham in the Judeo-Christian scriptures), roughly 4,000 years ago.

The pilgrimage involves a series of rituals in and around Mecca, over a period of five or six days. These include multiple circumambulations of the Kaaba, the stone structure at the centre of the Masjid al-Haram, the holiest site in Islam, ritual traverses between the hills of Safa and Marwa, scaling and praying at Mount Arafat, the hill outside Mecca where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon, and the symbolic stoning of the devil in the valley of Mina.

The pilgrimage takes place between the 8th and the 13th of the Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic calendar. Since the lunar year of the Islamic calendar is 11 days shorter than the solar Gregorian year, each Gregorian year, Hajj comes 10 or 11 days earlier than the previous year. This year, the Hajj took place from June 14 to 19.

While the Hajj will gradually move to earlier in the year and towards winter, it will come back to peak summer in the 2040s, by when the planet is expected to be significantly hotter than now, with the global temperature increase having gone past 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

The numbers

close to 2 million.

Haii is considered to be the largest gathering of humans in the world – some 1.84 million Muslims performed the pilgrimage last year, and the number this year is estimated to have reached

The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in charge of facilitating the pilgrimage and, over the years, as the number of pilgrims has gone up, the Saudi authorities have spent billions to improve infrastructure. Nonetheless, accommodating so many pilgrims in one location for a brief period of time is a massive logistical challenge.

Each year, the Saudi government issues country-wise quotas, which are by and large based on the number of Muslims in that country. Countries also lobby diplomatically with Riyadh for larger national quotas.

This year, Saudi Arabia allowed 1.75 lakh

Indians to undertake the pilgrimage – 1.4 lakh went through the official Haj Committee of India, and the rest went through more expensive private operators.

The tragedy

At least 658 Egyptians have died, according to an AFP report quoting an Arab diplomat. Many of the dead were "unregistered" pilgrims sent by travel agents in contravention of rules, Egypt's government said on Saturday. Indonesia has said that more than 200 of its nationals are among the dead, and

Pakistan, Malaysia, Jordan, Iran, Senegal, and Sudan have confirmed deaths of their citizens. People were searching for loved ones who were still missing, media reports published over the weekend said.

Pilgrims who come illegally on tourist visas often do not enjoy official Hajj facilities such as air-conditioned tents. An Indian official in Jeddah said that the majority of the dead came on tourist visas, perhaps with only a single mat and an umbrella. "They sleep on the streets without tents. This is why the probability of them dying is high," the official said.

Local hospitals or mortuaries inform country representatives of the deaths of their citizens, following which the country's consulate confirms the dead person's identity and gets the approval of the family for burial in properly marked graves in Saudi Arabia.

Indian deaths

MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal has

said 98 Indians have died during the pilgrimage this year. "These deaths have happened on account of natural illness, natural causes, chronic illness and old age. Last year, the figure of Indians who died on Hajj was 187, Jaiswal said.

"We have heard that because it was very hot...on the day of Arafat...several people suffered... From our country, six people died on the day of Arafat," he said.

India has a Hajj mission in Jeddah, the Red Sea port that serves as the gateway for the pilgrimage. Indian officials oversee a medical mission, hospital, ambulances and arrangements for Indian citizens.

The Health Ministry has said that almost 40,000 people over the age of 60 years undertook Hajj this year, and due to the "harsh weather conditions", services were provided for the pilgrims round the clock. A live portal provides real time data and analysis on the pilgrims seeking medical care, and the services being provided.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

HAWAII SETTLES CLIMATE SUIT BY YOUNG LITIGANTS: CASE, SETTLEMENT

ALIND CHAUHAN

NEW DELHI, JUNE 23

THE GOVERNMENT of Hawaii on Thursday settled a lawsuit with 13 children and teens who had sued the state's Department of Transport over its fossil fuel use. The settlement includes an ambitious requirement to decarbonise Hawaii's transportation system over the next 21 years.

is the world's first youth-led constitutional climate case addressing climate pollution from the transportation sector, according to the activists and lawyers involved in the case.

The lawsuit, which was filed in 2022,

The settlement is the latest in a series of victories in climate-related cases by young plaintiffs across the world.

What was the lawsuit?

The plaintiffs in Navahine v. Hawaii Department of Transportation argued that Hawaii's transport department had violated their constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment by implementing transportation policies and prioritising infrastructure projects that use fossil fuels.

The lawsuit also cited "Hawaii's constitutional pledge to "conserve and protect Hawaii's natural beauty and all natural resources" and pointed to the fact that Hawaii's transport sector is projected to make up 60 per cent of the state's emissions by 2030," according to a report by Al Jazeera.

The burning of fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal is the primary reason behind the soaring global temperatures. It results in the release of greenhouse gases (GHGs) like carbon dioxide and methane, which trap the heat in the atmosphere, leading to warming. Warmer temperatures have had severe consequences including worsening of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods across the world.



Wildfire in Hawaii in 2023. AP

What is the settlement?

According to the settlement, Hawaii needs to achieve zero GHG emissions across all transportation modes, including ground transportation and sea and air interisland transportation by 2045.

The state also has to publish a greenhouse gas reduction plan within a year.

Pedestrian, bicycle, and transit networks need to be completed within five years, while allotting at least \$40 million to expand the public electric vehicle charging network by 2030.

Additionally, the state of Hawaii will be accountable to a judge who will enforce the agreement in case disputes arise.

What are the challenges?

Hawaii's Democratic Governor Josh Green has called the settlement "groundbreaking" and said it "informs how we as a state can best move forward to achieve life-sustaining goals.'

However, meeting the ambitious goal of net zero will not be a cakewalk for Hawaii's Department of Transport.

For instance, the department "oversees the state's airports, and there are currently no feasible ways to power passenger jets without fossil fuels," according to a report by *The New York Times*.

It also manages Hawaii's harbours, where container ships and cruise ships also use fossil fuels.



GLOBAL

EXPLAINED PARLIAMENT

Oath-taking in Lok Sabha

Members of the 18th Lok Sabha will begin taking oath today. Lok Sabha terms begin from the day the EC declares the results of the elections, but to participate or vote in the House, MPs must first take oath

CHAKSHUROY&MANASGUBBI NEW DELHI, JUNE 23

vided in the Constitution.

THE FIRST session of the 18th Lok Sabha will start on Monday. Before the House can begin its legislative functioning, the newly elected members will have to take the oath of Members of Parliament (MP), which is pro-

The day will begin in Rashtrapati Bhavan, where Bhartruhari Mahtab — who has been elected for the seventh consecutive time from Cuttack. Odisha — will be the first one to take the oath of a Lok Sabha MP in front of President Droupadi Murmu.

The President has entrusted him with the duties of the Speaker (pro tem) under Article 95(1) of the Constitution till the election of the new Speaker. Mahtab will preside over the House as his colleagues take oath.

When does the term of an MP begin? The five-year term of a Lok Sabha MP be-

gins when the Election Commission of India (ECI) declares the results according to Section 73 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. From that day onward, MPs are eligible for certain rights as elected representatives. For example, they start receiving their salary and allowances from the date of ECI notification after the 2024 general elections, the ECI declared results on June 6.

The start of their term also means that if MPs change their party allegiance, their political party can ask the Speaker to disqualify them from Parliament under the anti-defection law.

If the term of an MP has started, why is the parliamentary oath significant?

Winning the election and starting the term does not automatically allow an MP to participate in House proceedings. To debate and vote in Lok Sabha, an MP has to take her seat in the House by making and subscribing to an oath or affirmation prescribed in the Constitution (Article 99). The Constitution also specifies a financial penalty (the only one in the document) of Rs 500 if a person participates or votes in House proceedings without taking an oath (Article 104).

However, there is an exception to this rule. An individual can become a minister without being elected to Parliament. They have six months to secure a seat in either Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha. During this time, they can participate but not vote in House proceedings.

MULTILINGUALISM & OATH

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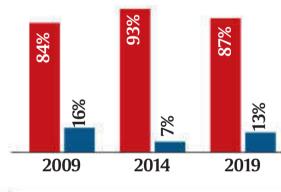
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Speaker pro tem Bhartruhari Mahtab will be administering the oath/affirmation. File

OATH VS AFFIRMATION (percentage of MPs)

■ Oath ■ Affirmation 84%



What is the parliamentary oath?

0

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Bodo

Konkani

The Constitution's third schedule contains the text of the parliamentary oath. It reads, "I, A.B., having been elected (or nominated) a member of the Council of States (or the House of the People) do swear in the name of God / solemnly affirm that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established, that I will uphold the sovereignty and integrity of India and that I will faithfully discharge the duty upon which I am about to enter."

How has the oath evolved over years?

The draft Constitution prepared by the drafting committee, chaired by Dr B R Ambedkar, did not invoke God in any oaths. The committee stated that the person taking the oath solemnly and sincerely promises to bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution. When the Constituent Assembly

members were discussing the draft, the question cropped up regarding the President's oath. Members like K T Shah and Mahavir Tyagi moved amendments to add God to the oath.

Shah said, "When I perused the Constitution, I was left with the feeling that there was a void in it. We had forgotten, I do not know why, to invoke the grace and blessing of God." Tyagi argued that "those who believe in God will swear in the name of God and there will be liberty for those agnostics, who do not believe in God, only to solemnly affirm, so that there will be freedom for one's faith." But there was also disagreement on adding God to the oaths.

Ambedkar accepted the amendments. He believed that "To some people, God is a sanction. They think if they take a vow in the name of God, God being the governing force of the Universe, as well as of their individual lives, that oath in the name of God provides the sanction

The last change in the oath was the Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Act 1963, which added that the oath-takers would

which is necessary for the fulfilment of obliga-

tions which are purely moral and for which

uphold India's sovereignty and integrity. The amendment was made on the recommendations of the National Integration Council. How do MPs take the oath? Before being called upon to take the oath

there is no sanction provided."

or affirmation, MPs must submit their election certificate to the Lok Sabha staff. Parliament added this safeguard after an incident in 1957, in which a mentally unsound individual posed as an MP and took the oath on the floor of the House. After the verification, MPs can subscribe to the oath or affirmation in English or any of the 22 languages specified in the Constitution.

Roughly half the MPs take their oath in Hindi or English. In the last two Lok Sabhas, Sanskrit has also been a popular language in which MPs have taken oaths. In 2019, 44 MPs and in 2014, 39 MPs took oath in Sanskrit.

MPs must use the name mentioned in their election certificate and adhere to the text of the oath. In 2019, Lok Sabha BJP MP Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur added a suffix to her name while reading the oath. The presiding officer ruled that only the name on the election certificate would go on record. In 2024, when Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal ended her oath with "Inquilab Zindabad", the Rajya Sabha Chairman asked her to retake the oath.

Oaths and affirmations are a matter of personal choice for MPs. In the last Lok Sabha, 87% of MPs swore in the name of God, and the other 13% affirmed their allegiance to the Constitution. MPs have sometimes sworn in the name of God in one term and affirmed in another.

Can MPs in jail take the oath?

The Constitution specifies that if an MP does not attend Parliament for 60 days, their seat can be declared vacant. Courts have used this ground to allow MPs in jail to take an oath For example, in June 2019, during the oath-

taking for the last Lok Sabha, Atul Kumar Singh, MP from Ghosi in Uttar Pradesh, was in jail for serious criminal charges. The court allowed him to take oath in Parliament in January 2020, and Singh affirmed his allegiance to the Constitution in Hindi. Roy and Gubbi are with

PRS Legislative Research.

Why Russia-North Korea mutual defence pact is significant for region & world

SAIMA MEHTA

NEW DELHI. JUNE 23

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's visit to Pyongyang last week culminated in a security agreement between Russia and North Korea on providing "immediate military assistance if either faces armed aggression". Details are not known yet,

the full implications of the deal remain unclear, and the commitment of the signatory countries to its terms is uncertain. But the pact could still be

the strongest that Russia and North Korea have signed since the end of the Cold War.

Historical context

After World War II, the erstwhile Soviet Union wanted to install a communist regime in Korea, and offered military assistance to North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung during the Korean War. After hostilities ended, the USSR and China both provided military and other aid to the communist North.

In 1961, the Russo-North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual

Assistance was signed, which too, contained a mutual defence agreement. But this treaty was voided by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and relations temporarily deteriorated. Since the early 2000s, Russia under Putin

and the Kim-family ruled North Korea have

come closer together. However, Putin did not back North Korea's nuclear ambitions and, for a time, even supported international sanctions **EXPLAINED** aimed at curbing Pyongyang's

nuclear capabilities.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a watershed in the relationship between the two countries. As a coalition of Western powers led by the United States came together to isolate Russia, Putin reached out to his neighbours China and North Korea for support and solidarity. These countries today form a front

against the Western liberal order, bound to-

gether by pragmatic considerations.

What the pact says

The pact between Russia and North Korea talks about cooperation in a wide range of areas, including mutual military



support, and unspecified technological assistance. But the most important part of the

deal is the provision for mutual defence. "In case any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of the DPRK (North Korea) and the Russian Federation," Article 4 of the agreement says, according

to a report by *Reuters*.

This provision echoes the 1961 agreement between the two nations. But what

President

Vladimir

Putin and

leader Kim

Jong Un ride

an Aurus car

in Pyongyang,

North Korea.

KCNA via Reuters

North Korea's

does a pact like this mean in today's world? Sue Mi Terry, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies at the New York City-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), said in an expert brief on June 19: "Because neither country is likely to be attacked by an aggressor, the mutual defence provision is unlikely to be invoked... The more likely consequence of the treaty is simply closer cooperation in

weapons production, with North Korea manufacturing more munitions for Russia and Russia providing more high-end help for North Korea's nuclear and missile programs... Both countries will become more dangerous as a result of this new partnership."

The provision of technological assistance is likely to be crucial. Western intelligence believes North Korea is in possession of nuclear weapons, but lacks critical missile guidance systems, cutting-edge warhead design, and re-entry vehicle technology, precluding its development of advanced, long-range nuclear weapons.

Strategic implications

The treaty presents a direct security threat for South Korea and Japan. Both countries have long been concerned about North Korea's nuclear program and military strength, and the Russian security umbrella

will only add to these concerns. This is likely to push both countries to strengthen their defences and rethink their security policies. Japan has already moved away from its long-standing pacifist foreign policy, and is in the process of rebuilding its military might, Both South Korea and Japan

are likely going to further cement their alliance with the US and its allies.

The US has already reaffirmed its commitment to its allies. NATO chief lens Stoltenberg too has expressed deep concern about the pact, and underlined the risks to global security and the potential for increased nuclear proliferation. "We need to be aware that authoritarian powers are increasingly joining forces and supporting each other in a way we have never seen before," he said during an official visit to Ottawa on June 19.

The Russia-North Korea pact could also encourage similar partnerships elsewhere. The West would be especially concerned about developments in the Middle East, where Iran and Russia could seek to make common cause against the US and its allies.

China, a traditional ally to North Korea, is likely to be conflicted about the development. While the treaty strengthens the anti-West bulwark in Asia, China would be wary of Russia's growing military collaboration with North Korea, which could undermine its near-exclusive geopolitical influence over Pvongvang. It would also be concerned about even closer Western attention in Asia that this development will inevitably attract.

12 IDEA EXCHANGE NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

Aakash Joshi: You have been following the Indian elections and politics closely. Will this coalition government, marked by continuity, be seen as a stable government?

I see India today as I've seen India for the last decade — as the strongest and most stable democracy with the strongest leadership, certainly in the Global South and in many ways around the world. Narendra Modi is now in a coalition. But it also means 15 years of driving of a consistent foreign policy, security policy and economic policy. That is unusual, even exceptional for a well-functioning democracy. It makes it much easier for foreign governments and multinational corporations to rely on India. It's certainly true that Modi underperformed with being nowhere close to the 400 seats but the NDA coalition has a Cabinet that's already formed. Most of the notable ministries are with the BJP. This speaks of a government that Modi is going to have control over. I'm sure he's going to have to negotiate and provide more to the states where his two regional partners are dominant, and that will slow down some of the new economic reform process, for example in agriculture. But it will also sort of reduce some of the strongman tendencies that you've seen from India's leadership. Greater checks and balances are a good thing for a democracy.

Aakash Joshi: We've seen foreign policy becoming a part of political campaigning more

ON INDIA

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STRATEGICALLY OVER THE

LAST 10 YEARS ACROSS

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than ever before. But we've got two kinds of feedback over the last 10 years. One has been of the hyperbole that India has never been as respected before. The other is that India is now seen as a "declining" democracy.

What is your opinion? It's overwhelmingly

the former. It is true that there are aspects of Indian democracy that are problematic. Of course, there are aspects of American democracy that are even more problematic. The US has slipped more as a political system in a liberal democracy in the last 30 years than India has.

The US has a hard time even holding a free and fair election that is seen as legitimate by its population. India just had elections, Modi didn't do so well, and everyone recognises it was a free and fair election. That's a sign of a strong and healthy democracy. When I was working on my PhD in 1989, people around the world looked at the US as the shining light. They wanted their political system to run more like the US. In 2024, a lot of people want to move to the US, invest in American markets, and send their kids to American universities but nobody says, 'I wish my political system ran like Washington.'

Yet, the US continues to be the most powerful country and is driving greater strategic relationships, international architecture, Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), AUKUS, Indo-Pacific framework, all of which India and many other countries in Asia want to be a stronger part of. India is respected in the Global South and has been very successful at chairing the G20 over the last two years. It is also seen as a bridge to the US, Japan, the UAE, and, increasingly, to Europe as well. That's somewhere that Modi, almost singularly, and S Jaishankar (External Affairs Minister), have done great work in. They've allowed India to punch above its weight. India has mattered more strategically over the last 10 years across the world. Finally, India's economy is starting to catch up with its growing strategic importance.

Aakash Joshi: How much does a Trump presidency affect India and other non-NATO US partners in the region?

For many allies of the US, the prospect of a Trump presidency is deeply concerning. Trump says he's going to end the war in Ukraine in one day, and if you're a frontline NATO country, you think that Trump is a crisis for you. There are other countries in the world that are deeply concerned about Trump's lack of climate agenda, his greater transactionalism on trade deficits, willingness to put tariffs. He's talked about a 10 per cent tariff on all exports to the US. That would clearly have a negative effect on the Indian economy. The more important point for India is that a US-China relationship under Trump would be under significantly greater pressure.

On the political side, the fact that the US and China would have a more tense relationship would benefit India strategically. Modi is one of the few leaders in the world who really doesn't care that much personally whether Biden or Trump wins. But there would be greater uncertainty. India is, right now, trying to navigate a world that has much greater geopolitical uncertainty because of all the industrial policy, subsidies, as well as sanctions and tariffs because of two major wars going on in the Middle East and Russia-Ukraine, and tensions in the US-China relationship. If you're India, you just want a stable global environment to grow your economy.

Aakash Joshi: Through the Ukraine war, Delhi has managed to keep our channels open with Russia. How do you assess that kind of balancing in this uncertain

geopolitical climate?

This year was the 11th time that India has been invited to attend the G7 as an observer. There was a time when the Russians were the G7 plus-one. If there was a plus-one to the G7 right now, it would probably be India because of its economic size and growing strategic alignment. There is a lot of constructive engagement between India and the G7,

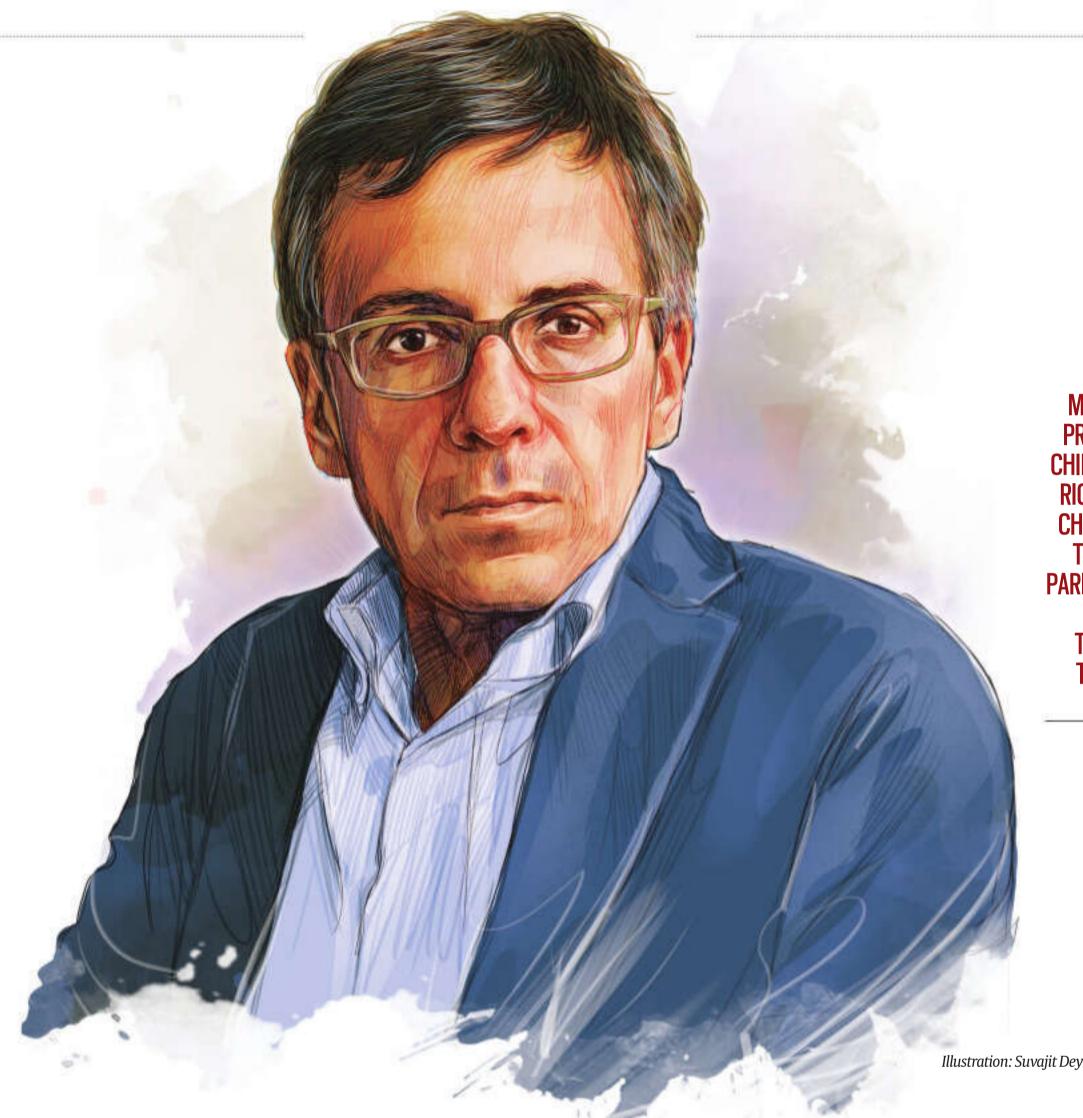


IAN BREMMER

WHY IAN BREMMER

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENTIST

Ian Bremmer is a keen India watcher, who has commented on the nation in various contexts, particularly in relation to its economic development and global influence. Founder of the Eurasia Group, a risk assessment consultancy that specialises in geopolitics and the political economy of emerging markets, the prolific author has published over 11 books and developed key conceptual tools such as the 'J-Curve' and 'G-Zero world'



'Americans versus the Americans is the most dangerous war out there'

American political scientist and entrepreneur Ian Bremmer on the election results in India, its growing strategic importance and how the American democracy is in crisis. The conversation was moderated by Aakash Joshi, Deputy Associate Editor, The Indian Express

including on Russia-Ukraine. India is buying a lot of goods from Russia, particularly oil. That is in explicit alignment with US policy. The US is not trying to prevent the Russians from exporting oil because it would lead to a global recession. Right now, it's escalating in terms of the use of frozen assets and targeting of NATO weaponry into Russia. We could see a time where India would be pressured to do a lot less with Russia.

Pooja Pillai: What is the response to Trump's conviction among his supporters? What does that mean for the US election and the world eventually?

In terms of the way they're going to vote, it has had virtually no impact — 34 convictions, felony convictions, are unprecedented in the US. That should mean that Trump should not be viable as a presidential candidate. But it doesn't mean that. He is arguing that this is a politicised case that wouldn't have been brought against anyone else. It's the least serious case of the indictments that he is facing, much less serious than the Georgia case of trying to overturn the election, the Florida case of stealing and then lying and obscuring classified documents, the Washington DC case of abetting insurrection on January 6. But none of those cases are going to come to resolution before the November elections. So, in my view, this is not going to have a significant outcome, but it does have a significant impact on how we think about the US in terms of the rule of law

and a sustainable democracy. US democracy is in crisis right now and

QUICK QUESTIONS

One thing that India could have done better in its relationship with China? The engagement that you're seeing now by Modi should have been done earlier.

The biggest geopolitical challenge PM Modi faces right now? Maintaining stable relations with China,

given that it's your most important trade partner.

The one concern that global investors have about India today? What they should be concerned about long-term is climate change and water.

The rise of Chinese science: welcoming or worrying? Both.

Is there an Opposition anywhere in

the world that the Congress party in

India can learn from? Yes, the Labour Party in the UK. When you're out of power for a long time, you need to get rid of incapable leaders, you need to focus on policies that matter, and you need to take advantage of the mistakes

Is BRICS currency a good idea or a bad idea?

being made by the party in power.

I don't think it's very important.

Japan ended its 17-year negative interest rate regime. Will it impact India? It's one of India's most important relation-

ships. Japan is becoming a little less important on the global stage, but it's very useful for India to strengthen that relationship.

there are many American voters who will not accept the outcome of this election. In 2020, the argument was that the election was legitimate, but the vote was rigged, which is not true. Trump is running on that. Today, the argument is that the election is illegitimate, not the vote. The Democrats will say Trump should not be eligible to run for office because of the two impeachments that were politically incapable of reaching conviction,

even though there were Republicans that voted to convict him in the second impeachment. A vote to convict is a vote that says that you can never run for President. If you go to our top risks that we put out

every year, as we did in January this year, despite all the concerns of US-China, the Middle East war, Ukraine war, the number one risk was the US versus itself. The Americans versus the Americans is the most dangerous war

out there. This is a horrible election and no American wants to have it.

Anant Goenka: There are two Indias one which agrees with the ideas of the BJP, and another that doesn't. Is there something about polarisation in

America that could happen in India? India is obviously a country with far more poverty and far less, in that regard, time and energy spent by the average citizen on highlevel politics. We're just at a different part of Maslow's triangle of self-actualisation. You're nowhere close to the middle-income trap. When you've got a country that is growing at six-seven-eight per cent a year, there's still a lot you can do that can make the average citizen feel like they have a bright future. That undermines polarisation. In a sense, political polarisation is a bit of a malaise that comes from ennui. It comes from a level where your basic needs are taken care of but now you feel you've got bigger demands.

China's gone through a very different political system but for 40 years the population felt good about the fact that economically they were going to have opportunities. India is finally on that path. It was a lot easier when Modi first came in because there was so much corruption and no digitisation. So you could help people without blowing out the budget. You could just improve efficiency and win. India is beyond that. But it's too pessimistic to say that India at this stage of development is heading towards where the US or Europe is.

Adya Goyal: In the US, students in

Columbia University were protesting against what is happening in Palestine. Similar protests took place in European colleges. Why is there a difference in the nature of student protests across regions?

The demonstrations and the number of students demonstrating have been extremely small. They're mostly in elite universities. But of course, you have an environment that it's politically polarised. You have a small number of political activists on the Right and on the Left in the campuses, and more importantly outside the campuses, who are looking for extreme statements to promote and say, 'look at these crazy Hamas supporters', or 'look at these crazy Islamophobic Jews.' It's true that young people in America, like in Europe, are more sympathetic to Palestinians because they see them as the underdog and think that ethnic cleansing and genocide is going on in Gaza right now. That doesn't mean they support Hamas. Almost none of them support Hamas, but they don't support the US-Israel policy as well.

Rishika Singh: The US has, for long, championed values such as liberty and free trade but in the last few years, particularly with regard to China, they've placed a lot of bans on semiconductor technology and other kinds of high-level technology, citing security concerns. How do you rate these bans in terms of legitimacy?

ON US-CHINA

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When you talk about access to the US market that's a choice that's made by the American government. And that's also true for China. China doesn't allow Google, Facebook or Wikipedia to operate. I wish they would, but they see those companies as a systemic challenge to the Chinese political system. The Americans see Huawei as a national security challenge to the American system. The US is not only doing that domestically but increasingly leveraging relations with their allies to ensure that nobody is providing the Chinese with high-level

the same with software. It's within the right of the US and other countries to make those decisions. It starts looking unfair if the Americans are coercing other countries to do it against their will. In principle, you want to see the US investing in being the best competitor globally. To that extent, the Americans have paid no attention to their semiconductor industry for the last 25 years and allowed it to be exported to mainland China. The Chinese increasingly have a lot more influence over Taiwan economically, politically and strategically, and you can understand why the Americans are panicking a bit.

semiconductors. They're now talking about

Anant Goenka: You'd said the obituaries on China are premature, and that China will bounce back. Is it bouncing back?

There are way too many Americans who are prepared to say that China can't do anything right. The fact is that China is overall close to a technological parity with the US. When you talk about transition energy, they're way ahead. It's a huge mistake to be overconfident.

Mike McFaul, former US ambassador to Russia, saw Putin meeting Kim Jong-un (North Korean leader) and immediately said, look at the desperation.

When I look at Putin with all the oil, gas, uranium, precious metals and land, the size of his conventional military and his nuclear forces, and I look at his relationship with China, I look at the unwillingness of the Americans to take pain by really hurting Russia. I look at the ability of the Russians to deter NATO. When I see him meeting Kim Jong-un, I don't see desperation. I see danger. I see the emergence of a couple of countries that are chaos actors. They are pariahs for the West but they're not pariahs for India, China or the developing world. They are not pariahs for the BRICS. Even for the Americans and the Europeans, how many companies are still doing business there? We have to be careful before we write off China and Russia.

Anant Goenka: How do you describe G7's decision to lend Ukraine \$50 billion backed by \$300 billion frozen Russian

assets?

They're spending a lot of money to ensure that the Ukrainians don't lose more territory. I support that because I think the invasion was illegal. It would have been more effective to stop Putin before he invaded Ukraine in 2022, to be tougher after 2014 Now it's a lot more expensive and we're all paying for that. But I also recognise the unwillingness of the West to take pain themselves. You still want to do business. If you sell the business now, you're not going to get any money for it. The Russians can just take advantage. So, I guess, we should probably keep a lot of those businesses there. You can't cut off Russian oil because it would be a real cost for the global economy. You can't cut off Russian uranium because then the reactors wouldn't work. If you're only willing to spar with them, play fight with them, then they're obviously not going to take you seriously.

I wrote this in our top risks: we expect that Ukraine will be partitioned. Not because I want that outcome. I think it's horrible Ukraine should get all their land back. Crimea is a different story... The rest of Ukraine should clearly be Ukrainian territory. There should be (accountability for) war crimes and war reparations. But that's not going to happen because the West is too unwilling to create leadership. It's a G-Zero. It's not a G7. Putin is advantaged in a G-Zero.

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INDIGENOUS THOUGHT

Union minister Jitendra Singh

Indian solutions for Indian problems and Indian data for Indian Innovations as our spectrum, and even our human phenotype, is different from the rest of the world

Shocks to informal sector

Employment in unincorporated enterprises is still not back to pre-demonetisation levels

MONG A HOST of factors, India's growth story depends also on the health of the vast number of unincorporated non-agricultural enterprises — which are not legally registered as companies — that belong to the informal sector. These small businesses, which are beyond the purview of institutional protection, contribute as much as 28 to 30% of the nation's output of goods and services or GDP and 40% of employment. These enterprises are not just standalone entities but also support the incorporated or formal sector by acting as suppliers and services providers, thereby forming an integral part of the domestic value chain. According to the National Statistical Office's latest fact sheet, the number of unincorporated enterprises rose to 65 million in 2022-23 from the pandemic lows of 59.7 million in 2021-22 while adding 11.7 million workers to 109.6 million. *Prima facie*, it would indeed appear that this sector is showing resilience after the Covid pandemic shock and exhibiting significant capacity to generate employment.

However, the informal sector has been buffeted by other shocks besides the nationwide lockdown to battle the Covid pandemic. The sector was hit by demonetisation which took high-value notes out of circulation in November 2016 and the implementation of the goods and services tax in July 2017. As cash accounts for bulk of transactions in India, demonetisation struck a body blow to unincorporated enterprises impacting daily wage earners in urban areas as also in the villages. There was no money to pay wages to around 46% of the unorganised workers who were either casual or contractual. Around 65% of daily wage earners went without work in urban areas as informal enterprises downed shutters and they returned to their villages. Pronab Sen, then country director for the India programme of the International Growth Centre, argued that the severe cash crunch perhaps permanently damaged the informal sector.

The upshot is that the informal sector has not fully recovered from these shocks. While the employment generated by unincorporated nonagricultural enterprises in 2022-23 is impressive, it still remains below the levels before demonetisation. As against 109.6 million in 2022-23, there were 111.3 million workers employed in this sector according to the survey conducted of these enterprises between July 2015 and June 2016. Sen told *FE* that had this sector not faced these disruptions, the number of enterprises — which normally rises by 2 million annually would have been around 75 million. In effect, 10 million enterprises were lost. As a typical unincorporated enterprise employs between 2.5 and 3 persons, close to 25 to 30 million jobs were lost in the process. Employment in unincorporated manufacturing enterprises suffered the most, declining to 30.6 million in 2022-23 from 36 million in 2015-16.

As the health of unincorporated enterprises is therefore far from resilient, what is it that policy can do to improve matters? The government can certainly help by ensuring that they have access to more formal credit for their working capital requirements as also guarantee term loans so that they can grow organically and become more formalised over time. If the bulk of their credit requirements are not met by the banks as they do not have the requisite documentation, they have no alternative but to access the informal credit markets and pay usurious interest rates. The overarching need is to restore vibrancy to this sector so that it continues to contribute to the country's process of rapid economic expansion.

James Bond tunnel is UK's soft power future

AN ENORMOUS HOLE in the ground near where I live in London could become the British capital's next great tourist attraction. Ever since Bloomberg News wrote about it in September, I've followed the progress of what's been nicknamed the "James Bond tunnel". In October, I attended a presentation inviting neighbourhood comment on a£220-million(\$280 million) plan to transform the Kingsway Telephone Exchange, which lies underneath High Holborn street and was built as a World War II air raid shelter. It also served as a secret workspace for Winston Churchill's spy agency, then as a conduit for the Moscow-Washington hotline during the Cold War before becoming a major switching station for British Telecom. Now called BT Group Plc, it declared Kingsway defunct in the 1990s and put it on sale in 2008.

If London Tunnels Ltd. wins all the necessary approvals, the structure — two large parallel tunnels linked by smaller passages — will become a subterranean multimedia "immersive experience" taking visitors through all that history. It will also house the deepest cocktail bar in London, where presumably your martinis will be shaken,

As with many urban projects, local authorities have the final say. But the new Kingsway — which will be reimagined by Wilkinson Eyre Ltd., the design firm behind the £9 billion shopping-mall overhaul of Battersea Power Station — is halfway there. Last week, the council of the City of London approved the project. Now, the developer needs the consent of the adjoining council of Camden to start work. That could come in July. If anything, refurbishing the building alone that serves as the tunnel's air intake valve on an alley off Holborn will improve the streetscape tremendously.

not stirred — perhaps by the tube's Central Line which runs between the two tunnels.



CHUA-EOAN

Bloomberg

announced, Raffles Hotels & Resorts opened its rejuvenation of the historic Old War Office, rebranded OWO to soften the association with military conflicts. Wealthy guests can book the late prime minister's Whitehall work space — the Army Council Room, lavishly redecorated as a luxury suite — for \$25,000 a night. Meantime, the Admiralty Arch that opens to the Mall (which then leads on to Buckingham Palace) will become a Waldorf Astoria hotel in 2025.

There's been another World War II-era revamp in

London. At about the same time Kingsway was

The British Empire has had a relatively soft landing compared to other imperial enterprises. Still, Britons

nostalgic for old glories may wince at these consumerist reincarnations of the past. But it's better than razing sites that have outlived their usefulness. Today, the National Trust makes money by renting out historic cottages to vacationers. For the literaryminded, I've got another historic tunnel for you: Alexander Pope's Thames-on-Twickenham grotto — all that remains of his famous garden — is now open to the public on selected days.

So why not turn old symbols of British hard power into seductive embodiments of soft power? The Hinduja Group paid £350 million in 2016 for the Old War Office, shoveling in £1 billion more to transform it into the 120-room Raffles London. Private residences in the building are also available, with one-bedroom apartments starting at about £4 million. It's a profitable way to achieve the important task of preserv-

ing the past — as Rudyard Kipling wrote, "Lest we forget — lest we forget". Kipling, of course, foresaw the decline of empire in the poem from which that line is taken. He wrote "Recessional" in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, as much an apex of British global power as any. "Far-called, our navies melt away," he wrote, "On dune and headland sinks the fire:/ Lo, all our pomp of yesterday/ Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!" Kipling probably wouldn't have been too surprised by the slow transformation of London's imperial icons. After all, Rome didn't fall in a day; it's

taken a while to turn it into a metropolis of Airbnb rentals. Of course, sybarites are not really out to learn from the past; they just want to bask in its prestigious shadows. Those who forget history should at the very least pay a premium for sleeping with it.

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

TASK CUT OUT FOR A CAPABLE SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN TO SEIZE CHANCE, TACKLE CHALLENGES

Rebooting agriculture

ASHOK GULATI

Distinguished professor, ICRIER

THE RECENTLY formed National Democratic Alliance cabinet (Modi 3.0), Shivraj Singh Chouhan is a very appropriate choice for heading the ministry of agriculture and farmers welfare as well as the ministry of rural development. Given that most of the seats that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost in the recent parliamentary election were from rural-dominated areas, it gives a clear signal that all is not well there. So, the BJP must fix it quickly, and for that, it needs to have someone with vast experience and who understands the problems of rural areas in general and agriculture in particular.

Chouhan fills this void quite nicely. He has soiled his hands as the longestserving chief minister of Madhya Pradesh. With his commitment and compassion for agriculture and rural development, MP saw an overall GDP growth of 7% per annum, and agri-GDP growth of 6.8% per annum during 2005-06 to 2023-24. No other state, with the sole exception of Gujarat under Narendra Modi as CM, had such a combo, making it the most inclusive growth model. MP's growth has been higher than the all-India GDP growth of 6.5%, and agri-GDP growth of about 3.6% over the same period.

The challenge before him now is whether he can boost all India agri-GDP growth to, say, more than 5% per annum, and augment farmers' incomes. How can it be done?

Here are a few suggestions. First and foremost, he needs to recognise that agriculture is not just the production of food, but a full food system that stretches from production to marketing to consumption. He has to increase productivity in the face of climate change, which is increasingly exacerbated by

extreme weather events. There is no better way than investing heavily in climate-smart agriculture, from heatresistant varieties of various crops to farming practices that give "more crop, per drop" of water. This, in turn, means that he has to immediately raise expenditure on agri-R&D and extension to at least 1% of agri-GDP, up from the current less than 0.5%. The marginal returns on this are above 10 times, according to latest

research. Second, he must ensure that farmers have access to the best technologies as well as the best markets for their produce. Without that, neither productivity is going to catch up with global standards nor will farmers' incomes increase significantly. But to enable farmers to get the best

price for their produce, he has to convince his colleagues in the inter-ministerial group, who would like to keep the prices of food low for consumers. It is this consumer bias in the policy framework that works against the interests of farmers. Export bans at the drop of a hat, stocking limits on traders, unloading government stocks at way below the economic cost of the Food Corporation of India to supress market prices, and suspending futures markets are all tilted

against farmers' interests. This is a big battle for Chouhan. He should start by opening up the export of onions, as Maharashtra's onion belt farmers are dead against the export bans that have hit their incomes badly. Thereafter, in a calibrated manner, he can go for opening up common rice exports with a 15-20% export duty to recover the cost of fertiliser and power subsidies inherent in rice production.

Third, for other highvalue fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, fishery, and poultry, he has to coordinate with other ministries to build value chains from farm to mega cities and foreign markets so that farmers get the best prices possible. Inviting the organised private sector or cooperatives/farmer producer

companies to build these value chains is necessary. They can be incentivised on the lines of the production-linked incentive scheme that exists in industry, or what India did while building value chain for milk in the domestic market on the lines of the Amul model. This will pay handsomely to increase farmers' share in consumers' rupee. He can start by taking over the TOP (tomato, onion, and potato) scheme and fix their value chains so that both producers and consumers can benefit.

Fourth, if he has the capacity to convince the Prime Minister and other cabinet colleagues, the fertiliser subsidy amount should be transferred to the agriculture ministry. Today, the fertiliser subsidy of ₹1.88 trillion (revised budget estimate of FY24) is more than the total budget of the agriculture ministry. The fertiliser subsidy is parked in the ministry of chemicals and fertilisers, which has little to do with farmers. The policy of the fertiliser subsidy, with almost 80-90% subsidy on urea and about 20-25% on DAP (diammonium phosphate) and MOP (muriate of potash) has massively distorted the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium balance. As a result, the response of grains to fertilisers, which used to be more than 10:1 in the 1970s, has dropped to about 2:1. On top of this, it must be noted that plants do not absorb more than 35-40% of the nitrogen that is being supplied to them through granular urea. The rest is emitted in environment as nitrous oxide, which is 273 times carbon equivalent. It is like subsidising urea to create poison in the atmosphere. This subsidy needs to go directly to farmers' accounts, and fertiliser prices should be freed. Digital fertiliser coupons of equivalent value can be issued to farmers, giving them the freedom to use chemical fertilisers, biofertilisers, or natural farming. But it will need careful planning, which needs to start now to carry out this big bang

Also, a special package for Punjab-Haryana is needed to save them from ecological disaster. The list of issues is much bigger, but given the space constraint, let me stop here. If Shivraj Singh Chouhan can do even these, he will do a great service to Indian agriculture and the peasantry dependent on it.

reform next year.

A smoother GST landscape

Multiple central and

state GST bodies, as

part of their revenue

augmentation

targets, audit and

investigate entities,

most of whom have

registrations in

various jurisdictions

A special package

for Punjab-Haryana

is needed to save

them from

ecological disaster.

The list of issues is

much bigger



THE WORLD OF indirect tax in India was never as exciting prior to the advent of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council meetings. Each meeting is awaited like the release of a blockbuster movie. The 53rd meeting was the first in almost 10 months and also the first since the formation of the new government. Working on the principles of cooperative federalism, the council took decisions to enhance the ease of doing business by proposing a set of measures designed to streamline GST procedures and reduce litigation related to past transactions.

Key decisions

The council's recommendations encompass a wide array of initiatives, starting from rationalisation of GST rates on goods and services and regularising the past period on "as-is where-is basis" to avoid any future litigation, provide exemptions on railway services, and specific hostel accommodation services (outside educational institutions) for rural sections. Besides this, the council decision to declare co-insurance and re-insurance commission as "no supply", reduce tax collected at source from 1% to 0.5%, clarify place of supply for custodial services by banks and clarification on levying GST on corporate guarantee in case of related person are all decisions that will help resolve ongoing litigations and provide much needed relief to industries.

The council also decided to extend the benefit of Circular 199/11/2023 on taxability of supplies between distinct/ related persons to import of services where if the recipient is eligible for full input tax credit (ITC), even nil valuation

would be deemed as open-market value. Possible examples are of activities between related persons without any money transactions, like use of a brand in India or allowing use of software and other intellectual properties for the provision of supply to overseas recipient, for justifiable and legally permissible reasons. For domestic reverse charge mechanism supplies also, the council has clarified that the time limit of availing ITC would be considered from the date of issue of selfinvoice. These decisions will help taxpayers manage their working capital and avoid unnecessary litigation on valuation and availing ITC. Further, the proposed mechanism to address

past errors stemming from an established industry practice of insertion of Section 11A is a welcome move. Such measures show the government's commitment to reduce litigation and help taxpayers.

Impact on taxpayers and industries

Another big decision in this meeting was accepting a lasting demand of industry for an amnesty scheme under GST regularising past transaction on self-assessment basis. The announcement to waive interest and penalty on disputes under Section 73 of the Central GST Act, arising up to FY19-20 (with tax paid by March 2025), and extend the time of availing ITC for FY2020-21 reflects the council's efforts to help settle ambiguities in the initial days of GST implementation. The decision to pare pre-deposit

The 53rd GST Council meeting took decisions to

to streamline GST procedures and reduce litigation

enhance ease of doing business by proposing measures

amounts while filing appeals at the GST Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT); assign monetary limit to the government for filing appeals before GSTAT, high court and the Supreme Court; extend deadline for composition dealers for filing returns; and provide an optional facility to taxpayers in form GSTR-1A to amend details in GSTR-1 for a tax period before filing of GSTR-3B for the stated period would benefit the industry at large. These measures are expected to alleviate tax burden and

> simplify the GST framework, and thereby foster a more conducive environment for businesses.

Vision for GST

As India moves towards its vision of "Viksit Bharat" by 2047, it is time to take stock of what the council further needs to do to ensure GST becomes an efficient tax which it was purported to be. While the council's

decisions are a testament to the government's commitment to foster a conducive business environment, it should develop a long-term vision for GST. Four main areas require its attention. The first is rate rationalisation, for which a Group of Ministers (GoM) is already in place and is expected to provide recommendations in the next council meeting post-Budget FY25 and expected in the

latter half of August. The second is reevaluation of ITC's scope, which will not only require revisiting Section 17(5) of the CGST Act that restricts credits in some cases but also looking at sectors where credits have been restricted to keep the rates low.

The third area that requires immediate attention is the multiplicity of audits, scrutiny, and investigations being faced by corporate organisations across India. Multiple central and state GST bodies, as part of their revenue augmentation targets, audit and investigate entities, most of whom have registrations in various jurisdictions. It is time the council set up assessee-friendly centralised, joint or coordinated audits. The final area requires removing sectoral kinks in taxation structure and procedures. There is a need to set up task forces within a GoM to look at sector-specific issues and remove inefficiencies such as inverted duties, interpretational inconsistencies, and procedural problems. It is also time to set up a technical secretariat that provides solutions to issues on an ongoing basis, leaving the council to debate only major policy issues.

The GST Council's proactive approach in addressing the concerns of industry is a reassuring sign. While taxpayers soak in the changes that this council has brought in and eagerly await the next meeting, gratitude is due to the members of the fitment committee who have worked hard to scrutinise the industry's requests and provide solutions.

With contributions from Swati Saraf, senior tax professional, EY India

overcentralisation and spread it over a

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Onto the new **Parliament**

Each new Parliament is new in its unique way. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has just begun his third consecutive term of office, and the Bharatiya Janata Party MPs would be acutely conscious of the party not having a majority of its own in the Lok Sabha. This could modify their behaviour on the floor of the House. It could hold also the coalition

government back from riding rough shod over the Opposition and bulldozing important legislation through Parliament. In our parliamentary democracy the country is governed by the elected representatives of the people and not solely by the government. The government must realise that just as politicians are ultimately accountable to the voters, it is accountable to Parliament. Thanks to the live telecast of the proceedings in Parliament,

people are now in a position to watch their elected representatives' conduct and contributions to the country's betterment in the temple of democracy.

—G David Milton, Maruthancode

New Delhi

Susceptible, ab initio

It is evident that the National Testing Agency has too many irons in the fire. Practically every major selection examination is under its aegis. We need to move away from

longer period and multiple branches. Tests with computer interface would yet be more manageable with prescribed oversight and checks, but in this day and age, holding papercentric examinations is an invitation to slips and machinations. It is precisely why the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test will remain susceptible. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

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— Ramnath Goenka

THE GOVERNMENT **SHOULD CEDE SOME GROUND ON GST**

HE Modi government, in its new stint, seems to have changed tack. The government has realised that arbitrary policymaking without taking the stakeholders into confidence may ultimately lead to disillusionment of the people. This was visible in the way the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reached out to GST taxpayers during her post-GST Council Meeting press briefing on Saturday. She took the opportunity to hold out an olive branch to businesses saying the government has no intention of making life difficult for them. She sounded out that the government is not there to send GST notices to businesses left, right and centre. The Council's decisions also reflected the same tone and tenor. The GST Council, which had its 53rd meeting, did look to address many common issues raised by taxpayers. Many decisions were more in favour of taxpayers than for revenue enhancement. Though some key thorny issues were left untouched, it would be interesting to see how the new-look Council with 11 fresh members addresses larger issues like rate rationalisation and inclusion of petrol and diesel under the GST regime.

GST collections have been robust with monthly revenue showing 10-12% increase year-on-year. In April 2024, monthly collections crossed ₹2 lakh crore for the first time in almost seven years. While the surge in GST collection is partly attributed to increased economic activities in the country, a large part of it is said to have been due to strict rules to ensure compliance. The government has tightened screws on tax evaders, fake claimants of input tax credit and fraudulent assessees. These measures have led to robust collections but the field officers of the GST department have been a bit overzealous leading to harassment of taxpayers. Cases of forced tax payments and unnecessary raids and notices have become commonplace under GST. While FM Sitharaman has said only 1.96% registered taxpayers have received notices by the Central GST department, she added that state GST officials should be judicious in using coercive measures to 'extort' GST from taxpayers. The 2024 Parliament election results were an indication that people voted out of anger and angst. Business owners as well as common people felt the burden of an overzealous government going the extra mile to fill government coffers. It is expected that parties in power in states would also take lessons from the general election results and curb their high-handed policies.

HOOCH TRAGEDIES REPEAT **BUT NO LESSONS LEARNT**

BOUT a year after 22 people lost their lives consuming hooch spiked with poisonous methanol in Tamil Nadu, another 56 people have died in the state from imbibing a similarly toxic brew. It would be an understatement to term the events of the past week as tragic, as families dependent on daily wages have lost their breadwinners, children, their parents and entire communities have been shattered. While the state government has announced solatium for the kin of deceased and financial aid for children who lost their parents, this is only the barest minimum it can do having grossly failed to fulfil its duty to control the movement of methanol and the brewing and sale of illicit liquor.

This failure is starker given last year's tragedy unfolded just 160 km away from Kallakurichi district, which was affected this past week. The government transferred out the district's collector and suspended the superintendent of police, both of whom initially denied deaths were due to hooch. Action has also been taken against cops in the prohibition and enforcement wing. For the families, who have lost loved ones, however, this is poor solace. Locals have said the hooch was openly sold near the local police station; police were clearly complicit. Opposition parties have alleged that the illegal business also had political backers, a charge that needs to be investigated and acted upon transparently. If the DMK government does not take meaningful action that goes to the root of the problem - apathy and corruption - the loss of public faith will be near impossible to recover.

In 2008, nearly 180 people from TN and Karnataka died after consuming spurious alcohol. Till 2023, TN had not seen hooch deaths since. While the usual suspects in TN have again raised the call for prohibition, what is needed is enforcement of existing laws, raising awareness of the risks of hooch and reform of the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation. The state-run Tasmac controls liquor sales in TN and is a revenue-spinner. However, state control of alcohol, ostensibly for the welfare of the public, is only meaningful if products are accessible to the people. Yet, people have died consuming illicit liquor purchased for ₹60 despite a Tasmac outlet being less than a kilometre away as even the cheapest licit liquor costs 2.5 times as much.

QUICK TAKE

BEING DOGS' BEST FRIEND

THE harrowing video of a woman narrowly escaping a pack of aggressive stray dogs in Hyderabad brings back an issue that's increasingly troubling Indian cities. Indian lore has recorded dogs in human habitats for millenniums. Strays as an urban issue has been recorded at least since the 1860s. Mass birth-control and anti-rabies programmes were adopted by the Animal Welfare Board in 1997. But the pandemic put paid to the progress. Puppy populations boomed and sterilisation suffered, leading to more aggressive packs. The only way to make things better for both humans and dogs is to expand the sterilisation and vaccination programmes. Municipalities need to take the lead on this.

HE outcome of June 4, 2024 has thrown up some interesting trends. We will try and analyse who lost and who won. First, let us start with the BJP.

The BJP had captured almost all institutions in this country and the mainstream media was depicting Modi as the best thing that happened to India. This had benefic and malefic effects, both short term and long term. Every event in which he participated or led in the last 10 years at the national and international level, every action, and all his shenanigans were repeated and magnified. His speeches lauding his own contributions and in contrast, vilifying in the most acerbic terms the failures of the opposition, in particular of the Congress, were perceived as true. It was as if Modi could catapult India into the 21st century as a global power and deliver for his party, on promises made and dreams sold. The BJP as a party, with a Tefloncoated Modi image, was seen to be an impregnable fort, almost invincible. Modi made people believe he was their saviour, remedying the historic faults of the Congress since independence. This narrative being played in and out 24/7 had a beneficial effect for his party in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. By the time the 2024 elections came around, fatigue had set in.

Blatant and unjust misuse of investigating agencies in prosecuting only opposition leaders including chief ministers, keeping them away from the electoral process, sent a very negative signal during the course of a serious electoral battle. Even the middle class, largely for Modi, did not appreciate the selective prosecution and inaction against those who were a part of or aligned with the establishment though perceived to be highly corrupt. In fact, some of them were forced to defect and join the BJP under threat of prosecution. Such motivated actions may have benefitted the BJP in some states, including Delhi and Jharkhand. Having said that, the Modi monotone was getting counterproductive.

The blatantly biased functioning of the Election Commission of India (ECI) was yet another reason for public disapprobation. Despite Modi's openly culpable statements in the midst of the elections, the ECI chose not to act. This was not lost to the ordinary voters in the remote corners of the country, thanks to social media. This too impacted the outcome.

The interference by governors in the

Modi was lauded as the leader who would catapult India into the 21st century as a global superpower. This belief helped the party in 2019; by 2024, fatigue had set in

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

VOICE OF PEOPLE: **BJP'S COALITION** GOVERNMENT





functioning of the state legislatures, indulging in politics to overthrow elected governments through means which, to the public mind, were corrupt, added to the already simmering disenchantment. In West Bengal, despite the battle cry aided by the governor trying to queer the pitch, it did not prevent a Mamata victory. Mamata's popularity coupled with the $electoral\, management\, made\, her\, for tress$ impregnable. Kudos to her!

Too much of Modi and too little delivery on the ground made Modi a controversial character. His faults were depicted on every social media platform and with mobile phones in almost every hand, the Modi mania had petered out; it was easier to access social media platforms than sit around watching mainstream TV channels. What benefitted him in 2019 hurt him in 2024.

Realising that the first two phases of the Lok Sabha elections had not gone off too well, he started making speeches that did not befit the office he occupied. His statement that if Congress came to power, it would shower benefits to those who produce more children sought to create societal divisions, which he thought, would help him in the remaining phases. That did not happen.

His choices in appointment of chief ministers over and above stalwarts and seniors in the party brought about a level of discontent, which ultimately reflected in the statements of Mohan Bhagwat. In other words, even the RSS was concerned that Modi was inconsist-

ent with the culture of the RSS of which he himself is a *pracharak*. It was Modi versus the rest; it seemed the BJP was subsumed by Modi's personality. The '400 paar' slogan boomeranged.

The nation has rejected Modi without any doubt because the people of India have not voted for the BJP coming back to power on its own. The vote was clearly

for an alternative government. As far as the Congress is concerned, the response of the people is somewhat mixed. The Congress gained, apart from a few exceptions. Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra brought huge dividends for the Congress, but only when it allied with other major players of the respective states. When it came to states like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttarakhand, the Congress lost out. Rajasthan was perhaps persuaded by local factors like Vashundhara not campaigning in all constituencies, having been denied the post of chief minister, apart from a united effort by Congress. In Punjab and Kerala, people had no other option but to vote for the alliance. There were gains in the Northeast because the chief ministers there seemed to replicate what Modi was doing at the national level. The Congress did well in Telangana where it was already in power.

Above all, the 'Bharat Jodo Yatras', thanks to Rahul, galvanised people. Priyanka's speeches were focused and combative, fitting replies to Modi's anti-Congress rants. There were three other factors: one, the handling of the economy with the price rise, which hurt ordinary people. Two, large scale unemployment where the youth were disenchanted with Modi. And three, that Modi had delivered for the rich—a narrative also fuelled by the electoral bonds judgement of the Supreme Court—which suggested to people that the scheme was meant only to benefit the BJP. It is this mixed result that almost doubled the Congress tally, though not enough to catch the imagination of the people.

So, the people in fact voted for a coalition government, not for yet another Modi juggernaut. Henceforth, what the coalition partners have to watch out for is to prevent being swallowed, as happened in Odisha. All alliance partners in the past left BJP, including the Akalis, the AIADMK and, of course, the Shiv Shena, to name a few.

The times ahead for Modi will be turbulent. If the Congress can get its act together, 2029 is for the asking.

(Views are personal) (Tweets @KapilSibal)

THINGS THAT HAVE LED GREAT PEOPLE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

OW do we describe an *anubhuti* or sensation of God's benevolent hand? I connect it with 'entheon', a place to discover 'God-within'. The mysterious *Soma Rasa* of the Vedas apparently sparked 'God-visions'. The Eucharist ("This is my body and this, my blood") performed with wafer and wine, say some, is a later version of the wine that induced divine inner visions in the first Christians.

A story you may like in this regard is about great Iranian poet Hafiz, born in the early 14th century in Shiraz, once famous as the city of wine and roses. The son of a coal merchant who died in debt, Hafiz was raised by an uncle and worked for a draper and then as a baker's boy. While doing delivery in a rich neighbourhood, he chanced to see Shakh-e-Nabat, a young woman of exquisite beauty. She remained the unattainable love of his life and many poems were addressed to her.

The utter impossibility of his love led Hafiz to God. After many 40-day prayervigils, his moment of 'God-realisation' or 'cosmic consciousness' came at 60. On the last day of his vigil, he met his spiritual guide Attar of Shiraz (not the famous Farid-ud-din Attar of Nishapur from two centuries earlier). He gave Hafiz a cup of wine and that's when he had his 'God moment'. A prodigious output of 500 ghazals (songs), 42 rubais (quatrains) and some qasidas (poems of praise) followed, written only when

divinely inspired. He died at 69. The orthodox mullans detested Haiiz and tried to oppose his burial by regular rites. But common people of Shiraz loved him, and still do, as I discovered on my visit there. To defuse the conflict, they divided Hafiz's poetry into couplets and asked a little boy to choose one, agreeing to do as it suggested. The child drew a classic Hafiz barb at the orthodoxy: "Neither Hafiz's corpse nor life negates him: with all his misdeeds, Heaven awaits him." So, it is something that came to Hafiz through his anubhuti, the 'entheon' in Greek, from

which English gets 'enthusiasm'. Sometimes, God-love is in our destiny. In several *Puranas*, including the 11th *skanda* of the *Srimad Bhagvatam*, it was foretold a great devotee of Narayana would be born in the southern country in the region watered by the river Palar, present-day north Tamil Nadu. And sage Valmiki wrote: "In the month of Chaitra under the ninth lunar mansion, when the sun had gone to the zodiac sign of Cancer, Lakshmana and



FAITHLINE

Shatrughna were born." So, when a son was born in 1027 CE to Kesavacharya in Sriperumbudur in the same birth month and zodiac sign as the sons of Sumitra, he was convinced his baby was Lakshmana reborn and named him Ramanuja, meaning Rama's younger brother.



The son of a coal merchant who died in debt, Iranian poet Hafiz was led to God by an impossible love, at the age of 60. He wrote 500 ghazals (songs), 42 rubais (quatrains) and some *qasidas* (poems of praise). He died at 69

Ramanuja's brilliance shone from childhood. He had to hear a lesson only once from his teacher to grasp its meaning, however difficult it was, and he frequently sought out the company of holy men.

At that time, a well-reputed devotee called Sri Kanchipurna lived in Kanchipuram. He went daily from Kanchi to Poonamalli, a neighbouring village, to worship the deity there. Sriperumbudur is midway between these two places, so he would pass Ramanuja's house every day. Though born "outcaste", he was revered by priests because of his deep devotion.

One evening, Ramanuja met Sri Kanchipurna. Seeing the *tejas* or lustre of Kanchipurna's face, he felt greatly drawn to him. Very humbly, Ramanuja requested him to eat at his house that night. After Kanchipurna had eaten, Ramanuja went to

press his feet in service. When the guest protested, citing caste, Ramanuja's face fell. "It is my misfortune if I cannot serve you. Is it the wearing of a sacred thread that makes a brahmin? Only he who is devoted to God is a genuine brahmin." It was Ramanuja's entheon or God-within that spoke. Struck by his devotion, Sri Kanchipurna had a long conversation with him and went his way the next day. They remained greatly attached to each other.

Though lost in thoughts of this mystic heritage, a fractured toe was my particular souvenir of a trip to the Kaveri basin in Tamil Nadu through the fabulous historical belt called Chola Nadu. Every name you went past there was resonant with music, history and bhakti: Swami Malai, Darasuram, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur, Seergazhi, Chidambaram, Thiruppanandar, Thiruvalangadu—they rang like a litany.

Chidambaram ('chit-ambalam' meaning 'little temple' in old Tamil) is extra special, as it is the one place where Shiva is worshipped as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. It's still called 'Thillai' after the swampy trees that once surrounded it, but there isn't even one to be found near the temple now. I hobbled in through the South Gopuram, the gate through which saint Thirugnana Sambandar entered in the 7th century. I had to sprint to catch the spectacular noon *arati* before the sanctum was closed. But I remember feeling peaceful, thinking, "I wasn't supposed to come to Chidambaram,

so if I'm here, I guess I'll get darshan." And I did. But then I felt faint with hunger, fatigue and pain and just wanted to curl up in a cool temple corridor and rest. Suddenly, a voice called from behind a granite pillar. It was a priest, offering lemon and curd rice from stainless steel buckets. I ate some gladly and asked, "May I have more, I'm so hungry." You'll never believe what he said: "I'm happy you're asking. Some people don't like to eat temple food." I can't imagine why, when it's a gift in God's name. I like to think of this incident as an entheon moment, an *anubhuti*, being unexpectedly fed by God's kindness when I needed it.

> (Views are personal) (shebaba09@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Domain experts

Ref: Vaishnaw a minister for all seasons & reasons (Jun 23). Domain experts play an indispensable role in governance as much as the political leadership does. The trend was first set by P V Narasimha Rao, who appointed non-political financial wizard Dr Manmohan Singh as the finance minister in 1991. One of the reasons for the Modi government's success is entrusting key portfolios to domain experts. Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Untold suffering

Ref: NTA head rolls; NEET-PG on hold (Jun 23). The 11th-hour postponement of NEET-PG has caused untold suffering to aspirants as many already reached their destination after travelling hundreds of kilometres. Had this been announced at least two days earlier, a lot of expenses could have been avoided. G Nataraja Perumal, Belagavi

Condemnable act

The deferring of NEET-PG at the 11th hour is highly condemnable. Playing with the emotions and future of lakhs of aspirants, who have been fervently preparing over the years for these exams, will further aggravate their trauma. With many hailing from a modest background and most of them having reached the examination centre, who will be held accountable for their expenses? M Rishidev, Dindigul

Weaponising tragedy

Scores of people dying in the Kallakurichi liquor tragedy in Tamil Nadu is treated more as a weapon to seek vengeance against the ruling party than seeking a lasting solution. The BJP is making so much noise, forgetting it just kept quiet when 27 people died in Gujarat in 2022 in a similar incident. No doubt, politicians involved in such activities should be taken to task. A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

Illicit liquor

The Kallakurichi tragedy claimed at least 34 lives and hospitalised many, raising serious concerns in Tamil Nadu. Despite legal liquor sales within specified hours, the incident highlights the persistent issue of illicit alcohol, where bootleggers often adulterate with dangerous substances like methanol. Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

Escalator facilities

It's heartening that the Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation has decided to construct two new foot over-bridges. Though it is meant to help older people, they may not be able to use it as most of them often suffer from arthritis or other leg problems. So authorities should provide a lift or escalator facility. V Venkitasubramanian, Coimbatore

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We Could Stop Beating About GST

Collapsing rates and enlarging coverage remain

Last week, the GST Council agreed on a host of measures to improve compliance and reduce litigation. These include an amnesty for the initial years, a sunset clause for anti-profiteering provisions, introducing the power to waive retrospective tax demands and clarity on corporate guarantees. Monetary limits have been set for appeals by the tax department at various judicial fora. And, as is usual, the council set about correcting anomalies that creep into India's GST on account of multiple rates and exemptions. These are all very welcome measures. But the real reform of the GST is still pending - that involving collapsing rates and enlarging coverage. On these two broad fronts, movement is slower. The council has sought an internal report on rationalising rates and consensus needs to be built over bringing petroleum within the ambit of GST. Our fingers are crossed.



Even in its imperfect state, GST collection in the previous fiscal year outpaced nominal GDP growth by 2 percentage points. But there is irony in this. Success of GST after initial wrinkles were ironed out could work perversely to slow reform, which has been driven in India historically by cri-

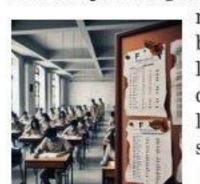
ses. The GST Council can draw comfort from not allowing the weighted average GST rate to slide further from the initial assumptions. But improving compliance and efficiency of tax administration can work only up to a point. By design, GST should improve both compliance and administration the closer it gets to a unitary universal tax rate.

States may need less convincing about basic reform of the GST with their reservations over revenue neutrality successfully laid to rest. The council can step up the pace of building consensus over converging the actual weighted average GST with the revenue-neutral rate proposed before the new tax was introduced. That would work out to an around 3 percentage points bump in the GST rate, with a positive fallout on tax collection. The extra revenue can be a compelling argument for states to dissolve carve-outs and rate arbitrage.

Mend, Don't Throw Away the Safety NTA

The haste to damn the National Testing Agency (NTA) and the politicisation of what isn't the agency's finest moments is unfortunate. GoI's move to address the problem of leaks and irregularities by setting up a time-bound committee headed by former Isro head and chair of IIT Kanpur board of governors, K Radhakrishnan, is the right first step. A common test for all applicants is a good idea. It reduces complexity, costs and ensures level playing field for applicants. Institutions are assured of a floor of the intakes' aptitude.

Fixing NTA will also require regaining public trust. The committee must engage with stakeholders as well as experts, who can provide guidance on creating fail safes to localise and



minimise impacts should the system be breached. Options for leveraging technology to improve the process and system drawing on successful practices of similar organisations like ETS in the US should be on the agenda.

GoI must be transparent and inclusive in its repair job. The committee's report and work products should be made available on relevant websites including those of NTA and education ministry. GoI's response to the recommendations and plan of action should be available for a time-bound public consultation finalisation. A time-bound

implementation with regular audits would help restore trust. The biggest vulnerability is the demand-supply gap. Nearly 24 lakh aspirants took the 2024 undergraduate medical test, NEET, for admission to 91,000 seats. As long as the ratio of aspirants to seats remains this high, there will be consistent and innovative efforts - some legal like coaching centres, and illegal to game the system. As the committee begins its work, the ministry should start working on addressing this mismatch.



entertaining as things can get in politics

Courtroom Waltz and The Jingle of Bail

Picture this: a politician, spring-loaded and perpetually popping up like a mischievous jack-in-the-box. He's got more bails than a cat burglar at a trampoline park. And yet, he's still doing encores going out and in of prison. The standard scene inside the courts is almost always the same, no matter his guilt or innocence. The courtroom doors swing open, and there he is, grinning like a Cheshire cat—without a muffler, of course in this heat—with a getout-of-jail-free card. 'Your Honour,' he says, 'I promise not to flee the country. My passport is already in the shredder, and I've enrolled in a 'How to Be a Model Defendant' workshop.' The judge raises an eyebrow. 'Again?' 'Yes, but this time I've got character references.' He waves a stack of letters like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat.

And thus, the dance begins. The Courtroom Waltz: one step forward, two steps back. Like something straight out of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland where the rousing command, 'Off with his head!' is inaudibly repeated so many times, that it takes on the form of a rap remix. The in-and-out of the politician underlines what many of us had vaguely muttered about before — that bail lies in the eye of the beholder. And if the court beholds things differently, it will be politely told to check its eyes again for power. Optical power, that is.

Some suggestions for systemic improvements to minimise, or stop, future NEET-NET-type leaks

For Exams to Pass the Test



Kiran Karnik

ecent events have brought the National Testing Agency (NTA) under scrutiny. Stories about leakage of the test paper for NEET-UG vigorously denied, at first — have proven true. NEET, the national-level entrance test for admission to medical colleges around the country, is taken by over 2 mn students each year. With a total of about 1 lakh seats in these colleges, the test is obviously very competitive. Getting admission, or not, is career-defining, deciding the future of millions of youngsters.

Therefore, leakages in NEET papers, which unfairly privilege a few, result in a high cost to the deserving who are consequently left behind. A few points stand out:

Massive demand for medical education In contrast, number of seats available is very limited, despite the rapid expansion over the last few years. Regulatory constraints and costs have inhibited the speed of expansion seen in engineering-tech education. In the latter area, overall supply (about 1 mn seats) now exceeds demand and colleges are shutting.

► The pull What attracts so many, even though it takes long years of hard effort before one graduates? Is it the prospect of securing a government job, indicative of its assured permanence and social security benefits? Or is it the lack of alternative employment opportunities? That millions are truly driven purely by the altruism of curing the sick can only be a hope.

Paying lakhs for leaked paper Is this indicative of the value attributed to a government job, or the dream of a roaring, high-income private practice? Hopefully, it's not indicative of other 'collateral' benefits expected, based on what students see and experience.

▶ Fee-ble minded A high NEET score enables admission in government institutions, with fees far lower than private ones. Number of seats is almost equal while fees can be 10-20 times higher. Is this fee differential, seen

ChatGPT

OF THE DAY

In a land where exams

were rigged,

The students were

constantly gigged.

They'd study and cram,

But it was all just a sham,

As the answers were

secretly jigged!



as a subsidy, driving a large part of demand?

▶ Outside chance 20,000-25,000 Indians go abroad to study medicine in countries like China, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Russia and the Philippines. Unlike the students who go to Western countries and Australia, studying in these countries is not motivated by a desire to subsequently migrate or settle there. These students have either not made it through NEET, or find studying abroad cheaper in private Indian colleges.

Soon after the NEET-UG controversy, GoI postponed NET - a test for jobs and research fellowships in universities - because of a leakage of the test paper, reported by a government cyber agency. Again, the first UGC statements were in denial. Now another test, the CSIR-UGC-NET has been

These and other leakages, admitted or not, point to serious systemic problems. Centralised tests, for admissions and employment, amplify the problem. Yet, some tests, like JEE and CAT, for engineering and manage-

nearly 9%. From 2000 to 2023...

ment respectively, have existed for decades with no known problems (except, apparently, one in CAT in the 1990s, detected and rectified in good time). A major point of difference is that these, unlike NEET, are administered or overseen by the primary stakeholders (IITs and IIMs).

There are independent institutions in other countries, too, who, like NTA, have full responsibility for tests. In the US, for example, SAT (for college admissions, taken by almost 2 mn, and available seven times a year) and GRE (for postgraduate admission), are administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), almost century-old, private, not-for-profit organisation.

While investigation into the reported leaks will proceed, and action hopefully taken against those responsible, here are a few suggestions for systemic improvements tominimiseorstop

future leaks: ▶ Audit it Undertake a professional audit of systems and procedures of NTA. Reengineer these to make them foolproof and transparent, capable of identifying speciidentifying points of failures or leaks, and persons responsible fic points of failu-

capacity

3

3,870

2023

China -1,454

■*Excl. China+India ⊇

Europe

2020

res or leaks, and the person(s) responsible. Excellent expertise for this exists. The IT industry, for example, has globally recognised capability in such process engineering and manage-

► Tech stock Make full use of technologies like encryption, block-chain and AI to ensure security, handle test papers and track leaks or tampering. Printing of test papers should be decentralised, password protected and done just before the test. Data analytics can raise a red flag for further investigation by detecting anomalies like a remote centre in Gujarat having a lot of registrations from Bihar, or one centre with exceptional results.

Keep an eye Tight monitoring, with third-party audit, during the test. Functioning CCTV cameras to be used, in conjunction with AI, to detect suspicious behaviour. While two cameras are apparently mandated, one audit indicated as many as 46% of the centres didn't meet this for NEET-UG.

Professional, not political watch Since the most vulnerable links are humans, selection, training and monitoring of key personnel are vital. Carelessness and corruption must be rooted out - difficult, but not impossible. In this, institutional strength is crucial, as proven by those which have stood out for their professionalism, autonomy and integrity. Yet, too many institutions that bend to powerful people — often politicians are the bane of India. Politicians who do this realise their folly only when the chickens come home to roost

The broader issue, though, is conceptual — admission tests aim at elimination, not selection. Most test memory or regurgitation, not critical thinking; training — through endless practice on generic problems, not problem definition or innovative solutions; speed, not analysis. Aptitude and attitude so key for a doctor—find no place in the testing. No wonder successful applicants in admission and job tests are mostly from 'factories' à la Kota.

Massive numbers are one reason for multiple-answer tests. Though grossly inadequate, they are easy to administer and evaluate, and reflect an aura of objectivity. One solution as IIMs have successfully proven—is a single test, without a common ranking, and decentralised selection processes. Why not adapt and adopt that?

The writer is chairperson, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi



postponed. Official reason: 'logistical problems'.



transparent, capable of

2015

Global Renewable Energy Capacity

Between 2000 and 2023, global renewable capacity increased from 0.8 to 3.9

TW. This was led by China, which added 1.4 TW, more than Africa, Europe, and

capacity also expanded fast, growing 604% in that period, attaining a CAGR of

with China being the standout country in the continent. India's renewable

World renewable energy capacity grew 414%

2010

since 2000 (Installed capacity, GW)

North America combined. Overall, Asia has shown the greatest regional growth,

Note: Renewable energy: solar, wind, hydro (excluding pumped storage), bioenergy,



Knowing there would be tough questions, I brought my CA along.

On GST, KISS and Tell

geothermal, and marine energy



GR Gopinath

Making things simple isn't that simple. In December 2018, as FM, Arun Jaitley had announced that the sun would soon set on the 28% GST slab, except for luxury items. That the country could look forward eventually to only two slabs-5%, and a standard rate between 12% and 18%, apart from exempt items. Unfortunately, in less than a year, Jaitley passed away, leaving his assurances unfulfilled.

GST is still a complicated tax regime with varying slabs, not easy to compre hend or comply with, and open to interpretation, harassment and avoidable litigation. One can remind finance ministry officials of the KISS principle-KISS: Keep It Simple, Stupid. Attributed to Lockheed aircraft engineer Kelly Johnson, KISS was to urge his engineers to keep aircraft design so simple that even a 'stupid' person should be able to repair the aircraft with ordinary tools on the combat field.

Bureaucracy, the world over, however, is usually oblivious to KISS. An Amazon ad boasts it sells more than 1 crore different products, with more categories added every day. In this context, asking bureaucrats to identify and categorise all products and services for differential tax slabs in the GST regime is the surest way to get into a labyrinth. Empirical data from across the world on the benefits of a unified single tax is incontrovertible. So, an unambiguous

directive to the bureaucracy is necessa-

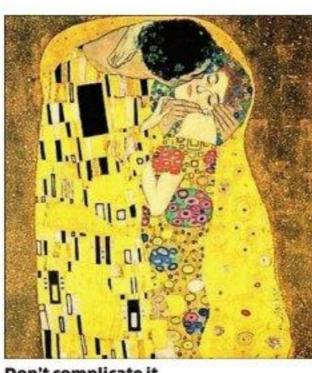
ry to come up with just two categories:

goods eligible for zero tax, and all the rest to come under a single rate of 10% or 12% or even lower. That means everything, except those specifically exempt, is taxed.

This needs bold and clear reformist thinking at the political level. Take 'sin taxes'. They make no sense and are at cross purposes with GoI's overarching policies of generating growth and creating jobs under the much-touted 'Make In India'.

A typical 300-room 5-star hotel generates direct employment for around 500 people, 90% of whom are waiters, housekeeping staff, front desk and concierge staff, besides cooks, chefs, managers, financial and clerical staff. There are a host of others employed in associated services such as the spa, gift shops and swimming pool. The hotel also generates indirect

employment in ancillary areas. It buys bed linen, furnishings, rugs and carpets, ACs, cutlery, electrical fittings, furniture... and consumes enormous quantities of food produce. All these generate jobs and income. These hotels also generate forex by attracting rich tourists and investors looking for



Don't complicate it

investment opportunities and have a direct bearing on FDI. So, it's unwise to tax these hotels to death. The same warped view imposes high taxes on ACs, AC restaurants, chocolates, luxury cars...

One must figure out how to rev up the economy by making the rich and upper-middle classes spend, and to move more people up the value chain, instead of designing a tax system that keeps these products out of the new consumer class' reach.

Take a roadside bakery, where officials have mastered the art of baking confusion. Bread is zero tax, but the vegetable sandwich is in the 5% tax slab, hitting the vegetable grower directly. Bun is zero, but bun with a few raisins is 5%. And cakes and chocs are 18%. It's the same with taxes on wine, rum and beer, which generate large scale employment.

The labyrinthine slabs for thousands of categories of products and services are mindboggling. Can a country really aspire to be a \$5 tn economy if its taxmen turn on gourmet chefs and get bogged down into researching distinctions of dough-making while startups

struggle to make dough? Instead of moving gingerly, as has been the case till now, Nirmala Sitharaman should take a cue from the PM, who hinted at major reforms in taxes and elimination of 'tax terrorism' and needless litigation, and do away with all the confusing tax slabs in one fell swoop. She can then usher in a truly single low tax rate, along with a list of exempt items. That will ensure compliance, widen the tax net, improve ease of doing business, boost the economy, create jobs and increase tax collection.

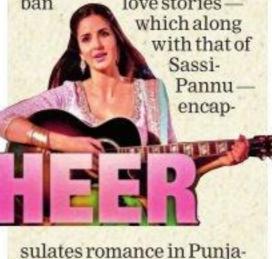
The writer was founder, Air Deccan



Heer Harshdeep Kaur

In a strange way, it's an

utter surprise to find such a haunting, ethereal song like 'Heer' in a film as 'mainstream' as the 2012 Jab Tak Hai Jaan. But there it is, sung like a ghost song by Harshdeep Kaur, giving flesh to AR Rahman's evocative, almost 'banjara' music. And the lyrics by Gulzar, transposing the doomed Heer-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahilove stories -



bi folklore. Kaur's voice remains a ripple pretty much through the song, until it soars — 'Ho mainu le jaaye Mirza koi/Le jaaye Mirza koi..' (Someone like Mirza take me...). The pace is slow, because so seems its subject - a slow burn. While the picturisation in the film shows the singer (Katrina Kaif) strumming on a guitar, it's the sheer presence of the voice and a

dafli (hand percussion)

a spider web.

that holds the number like

THE SPEAKING TREE

Benefits Of Yog

BK BRIJ MOHAN

Yog consists of profound and subtle teachings; it is described as the supreme secret revealed by God. Yog is "evenness of mind" and "skill in action", chapter two of the Bhagwad Gita enunciates. "Established in yog, perform action," Krishn exhorts Arjun. Later, in chapter eight, Arjun is asked to always be steadfast in yog. These examples from the Gita make it clear that yog is more about our state of mind and way of life than mere physical postures.

Its goal is bigger than attaining perfect physical health and fitness. The practice of yog, in all its aspects, including action without attachment to the result, devotion to God, acquisition of knowledge and control over the self leads to freedom from the bondage of vices and liberation from sorrow.

Yog is an essential component of not just spiritual practices but also ethical conduct and a life of virtue. The purity of mind that comes from regular practice of meditation, a key element of yog, enables one to have accurate discernment and the right judgment, which leads to correct action, success and happiness.

If the mind is tainted by vices, it distorts our perception of people and situations, negatively influencing our conduct and decision-making. Purity of mind is fundamental to fostering divine qualities while an impure mind is the breeding ground of demoniacal tendencies, as the Gita envisages in chapter 16.

The writer is chief spokesperson of Brahma Kumaris Organization

Chat Room

Changing Priorities

Apropos 'Transmission Projects Worth ₹13,595 cr Get Govt Nod' (June 23). India needs to make significant investments to build up energy storage infrastructure to meet the target of 500 GW of non-fossil fuel energy capaci ty by 2030. Given the variable nature of solar power, these systems can be placed next to transmission lines, injecting power into the grid during periods of deficiency and absorbing back surplus power during phases of congestion. This will help improve overall efficiency of transmission systems and reduce the evergrowing need to add conventional infrastructure.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA Jalandhar, Punjab

Hold to Account

Apropos 'Darkness to Death in Mins: How Illicit Liquor Left Families Shattered, (June 23). The hooch tragedy is a result of administrative failure. The



district collector of Kallakurichi has been transferred and some police officials suspended or transferred.

barn door after the horses have bolted. The government must undertake proper and timebound investigation, and ensure all those responsible for this tragedy are punished swiftly.

This amounts to closing the

N SADHASIVA REDDY Bengaluru

Good News, Indeed

Apropos the Edit 'NRIs of the World, Keep on Depositing' (June 22). It is gratifying to note that the Indian diaspora is keeping a close tab on our economic growth and realigning their investments accordingly. Further deposit growth is incumbent on successful execution of our capex plans, long-term political stability and inflation control. With the expected decline in interest rates, volatility in NRI deposits cannot be ruled out.

RAJARAO KUMAR Bengaluru

Letters to the editor may be addressed to

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ASK MANY QUESTIONS QUESTION ALL ANSWERS



CONTRAPUNTO

The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled

PLUTARCH

Fix It, GOI

The future of India's young depends on govt thinking creatively on reforming exams

isery piles on for our young examinees. Last Wednesday, education ministry cancelled UGC-NET exam, conducted a Aday earlier, fearing a paper leak. On Saturday, it postponed NEET-PG exam scheduled for the next day, over "logistical issues". When seen together with NEET-UG controversies, the message is loud and clear: something is seriously wrong with the National Testing Agency's (NTA) functioning. And fixing the problem poses the first big challenge for new NDA govt.

Problems evident for long | The crisis may have blown up this year, but the signs have been there for years. Exams like NEET and JEE conducted by NTA have run into controversies regularly. In NEET 2022, CBI had to step in following allegations of impersonation in the exam. In 2021, a Russian hacker even hacked into the software for that year's JEE to help examinees cheat.

It is the reluctance of authorities to take timely action against such episodes that is responsible for the



present mess. This was made clear, when despite ample evidence, the education ministry remained in denial of a paper leak in this year's NEET, ordering a CBI inquiry only on Saturday.

Remedy has failed us | What is galling is that NTA was put in place precisely to weed out issues we are facing today. So, one of the questions that needs to be asked is whether there

are in-built flaws in conducting a mammoth exam like NEET, with 2.4mn examinees taking it in 13 languages across 4,500 centres. It is welcome that govt has set up a high-powered committee to

examine NTA's functioning and recommend ways for fair conduct of exams. It has also brought into effect the Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 to prevent use of unfair means in public exams.

Nothing should be off table | But the panel's work will have to be more than a bureaucratic exercise if the system is to be rid of its flaws. We need genuine reforms that address the spectrum of concerns that experts have been raising. The use of technology that allows algorithmic question patterns is one answer to paper leaks in a vast system with innumerable nodes. Conducting exams more than once a year, as is the case in US, is another option to be considered. But decentralising the exams altogether is an option govt mustn't shy away from. The future of young Indians is at stake.

Helping The Help

At home or abroad, Indians treat domestic workers as exploitable, cheap labour

ritain's wealthiest family, the Hindujas, appealing a Swiss court's ruling, which found them guilty of exploiting domestic help from India, raises two important issues. First, domestic workers who go abroad for work are a vulnerable category. Second, the huge cohort of domestic workers in India continues to face exploitation because there's no legal protection and social safety net.

Vulnerable abroad In the Hindujas case the family is accused of underpaying workers, keeping them on call without proper breaks, confiscating their passports and paying them in Indian currency. While the family has denied these charges, it's a reality that domestic workers working abroad often face similar employment conditions.



GOI has launched a consular grievances redressal system called MADAD. It's a measure of the challenge that top FAQs on MADAD cover non-payment of dues, termination or absence of employment contract, and repatriation.

Vulnerable at home too | Conditions of domestic workers in India aren't any better. According to govt data, total number of domestic workers in the country was 28mn in July 2023. The actual number is likely to be more than

twice as much. GOI did enact four labour codes in 2020 aimed at providing decent working conditions and wages. But they don't specifically cover domestic workers. Plus, despite most state govts adding domestic work to the list of scheduled employment, they haven't implemented this on the ground. Only Kerala is moving ahead with a specific law for the welfare of domestic workers that will fix minimum wages, working hours, and ensure a safe work environment.

Learning from international examples | India needs a standalone law covering domestic workers. Asean countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, have laws that ensure weekly off days, pensions, minimum wages and even social security for domestic workers, most of whom are foreign nationals in those countries. GOI too must make a beginning in this direction for domestic workers at home.

It's hair-razing

Man's trial by woman's shampoo and conditioner

Milind Ghatwai



Most men of a certain vintage can't tell a shampoo from a conditioner. They are clueless about what goes first. They occasionally take a sly look at the colourful bottles stacked on bathroom shelves in their homes or hotels but chicken out due to fear of the unknown. But they do so at their own peril. When they get to use either, it's a consequence of someone else's motive-their better halves, partners, or whoever calls the shots at home.

It begins on an innocuous note. Products that don't deliver on promised lustre, bounce, shine come their way. The guilt of leaving expensive stuff halfunused reminds women of their men. Ditto for nearly out-of-date bottles that are fobbed off with sugar-coated words.

The male is coaxed into washing his hair with whatever is left in the fancy bottles. He's clueless about the sudden attention his scalp gets. He is happy about bubbles and foam. So far so good. After all, sharing is caring. But things get a little sinister when it comes to testing products of indeterminate provenance. Or those that say something in the fine print that you read only in the comfort of your home.

Can women be accused of unethical conduct? No. Who cares about male hair anyway? Hasn't Bollywood sung paeans to female locks, tresses, and curls, whether bheegi, bikhari or reshami. Not to forget Urdu shayari. The male variety gets a mention only in films like Bala, where it's for lack of it, not abundance. Anyway, there's only anecdotal evidence about such clinical trials at home.

Will women plead guilty to the charge? Are women likely to squeal on other women? Probably these minor transgressions are covered under *omerta*. Men at the receiving end of such experiments must take solace in the fact that they're helping preserve a national treasure. No need to call it a sacrifice because you are most likely to get rid of what grows on your head at the earliest.

There's one product that some men swear by. A certain beer shampoo. The very name gives them a heady feeling, if not essential vitamins and oils. But gentlemen from the old school, who detest anything that deviates from the customary, are perplexed when they encounter a bald spot. The root cause of falling hair need not be only stress. They need to read the fine print too.

Examine Our Exam-Nation

The national testing system, centred around a three-hour exam that encourages rote learning, is broken and irreparable. What we need is a new method that employs three-year progressive evaluation

Kalyan T Chakravarthy and Hemali.Chhapia@ timesgroup.com





India's centralised exam system is losing credibility by the day. As GOI, which sacked NTA's chief, is struggling to restore a

semblance of order, it's time to ask a different, more fundamental set of questions.

Fixing accountability and rescheduling exams may be all very well, but what about the impact of such decisions on young minds? In any case, should a three-hour test be a deciding factor that defines the lives of millions of young Indians? There is a serious issue with the system and we need to revisit the three Ms - mindset, methodology and modality - to fix it. And we need to look inwards for solutions.

Macaulay to Maitreyi mindset | The rise of Kota, Sikar, Hyderabad as coaching hubs should have raised red flags long ago that India's entrance exams can be cracked with two years of intensive coaching. Worse, what students go through to do so is terrifying; coaching institutes have even gone to the extent of jamming windows and removing fans to ensure students do nothing but study and there is no untoward incident when stress drives them up the wall.

What we instead need are tests that allow for soch, moving away from a Macaulay system of measuring memory

to a more holistic system that measures innate inclination (swadharma), IQ and EQ. We need to break free of the colonial legacy and adopt an India-centric system, a version of which had been in vogue long ago-as exemplified by the Upanishadic story of Maitreyi, India's first woman scholar – before it was replaced by Macaulay's rote learning-based mindset.

Given the controversies we are facing, examiners can no longer be lazy; they must be imaginative and devise tests that genuinely assess the learning levels and understanding of students.

Use of technology is key In a nation where millions of aspirants want to be a doctor or engineer, where candidates and their parents are open to paying lakhs

Days after LS results, parties in Bihar are already preparing for 2025 assembly polls. State party CPI-ML

has returned to Parliament after 35 years with two MPs in

the 18th Lok Sabha. In a stunning comeback in 2020 Bihar

polls, the radical Left party won 12 seats. Party general

secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, credited with

CPI-ML's electoral revival, tells Subodh Ghildiyal

about lost opportunity in Siwan and Saran, where

Lalu's daughter Rohini Acharya narrowly lost by 13.6k

SP-led opposition did very well in UP, but RJD's score in

votes, and sharp spike in INDIA's EBC vote shares.

Though their socio-economic profile

may be similar, the situation was very

different in the two states. UP, after all,

is the laboratory of 'bulldozer raj'. It

has seen much worse caste oppression

and anti-Muslim violence than Bihar.

Of course, INDIA bloc in Bihar could

have put up a better performance with

better management of seat-sharing,

choice of candidate and campaign

execution. That said, outcome

of eastern UP and south Bihar

In the final phase, INDIA

won 6 of 13 seats in Purvan-

chal, and 6 of 8 in adjoining

region of south Bihar. As an

example of better seat-sha-

ring, we had a legitimate claim

over Siwan, which could've

helped us and INDIA win

not only one more seat, but

also improve our chances in

adjoining constituencies,

including Saran that RJD

lost by a very narrow margin. Likewise, friction between

is quite on the same level.

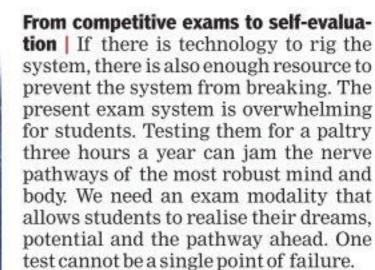
Bihar was underwhelming.

key, what could possibly be the way to conduct exams? Technology offers us solutions. AI may have disrupted the jobs scenario, but it has also taught us to live with, adapt to, and embrace uncertainty.

The question to be asked is: why must our exams be so symmetrical, syllabi clearly defined, textbooks rigidly prescribed. We know deep inside that the marrow of any exam's soul is to evaluate, not put teenagers

to get their hands on a question paper and its answer

quick evaluation may not lend themselves to subjective questioning, but multiple-choice questions can be replaced by fill-in-your-choice format, allowing for infinite possibilities in solutions, with machine evaluation and immediate result generation. After candidates are filtered, a second advanced exam could ask them to defend their responses, thus reinforcing their application of learnt concepts.



The New Testing system ought to be a three-year progressive evaluation, with a national general aptitude assessment with normalised scores to wipe out state differences. A part of this would be a psychometric test in grade 10, which assesses the strengths of each candidate, and what she is best at pursuing. Before an entrance test is held, grades 11 and 12 should have focused national tests, including those assessing special aptitudes like writing code or creating music.

Such an early feedback system for self-selection would allow several things to happen: a potential writer, economist, artist, or musician would be freed of the pressure to live the wry half-

lives they would as engineers or lawyers. Also, it would reduce crowding into three or five entrance exams of Second, tests need to be offered on an on-demand

basis. Third, students must be allowed to choose from more than one national testing agency. Open book exams are also an option to be considered.

The examination system needs to be reimagined, recalibrated and revised, as the existing model is not working. Indian exams need Indian solutions. We owe our students new ways of testing them, so that, once evaluated, they can go back to deriving joy and wonder from constant learning and discovery.

Chakravarthy is executive director of PanIIT Alumni Reach for India Foundation

We should have a national aptitude assessment with normalised scores to wipe out state differences, and a psychometric test in grade 10 that points to the strengths of each student

through a pressure cooker environment that kills the joy of learning. AI can be deployed to design and pick questions from a large bank to personalise in real-time each candidate's question paper, thus eliminating the possibility of paper leaks.

'No reason why INDIA can't win the next Bihar assembly

an Independent and RJD over Purnea possibly weakened

In 2020, we bounced back after a crushing defeat in

2019. This time, our LS performance in terms of vote

share and seats has been much better. There's no reason

why INDIA cannot secure a clear victory in the next

assembly elections even if they're held ahead of schedule.

in alliance with RJD - Left as a bloc wasn't part of RJD-

Congress alliance in 2019. Impact of Left's inclusion in

general, and ML in particular, saw massive impro-

vement in INDIA vote share. CSDS-Lokniti post-

for the next battle without delay.

bigger sustainable trend?

poll survey found that vote share increased by 38

percentage points among non-Paswan Dalits,

by 28 among Paswans, by 9 percentage points

among non-Yaday OBCs and by 7 among Muslims.

INDIA should consolidate these gains and prepare

CPI-ML is in Parliament after decades. Do you see a

Koderma in Jharkhand.

In the past we've won independently in multi-

corner contests, winning assembly seats on

our own. But our votes weren't enough to win

an LS contest. But we still finished second

on seats like Siwan and Ara in Bihar, and

This time, support of INDIA

allies has been as crucial to our

victories, as was our support

This was the first time CPI-ML contested LS elections

INDIA prospects over seats in Koshi-Seemanchal.

Will INDIA have a good show in assembly polls?

Exams with a high volume of aspirants requiring

elections, even if advanced...Our vote share has shot up' for their wins. Both our MPs are farmer netas who represent Shahabad and Magadh regions. Eight of our 12 MLAs also represent this region. More focused attention to developmental needs here alongside the struggle to improve education, healthcare and housing needs, jobs and conditions of scheme workers

will help the party expand.

How can parties like Congress improve opposition's political strategy without taking a radical tack, like, say,

Not for me to advise other parties. Congress has nearly doubled its tally, indicating a significant revival. Perhaps this also calls for a certain degree of reinvention and reorientation of policies. There are signs that Congress is moving in that direction. Greater emphasis on social

equality, adequate representation of sections so far excluded, common people's economic welfare, and people-oriented development can help pro-democracy forces come closer.

How do you see the way forward for BJP govt at Centre? BJP aimed for 370 seats, but fell short by 130! Certainly a big defeat. Sangh-BJP forces may have to go a little slow in terms of implementation of their core agenda. Modi 2.0 was marked by escalation, acceleration and all-out aggression. I only hope democracy can prevail more decisively. The broad spectrum of political forces, civil society and digital community aligned with INDIA will have to continue to work in unison.

Do you think TDP and JDU will cramp BJP's style? Not majorly, but the threat of JDU and

TDP moving away will haunt BJP. Its previous allies Shiv Sena and Akali Dal paid a heavy price; parties like BJD, YSRCP, BRS and AIADMK also suffered while supporting BJP at the national level. If TDP and JDU move away, no potential ally would risk joining hands with BJP.

Calvin & Hobbes



HA HA! I HOW ARE YOU CAN'T WAIT GOING TO PICK IT UP? TO PLASTER SOMEBODY WITH IT!







Sacredspace



The truth knocks on the door and you say, 'Go away, I'm

the truth,' and so it goes away. Puzzling.

Robert M Pirsig

Develop The Ability To Make Enlightened Choices

BK Brij Mohan

Tog consists of profound and subtle teachings; it is described as the supreme secret revealed by God. Yog is "evenness of mind" and "skill in action," chapter 2 of the Bhagwad Gita enunciates. "Established in yog, perform action," Krishn exhorts Arjun. Later, in chapter 8, Arjun is asked to always be steadfast in yog. These examples from the Gita make it clear that yog is more about our state of mind and way of life than mere physical postures.

Its goal is bigger than attaining perfect physical health and fitness. The practice of yog, in all its aspects, including action without attachment to the result, devotion to God, acquisition of knowledge, and control over the self, leads to freedom from the bondage of vices and liberation from sorrow.

Yog is an essential component of not just spiritual practices but also ethical conduct and a life of virtue. The purity of mind that comes from regular practice of meditation, a key element of yog, enables one to have accurate discernment and the right judgment, which leads to correct action, success, and happiness.

If the mind is tainted by vices, it distorts our perception of people and situations, negatively influencing our conduct and decision-making. Purity of mind is fundamental to fostering divine qualities, while an impure mind is

the breeding ground of demoniacal tendencies, as the Gita envisages in chapter 16. Yog holds the key to transforming an evil mind into a pure one.

tion of evil, and establishment of righteousness that God manifests for as He tells Arjun in chapter 4 of the Gita - is done by His teachings of yog. It enables humans to know their true spiritual identity and connect with Him to empower themselves and overcome their weaknesses.

The yog taught by God is Raj Yog, meant for the salvation of all. It is a spiritual process and practice capable of being universally adopted and undertaken even by the elderly. This king of yog THE SPEAKING TREE enables the self to rule over

the senses and sublimate worldly desires and attachments. It also leads to the purification of the soul and freedom from sorrow.

In Raj Yog, the Self is recognised as an immortal being, a sentient non-The protection of the good, destruc-physical entity or as a divine point of

eyebrows. In the process of Raj Yog, our mind and intellect stay connected to the Supreme Soul through His loving remembrances, even while doing our daily duties. Regular practice of Raj Yog draws

light twinkling between and behind

into the soul the powers and virtues of the Divine and transforms it from weak to powerful, from disturbed to peaceful, from its subservience to passions, people and situations to being master of the self, unshaken by circumstances.

Raj Yog is an ancient art and skill that restores intellectual communion with the Supreme Being. It's not just about achieving physical well-being but also about learning a better way of life by developing the ability to make more enlightened choices.

The writer is chief spokesperson for

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Delhi-Dhaka rapport

Neighbours boost ties under Chinese, US gaze

N her second trip to India within a fortnight, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held wide-ranging talks with PM Narendra Modi, underlining the commitment of both nations to bolster their ties. This was the first bilateral state visit by a foreign leader after the formation of the new BJP-led NDA government. The agreements signed by New Delhi and Dhaka covered a lot of ground — maritime cooperation and blue economy, railway connectivity, space sector, digital partnership, healthcare and defence production.

Describing India as Bangladesh's major neighbour and a trusted friend, she recalled the contribution of the government and the people of India to her country's liberation in 1971. Beyond the historical legacy, Modi and Hasina have developed a good rapport over the past decade. This has helped bilateral relations go from strength to strength. In November last year, when Hasina was under pressure not only from the Bangladeshi Opposition but also the US ahead of the national elections, PM Modi joined her in virtually inaugurating three infrastructure projects. This had given a major fillip to Hasina's poll campaign.

A key takeaway from last week's interaction was India's decision to send a technical team to Bangladesh for a mega project to conserve the Teesta river. China, which spares no effort in wooing or coercing India's neighbours, has been eyeing the estimated \$1-billion project amid New Delhi's reservations. Hasina's bonhomie with India will be put to the test next month, when she is expected to travel to China. India, meanwhile, is in no mood to walk a tightrope. In a fresh assertion of its independent foreign policy, New Delhi is engaging closely with Dhaka even though the US has been critical of the Hasina-led Awami League government over alleged human rights violations and electoral irregularities.

Exam mess

It's time to remove systemic flaws

ATE in the day, but the Centre has finally cracked the whip. The National Testing Agency (NTA) chief has been shown the door, the Central Bureau of Investigation has been tasked with the probe into the alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG examination and a committee constituted to suggest an overhaul of the examination system. The last-minute cancellation of the NEET-PG examination, though, underscores an unchanged component of the entire process — insensitivity. What could have been announced a day or two in advance was done just hours before the candidates were supposed to take the test. The inconvenience, hassle and mental trauma such decisions result in were hardly factored in. Earlier, the CSIR-UGC-NET examination was postponed and the UGC-NET cancelled a day after it was conducted. A relook at the testing procedures and a fresh start have been the need of the hour for some time, and this aspect is finally being addressed. Comprehensive recommendations that leave no scope for error and suggest absolute integrity must be on the agenda.

The decisions come on the eve of the commencement of the Parliament session. A resurgent Opposition is expected to take up the issue strongly. The Centre would do itself and the entire student community a favour by being transparent about the NTA mess. The issue has transcended political one-upmanship. Fixing inadequacies and regaining trust in the institutions is of paramount importance.

A larger question demands an informed debate: When a staggering 24 lakh students compete for a mere one lakh medical seats, what's apparent is the lack of opportunity and a failure to match aspirations. The issues of education and unemployment are the core challenges that confront the nation. Walkouts, sloganeering or sidestepping these matters won't help. Politicians across party lines must sit together, talk and work toward finding solutions. Everyone is affected.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

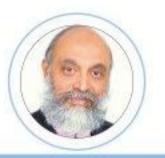
The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JUNE 24, 1924

Mahatmaji's ultimatum IN a signed article under the heading 'The acid test' in the latest issue of Young India, Mahatma Gandhi gives an explanation of his position with regard to the several resolutions that he proposes to move at the forthcoming meeting of the All-India Congress Committee, which virtually amounts to an ultimatum to the Congress generally and to those who differ from him in particular. "If I am to become an efficient General," writes Mahatmaji, "I must have soldiers who would obey, who have faith in themselves and in their General and who will carry out instructions. My plan of action is always open and very definite. Certain well-defined conditions being fulfilled, it guarantees success. But what is a poor General to do when he finds soldiers who subscribe to his conditions and yet do not carry them out and, maybe, do not even believe in them? The resolutions are designed to test the qualifications of the soldiers." The same idea is put in another and a still clearer form. "The soldiers," writes Mahatmaji, "are in the happy position of being electors of their own General. The would-be General must know the conditions of employment. I remain where I stood in 1920. Only my faith has increased with the years that have gone by. I have no faith in any other plan. I am, therefore, not available on any other terms, not because I am unwilling but because I am unfit. All the four resolutions, then, constitute my application for employment as the General and lay down my qualifications and limitations."

No light at the end of the N-tunnel

ICAN and SIPRI reports paint a grim picture on the global nuclear front



C UDAY BHASKAR DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

HE apocalyptic nuclearweapons and a parlous global security framework were in focus this month, with two major reports being released on the same day (June 17) - one by the ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) and the second by SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). Their findings are both distressing and bleak.

The ICAN report reveals that the nine nuclear-weapon-capable nations (the US, UK, Russia, China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea) collectively spent \$91 billion last year in modernising and increasing their respective arsenals. Assuaging a deep-seated strategic insecurity syndrome apropos of the adversarial 'other' is the common thread for all nine nations.

Predictably, the top three spenders are the US with \$51.5 billion, which is more than half of the global nuclear weaponrelated spending in 2023, followed by China (\$11.8 billion) and Russia (\$8.3 billion). ICAN Director Melissa Parke noted that the nuclear powers collectively spent \$2,898 per second last year on these weapons and that these funds exceed what the World Food Programme estimates as necessary to end world hunger. She added that "a million trees could be planted for each minute of spending on nuclear weapons".

The reference to the number of trees that could be planted is particularly relevant in the context of the irreversible global warming and climate change exigency that



OMINOUS: China is in the middle of a significant modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal. REUTERS

the world responds to in an effete and indifferent manner. India, which is reeling under a scorching summer and a dangerously low people-tree ratio, is among the most affected among large nations (in terms of total area and demography). This geo-physical trend may soon prove to be the most serious threat to human security globally. The recent heatwave-related deaths during the Haj pilgrimage are illustrative.

The SIPRI Yearbook 2024 is a comprehensive volume that provides an overview of developments in international security, weapons and technology, military expenditure, arms production and the arms trade as well as armed conflicts and conflict management, along with efforts to control conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The nuclear chapter of almost 100 pages is a valuable summary of recent developments and trends in the nuclear domain over the last year. Authors Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda are to be commended for their due diligence in furrowing a tenaciously opaque domain, where facts, information, disinformation and political rhetoric abound.

The key findings of the SIPRI

A significant increase in the deployment of Chinese nukes would have significant

implications for South Asian strategic stability.

nuclear survey are that the number and types of nuclear weapons in development have increased, as all nine nations deepen their reliance on nuclear deterrence to safeguard what they perceive as their core national interest. The most recent example is that of the Russia-Ukraine war, where Moscow has rattled its nuclear sabre to warn the US-led NATO about redlines, and in response, both NATO and the US have stated that they will enhance their nuclear readiness across the board.

The SIPRI nuclear overview indicates that in early 2024, the nuclear nine (N9) "possessed approximately 12,121 nuclear weapons, of which 9,585 were considered to be potentially operationally available. An estimated 3,904 of these warheads were deployed with operational forces, including about 2,100 that were kept in a state of high operational alert - about 100 more than the previous year."

While the US and Russia still account for 88 per cent of the total global arsenal, an instructive statistic has been highlighted by SIPRI in relation to China, whose nuclear arsenal "has warheads in January 2023 to 500 by January 2024, with expectations of continued growth". It adds that China is in the middle of a significant modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal over the next decade and "some projections suggest that China could potentially deploy at least as many intercontinental ballistic missiles as either Russia or the US in that period".

While China may be pitting itself against the US, a visible increase in the deployment of Chinese nukes (from the current 24) would have significant implications for South Asian strategic stability that would be of grave import to New Delhi.

During the Cold War, the nuclear missile contest was played out between the US and its allies (UK and France) and the then USSR from 1945 to 1991. After the 'scare' of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, both sides warily moved towards a degree of credible, robust nuclear deterrence that was predicated on arms control agreements and MAD (mutually assured destruction). This geopolitical, steadystate plateau had an ironic anomwherein a deep techno-strategic insecurity was assuaged by accepting MAD and the acronym captures the apocalyptic sardonicism.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the world has been getting divided into two competing nuclear weapon clusters: the US-led military alliance (with the UK and France) versus the Russia-China dyadhaving North Korea as ajunior partner. The other three members of N9 — India, Pakistan and Israel — have not formally joined either cluster, though their geopolitical orientation is self-evident.

The bleakness referred to at the outset stems from the fact that since 2022, the world has drifted from reasonably robust deterrence to one of fragile fecklessness. The earlier strategic communication among the major powers and well-entrenched increased significantly from 410 arms control and restraint agreements have steadily frayed.

The US is going through an intense domestic socio-political churn with the possibility of a second Trump presidency. Russia remains determined to prosecute its war in Ukraine, come what may, while Chinese belligerence over its territorial claims continues to be brittle.

This is a bleak augury. The ICAN and SIPRI reports illuminate this arid landscape in an objective manner but underscore the grim reality that there is no light at the end of this tunnel.

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THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The nuclear option is ultimately an example of the arrogance of power. - Joe Biden

The suspension that never happened

SATISH KUMAR SHARMA

ERHAPS no other government department can match the police in fixing accountability of its staff. Suspension from service is, therefore, a common occurrence here. Even senior officers are not immune from it.

JD Nagarwala, an IP (Imperial Police) officer who was part of the team that investigated the Mahatma Gandhi assassination case, became the Inspector General of Police (state police chief in those days) in Gujarat in the 1960s. He was also the president of the Indian Hockey Federation; he got a stadium built for the police in Ahmedabad, using police resources and manpower. The government suspended him for 'misusing government resources'. Now, while Nagarwala is long dead, the stadium not only hosts police events but is also used by schools, colleges and other organisations for sports and cultural activities — some misuse!

When I joined the IPS and became Superintendent of Police, I realised that the force I was heading had got used to harsh handling. Soft methods to discipline them did not work, in the short term, at least. I suspended subordinate officers whenever the situation required and had no qualms about it. But one incident taught me a lesson, afterwhich I used this power very sparingly.

I was serving as Additional Commissioner of Police in Ahmedabad city when a murder took place in an area under my jurisdiction. A petty criminal had been stabbed to death in a drunken brawl among friends who had gathered in the evening in a corner of a school ground close to the police chowki.

Drinking in a group at a public place in a state with prohibition was in itself a serious matter, but what upset me more was the local people's complaint that criminals gathered there every evening for drinking and gambling and cops did nothing about it. On asking the officers, I did not get a satisfactory reply. So, I asked the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) to fix the responsibility of the sub-inspector (SI) in charge of the chowki and send a report to me quickly so that I could take action.

The next day, the ACP brought his report to me. He was accompanied by the SHO of the police station concerned. I went through the report. It held the chowki SI prima facie responsible for negligence. I decided to place him under suspension. But the ACP said: 'Sir, please do not suspend him. Give him another chance. We will take steps to improve policing in the area and show you results.' I relented. I kept the report pending for further action.

Two days later, I received the ACP's call in the morning. He informed me that the chowki SI had died of a brain haemorrhage the previous night. He added: 'He was suffering from high blood pressure and had not taken leave despite the doctor's advice to take rest. Nor had he shared this information with any colleague.' I was too stunned by the news to thank the ACP for sparing me a major embarrassment and self-indignation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's balancing act

Apropos of 'Why Delhi is shaken and stirred' (The Great Game); the article has underlined the intricate geopolitical balance India is trying to strike following the recent Lok Sabha elections. Critical discussions with the US emphasise the importance of technology transfer and defence cooperation. However, lingering historical tensions and the controversy surrounding the alleged plot to kill a pro-Khalistan activist highlight the complexities of these alliances. India's engagement with Russia and other BRICS members underscores its multi-alignment strategy. Besides, resolving border disputes with China remains a formidable challenge. As India asserts its role as a stabilising power, it must adroitly steer these multifaceted relationships to maintain its global standing while addressing domestic political challenges effectively.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA

Shifting dynamics of global power

Delhi is shaken and stirred not just by the recent election results but also by the shifting dynamics of global power. PM Narendra Modi's political clout faces a serious test, and the Parliament session beginning today will reveal much about India's political trajectory. Amid all this, India's role as a stabilising force is under scrutiny. With Chinese troops at the LAC and tensions high, Modi's reluctance to engage in pleasantries is understandable. The meetings between NSA Ajit Doval and his US counterpart highlight the critical need for strategic alliances, especially in technology transfer. Yet, controversies like the alleged plot against Sikh separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun cast a shadow over bilateral ties. As India navigates its relationships with the US. Russia and China, every move is critical. Delhi must balance hard power and diplomatic finesse to maintain its position on the global stage.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Welcome move to replace NTA chief

Apropos of the news report 'NTA chief shunted out, CBI to probe NEET irregularities'; the Centre has rightly removed National Testing Agency (NTA) Director General Subodh Kumar Singh and entrusted the probe into alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG to the CBI. The appointment of former Union Sec-

retary Pradeep Singh Kharola as the NTA chief is welcome. Laxity in the conduct of the NEET-UG examination has caused much embarrassment to the Central Government

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Credibility of tests at stake

and left lakhs of aspirants in limbo.

With reference to the story 'NTA chief shunted out, CBI to probe NEET irregularities'; these entrance exams are make-or-break events for lakhs of aspirants. Upholding the integrity of the exam and the credibility of the testing agency are the key to maintaining public confidence in the system. The use of AI-based proctoring or monitoring methods can help ensure fairness in competitive exams. Meting out stringent punishment to the miscreants who resorted to the use of unfair means in the tests can help set a strong precedent.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Another hooch tragedy

The hooch tragedy in Tamil Nadu's Kallakurichi district has claimed around 50 lives and left more than 100 others hospitalised. The incident once again throws the spotlight on the sale of illicit liquor, which continues unabated. The bootleggers often lace the illicit liquor with poisonous methanol or some other lethal substance. The case points to a flourishing illegal alcohol trade that probably also involves politicians and law enforcement officials. The recurrence of such tragedies necessitates urgent measures to dismantle the networks of operatives. Ensuring public safety and bringing the culprits to justice are the need of the hour. VUAYKUMAR HK, RAICHUR

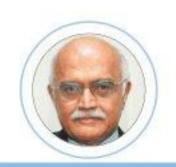
Expenditure tax the way forward

Apropos of 'GST council meets, tweaks tax rates'; the public would remain indebted to the panel for exempting services provided by the Railways to the public, such as the sale of platform tickets, the facility of retiring rooms/waiting rooms and battery-operated car services, from the GST. Almost all items of daily use are subject to the GST. Since the masses are currently paying both direct and indirect taxes, like excise duty and VAT, bringing in an expenditure tax would be a step in the right direction.

SK GUPTA, NEW DELHI

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Swiss-led peace talks a flop as Russia left out



VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN FORMER SPECIAL SECRETARY, CABINET SECRETARIAT

ID the Swissmediated Burgenstock peace conference collapse because the organisers did not study how delicate peace negotiations are conducted? Did the conference fail because Russia was not invited?

In the past, the 1993 Oslo Accords temporarily halted Israel-Palestinian wars. Similarly, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought peace between Britain and the Irish Republican Army.

The Oslo process was started in 1992-93 by Terje Larsen, a Norwegian sociologist, and Yossi Beilin, a member of Israel's Labour Party government that had come to power in 1992. This had the backing of Israeli leaders and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) chief Yasser Arafat.

Since the Israeli law banned contacts with the PLO, Larsen and Beilin set up a secret backchannel between two Israeli professors and three PLO leaders, including Ahmed Qurei. Their first meeting was held during January 1993 at the residence of ian right to self-rule in those then Norwegian Defence Minister Johan Jorgen Holst.

The US Department of State archive says "strict secrecy allowed the negotiators to discuss scenarios and potential concessions without incurring domestic political costs."

In May 1993, Israel decided to elevate the talks to the official level and sent then Director General of Foreign Ministry Uri Savir. In August that year, the Israeli and Palestinian chief negotiators initialled the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (DOP) in Oslo. The formal signing ceremony was held at the White House in September, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Arafat 'shook hands'. Although permanent peace

remained elusive, the Oslo Accords were an important milestone in West Asian peace, like the 1978 Camp David Accords, brokered by US President Jimmy Carter, between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, bringing peace between Egypt and Israel. Together with the DOP, the agreement also included 'Letters of Mutual Recognition', through which the PLO recognised the existence of Israel for the first time.

Israel also recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Besides, Israel committed itself to withdrawing from parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and acknowledged the Palestinterritories under a Palestinian Authority.



FAILURE: The Swiss-mediated Burgenstock peace conference became a routine meeting to show solidarity with Ukraine, with 80 countries signing the resolution. REUTERS

Similarly, Senator George Mitchell, who was designated as a 'Special Envoy' by then US President Bill Clinton, had to toil between September 1996 and April 1998 to bring in peace in Northern Ireland, ending 30 years of violence. He had to overcome hostility from the 'unionists', who wanted Northern Ireland to remain with Britain, as they felt that President Clinton had imposed mediation efforts to their detriment.

It is said that they also opposed secret talks in a foreign place away from Belfast, as they wanted to avoid the possibility of being politically ambushed away from their home base. Mitchell's tactic was his infinite patience to listen to the opposing parties whose hostility to each other was so intense that there "was very little inclination to listen to the other side, let alone compromise with them," as he told an interviewer later. The cardinal principle in all

such negotiations is the secrecy of proposals put across by contending sides so that no embarrassment is caused to either of them by sending wrong signals to their constituents. The organisers should have studied an old CIA document (1992), 'Analytic Support for Peace Talks', released by its think tank. Centre for the Study of Intelligence, as a guide to sensitive peace negotiations.

True, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis was quoted as saying by the media at the UN that several secret plans were being considered to

bring peace in Ukraine. He was also quoted by TASS in January telling the Davos conference that Russia should be invited. Why then was Moscow not invited? As a result, the conference became a routine meeting of support to Ukraine, with 80 countries signing the resolution. However, India, Saudi Arabia, Africa, Thailand, South Indonesia, Mexico and the UAE chose not to sign, besides Brazil, which attended as an 'observer'.

It is not that Switzerland is not experienced in backchannel diplomacy. It looked after American interests shortly after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Gulf News said in 2020 that the US and Iran had exchanged several messages through Beme after the US killing of Gen Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. It came hours after the American drone strike. Iran responded by condemning the attack through the Swiss. Similarly, America used Switzerland to talk to Cuba when they did not have diplomatic relations.

However, would this, by itself, qualify Berne to be an interlocutor unless it wins the confidence of both sides? History has many other instances of backchannel negotiations (BCNs) succeeding or at least reducing tensions. An Oxford University compendium quotes several instances, beginning with President Richard Nixon's secret approaches to the Soviet Union and Vietnam in the 1970s, Nelson Mandela's contacts with South African leaders during the 1980s/1990s for ending apartheid and the 2016 Colombian agreement with the insurgent group FARC.

This compendium, like the CIA handbook, gives different stages in BCNs to be effective. The first stage is called 'prenegotiations', which explores the desire of both parties to talk. They need to have trust in the negotiator country as it shares highly confidential information.

A third-party mediator is always preferred since opposing parties would not like to sit across the table. "These discrete communications ultimately allow parties to move away from unilateral, conflictbased approaches to a political problem and engage in a mutual exploration of their options before the start of formal peace talks," according to the compendium. None can do this type of negotiation with nearly 100 delegations participating, as we saw at Burgenstock.

The CIA document lists the initial difficulties of bringing the opposing parties to the face-to-face talks: "The opening session can take on the air of a battlefield without lethal weapons." It mentions several other problems, like both parties exaggerating their own strength for "vying for advantage". Another difficulty that it mentions is the efforts of "extremists on both sides who are determined to undermine the agreement". To sum up, BCNs are not as easy as arranging an international conference.

Views are personal

The exam system needs urgent course correction

A third-party

mediator is always

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opposing parties

would not like to sit

across the table.



BRAJESH KUMAR TIWARI ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ATAL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, JNU

HE Ministry of Education has cancelled the 2024 UGC-NET (University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test) in view of a paper leak. The case is now under the purview of the CBI, which will conduct further investigation. The ministry has also handed over the case of alleged irregularities in the conduct of the 2024 NEET-UG (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate) to the CBI. The NEET medical entrance exam is also under the scrutiny of the Supreme Court. In this year's NEET (UG), a record-breaking 23 lakh candidates had got themselves registered.

Meanwhile. Subodh Kumar Singh has been removed from the post of Director General of the National Testing Agency (NTA) amid the controversy over the NEET-UG and UGC-NET exams. In another significant development, the government has postponed the NEET-PG.

These cases of question

paper leak are not isolated, but rather part of a long history of incidents. The IIT-JEE of 1997 and the All India Pre Medical Test of 2011 witnessed this menace. The phenomenon is seen in many states, regardless of which political party is in power. There is a high incidence of paper leak in India. As a result, numerous examinations have to be cancelled. According to media reports, over the past seven years, more than 70 examination papers have been illicitly disclosed in various states, resulting in adverse consequences for the professional prospects of over crore individuals. Instances of leaked exam papers and answer keys are frequently shared on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook.

The NTA need not be scrapped; only the examination system needs to be revamped. Each year, over 10 lakh candidates participate in the Civil Services examinations, yet the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) manages to conduct a secure examination. However, when it comes to online exams, there is a potential risk of leak due to the use of technology. The



BUST: Every exam that is scrapped wastes the money of students as well as taxpayers. ANI

likelihood of the threat intensifying is certain to rise amid the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Given these circumstances, AI is poised to become a significant menace. If the website of the Home Ministry can be compromised, it is reasonable to question why these exams cannot be similarly vulnerable to hacking. Every exam that is scrapped not only wastes the time and money of millions of students, but also consumes taxpayers' money. The NTA is exceeding its brief by repeatedly employing a trial-and-error approach in conducting these examinations. The agency was estab-

The practice of appointing members to recruitment commissions based on political connections must

be ended.

lished in 2017. However, even after seven years, the scourge of paper leak persists. The NTA must take lessons from the UPSC.

The practice of appointing members to recruitment commissions based on political connections must be ended. Additionally, the examination commission should possess its own printing press or alternatively, the digital copy should be directly transmitted through a code lock system — 15 minutes prior to the examination — to the designated examination centre. The document ought to be printed and distributed among the candi-

dates. By employing this approach, the cost of question papers will undoubtedly be slightly higher compared to press printing, but they will be secure and impervious to leaks. It is imperative that the punishment for the paper mafia is administered promptly within a specified timeframe in a fast-track court, ideally within a month of the arrests. If any coaching institute is found to be involved. appropriate action should be taken against the individuals responsible and the institute should be shut down. The participation of external agencies facilitates unethical practices. From the initial creation of paper sets to their delivery to the examination centre, a large number of individuals are involved in the process. As a result, each person has a clearly defined responsibility within the hierarchy. Question papers undergo multiple stages involving drafting, printing and transportation before reaching the examination centres. It is imperative to prohibit the use of mobile phones by all persons involved. The majority of the examination centres are privately owned institutions, and a significant number of them do not meet the required standards. Examinations ought to be exclusively administered at governmentapproved facilities, with papers subject to constant surveillance and monitoring via CCTV cameras.

The leak of question papers for public examinations has a significant impact on public trust, besides causing a substantial financial burden on the state exchequer. The Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, also known as the anti-paper leak law, has come into effect. But the notification of the Central Government regarding the Act contains a lacunae that require an urgent resolution. The new legislation mandates a minimum prison sentence of three years; it should be increased to a minimum of 10 years. The severity of the punishment should align with the seriousness of the offence. There is no provision for conducting investigations within a specified time-frame. In addition to imposing an additional prison sentence for failure to pay a fine for an offence under the Act, the provision for confiscation of the offender's property should also be included. The candidate who engages in exploiting unfair methods should be disqualified from appearing in any subsequent examination.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Of noble birth (4-7) 9 Treated badly (3-4)

10 Trainer (5)

12 Autocratic (8)

14 Transcend (6)

11 Pleasurable thrill (4)

16 Drawing instrument (6) 18 Wide view of

landscape (8)

19 A slight quarrel (4) 22 Loop with running

knot (5) 23 To attribute (7)

DOWN

2 A flowering shrub (5) 3 Otherwise (4)

4 Accounts book (6)

5 Inhabited (8) 6 Springy (7)

7 Extremely pleased (7,4)

8 A type of confectioner (11)

13 Regain possession of (8) 15 Frankness (7) 17 Go on board (6)

20 Self-possession (5)

24 Golf course caretaker (11) 21 Highest point (4) Saturday's solution

Across: 1 Ratify, 4 Scornful, 9 Corral, 10 Esoteric, 12 Lead, 13 Catty, 14 Cool, 17 Shot in the arm, 20 Spick-and-span, 23 Pity, 24 Putty, 25 Snub, 28 Intrigue, 29 Put out, 30 Gos-

Down: 1 Reckless, 2 Tarragon, 3 Fray, 5 Cost the earth, 6 Rate, 7 Furrow, 8 Locale, 11 Haute couture, 15 Nippy, 16 Crude, 18 Open door, 19 Unabated, 21 Spying, 22 Status, 26 Lima, 27 Puny.

SU DO KU 4 3 6 5 3 6 9 4 9 5 4 5 6 8 8 MEDIUM

9 3 8 6 2 1 3 1 6 2 7 5 4 2 7 5 4 9 3 8 4 6 7 3 5 9 2 3 9 4 2 5 1 8 6 8 9 1 3 2 6 4 7 5 4 6 2 4 5 2 1 7 8 6 3 3 8 9 4 2 6 1 7 5 CALENDAR JUNE 24, 2024, MONDAY ■ Shaka Samvat 1946 ■ Aashadh Shaka 3 ■ Aashadh Parvishte 11 ■ Hijari ■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 1.24 am ■ Indra Yoga up to 11.51 am ■ Uttrashadha Nakshatra up to 3.54 pm ■ Moon in Capricom sign

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

SUNSET: 19:27 HRS SUNRISE TUESDAY 05:23 HRS CITY MIN MAX Chandigarh 39 29 New Delhi 40 30 29 Amritsar 40 39 Bathinda 27 Jalandhar 39 29 29 Ludhiana 41 31 Bhiwani 43 Hisar 41 28 41 31 Sirsa 21 Dharamsala 33 Manali 27 16 27 18 Shimla 24 17 Srinagar 39 27 Jammu 13 Kargil 27 10 24 Leh 34 24 Dehradun Mussoorie 25 18 TEMPERATURE IN TO

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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

Friend in need

Both India and Bangladesh stand to beneficially feed off each other with the new tranche of agreements

ew Delhi and Dhaka have signed a comprehensive bunch of collaborations that includes pledging to begin negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), deciding to launch a medical e-visa facility for Bangladeshis and agreeing to send a technical team to discuss the Teesta river watersharing, besides announcing the opening of an Assistant High Commission in Rangpur. Additional goodies in the bouquet include new train and bus services, export of 40 MW power to Bangladesh via the Indian grid, an inland container depot at Sirajganj and 350 training slots for Bangladeshi police officers. For India, four major imperatives have significantly driven the nation's increased strategic engagement with Bangladesh: Improving the country's economic standing, attending to the healthcare requirements of Bangladeshis, increasing India's presence in the region and attempting to counter China's increasing influence in Bangladesh. In office since 2008 and earlier heartily praised for



leading her country's economic and social development, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is now facing difficulties in post-pandemic recovery. Her plan to use the bilateral relationship to address these issues includes the outreach to New Delhi in a major way. It makes sense that New Delhi is responding to her advances with a bit more warmth than usual this time, in part because of Beijing's looming shadow in the background. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina deepened their partnership with a "futuristic vision" for transformative cooperation during the latter's two-day visit to India from June 21.

India holds a special place in Bangladesh's history, particularly owing to the 1971 Liberation War wherein India played a key role. However, relations between the nations became tense during military rule in the mid-1970s, marred by anti-India sentiment. But the shared history has helped forge a strong bond, with Modi's tenure since 2014 giving a new fillip to bilateral ties. Earlier, a significant shift occurred in 1996, when Hasina took over as the Prime Minister for the first time; since then, bilateral relations have steadily improved. Since 2019, the two leaders have met on 10 occasions, ushering in an era of remarkable transformation and strengthening bonds. Prime Minister Hasina, who began her fourth consecutive term in January 2024, joined six other world leaders at Modi's swearing-in ceremony on June 9, 2024. However, challenges persist, such as border management, illegal migration, the National Register of Citizens, Rohingya and river water sharing, necessitating ongoing dialogue. Bangladesh has established an island for the persecuted Rohingyas and seeks India's help in persuading Myanmar to repatriate the displaced minorities. The Modi-Hasina partnership has the potential to further cement India-Bangladesh relations, navigating these challenges and leveraging their shared vision for mutual prosperity.



A herd of wild elephants bathes in water to get respite from the heat, in Kamrup

Naidu's comeback will redefine Andhra's future

After being sidelined for over two decades, Naidu's resurgence signals a major shift in the State's politics and sets the stage for a renewed focus on development

he recent swearing-in of Nara Chandrababu Naidu as Andhra Pradesh's Minister was a significant event for Naidu personally, his Party and Indian politics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP leaders witnessed the 74-year-old politician taking the oath for the fourth time, marking a significant political comeback.

Despite being marginalised in State and national politics for over two decades, Naidu is grateful for his new role. He has once again proven that one should never underestimate a politician until they are out of the game.

The triumphant return of Naidu as the Chief Minister, along with the emergence of his Party, Telugu Desam, as the second largest group in the current NDA Government, signifies a shift in power dynamics,

A year ago, Babu's predecessor, Jagan Mohan Reddy, was comfortably placed to win another term. Then, because the opposition was divided. Pawan Kalyan was not with the TDP and the BJP was still deciding whether to let the TDP join the NDA coalition again. Babu was accused of corruption and TDP workers felt disheartened.

Several factors contributed to Naidu's comeback. Apart from the anti-incumbency sentiment, the caste coalition of Pawan Kalyan's Janasena, the BJP and the TDP played a crucial role. Jagan's neglect of infrastructure and agriculture also negatively affected the people, further contributing to Naidu's resurgence.

Naidu has been a survivor. He started his political career as a junior minister in 1978 and has since held various positions in the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). He has served as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh multiple times, overseeing significant development projects and facing political controversies. Throughout it all, Naidu kept up his unwavering spirit. Naidu has innounced that the 2024 election will be his last, a move intended to emotionally appeal to voters while grooming his son Lokesh as his successor. This strategic deci- have focused on developing

sion could significantly impact the Naidu dynasty's future in Andhra Pradesh politics.

At first, Babu stayed in the shadows of his father-in-law and Telugu Desam chief N.T. Rama Rao, but eventually became Indispensable. He gained valuable experience and insights into national politics during the National Front Ŭnited Governments. His Party was part of the V.P. Singh, Deve Gowda, I.K. Gujral and later Vajpayee Governments, signifying that no party was untouchable.

Naidu and his Party have had a fluctuating relationship with various central Governments. However, their current participation in the Modi Government is particularly notable. With TDP's support for the Modi Government, Naidu is in a position to negotiate and advocate for the interests of Andhra Pradesh. As for the State, Babu has become the State's CEO again. As chief Minister, Naidu rubbed shoulders with Tech Giants like Bill Gates in his earlier terms. He brought investment opportunities to Hyderabad and transformed it into Cyberabad. He secured funding for infrastructure from agencies like the World Bank and developed Hyderabad overall. However, the mistake was that he should



DURING HIS FOUR DECADES OF POLITICAL CAREER. NAIDU, AGED 74, HAS PROVED HIMSELF A SURVIVOR. HE WAS MUCH AHEAD OF HIS TIME IN HIS FIRST AND SECOND TERMS

other parts of the State. In his fourth term, Naidu should avail the opportunity to bring back the importance of Andhra Pradesh, once the country's rice bowl. Naidu's top priority is securing additional funds for Andhra Pradesh, which is a crucial step towards the State's development. Naidu's vision for Andhra Pradesh's development includes reviving long pending irrigation projects like the Polavaram project to boost the State's agricultural sector. With his Party's support, Naidu is determined to

and drive development. "We are not negotiating on the composition of the Narendra Modi cabinet when it comes to State interests," was his response to a question about the TDP securing only one cabinet minister and one Minister of State in the Modi cabinet. However, they still hope to secure more positions during the next expansion. The second important task is

maximise the State's resources

to build the Andhra Pradesh State capital, Amaravati. His predecessor, Jagan Mohan Reddy, suspended this ambitious project during his two terms. Now that Babu is back in charge, he aims to complete Amaravati. ne wiii put pressure on the Centre to secure funds and that of his son Lokesh. for building capital, various new projects and his six welfare schemes. Being a show-

man, he would like to project Amaravathi as a model capital. The State is facing a severe financial crisis. There is a significant shortage of funds, with a total debt of around Rs 14 lakh crores, including Rs 12 lakh crore borrowed from various sources and pending bills of Rs 1.5 lakh crore.

During his four decades of political career, Naidu, aged 74, has proved himself a survivor. He was much ahead of his time in his first and second terms. He projected himself as a forward-thinking, pro-technology and tech-savvy Chief Minister. The atmosphere is excellent, as Naidu has the comfort of a kingmaker. Being part of the Modi Government gives him a chance to share power. He has no opposition in the Assembly, with YSRCP

The TDP needs to address the issue of reservations for Muslims. This topic could lead to conflicts with the BJP. Naidu's positive relationship with Modi is expected to last a year, after which they could pressure the Modi Government on this issue. Additionally, the TDP must resolve the corruption case as Naidu is currently out on bail. His conduct in his fourth term is crucial for his future

reduced to just 11 seats.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

Venture Capital and Private Equity drive growth globally



MAYANK SINGHAVIE

These financial engines reshape industries and foster entrepreneurship, marking a pragmatic shift in the global financial landscape

n recent years, venture capital (VC) and private Lequity (PE) have emerged as powerful catalysts for innovation and economic growth globally. This surge represents a pivotal shift in the financial landscape, reshaping industries and fostering entrepreneurship in unprecedented ways. Venture capital, known for financing early-stage startups with high growth potential, has experienced remarkable expansion due to technological advancements and evolving consumer demands. Startups leveraging technologies such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, fintech and sustainable energy have become prime targets.

These funds not only provide crucial capital for research, development and market expansion but also enable entrepreneurs to scale their innovations rapidly and disrupt traditional industries. Simultaneously, private equity has broadened its scope beyond traditional domains to include sectors like healthcare, education, consumer goods and infrastructure. PE firms typically invest in established companies seeking growth opportunities or



undergoing strategic transformations. By injecting capital, implementing operational efficiencies and providing strategic guidance, PE firms play a pivotal role in enhancing competitiveness, expanding market reach and driving sustainable value creation. Several key factors have contributed to the robust growth of VC and PE investments:

Technical Advancements Breakthroughs in technologies such as cloud computing, oig data analytics and blockchain have revolutionised business models and accelerated innovation cycles. These advancements have lowered barriers to entry for startups and empowered established companies to adapt and thrive in a digitalfirst economy, making them attractive targets for PE investments seeking to opti-

profitability. Globalisation and Market Access: Increasing interconnectedness has facilitated cross-border investments, allowing VC and PE firms to diversify their portfolios and tap into emerging markets with untapped potential. This global expansion not only increases investment opportunities but also exposes companies to new markets, cus-

tomers and strategic part-

nerships, driving growth and

scalability

Shift in Consumer Behavior: Evolving consumer preferences towards sustainability, digital solutions and personalised experiences have driven demand for innovative products and services. VC-backed startups are at the forefront of meeting these evolving needs, disrupting traditional industries and creating new market opportunities.

Supportive Regulatory Environment: Favorable regulatory frameworks and Government policies aimed at fostering innovation, entrepreneurship and capital formation have played a crucial role in facilitating VC and PE investments. These policies mise operations and enhance provide incentives for

investors, reduce regulatory barriers and create a conducive environment for startups and growth-stage companies to thrive.Institutional Investor Participation: Growing interest from institutional investors such as pension funds, sovereign wealth funds and endowments has significantly bolstered VC and PE markets. These investors seek diversification, higher returns and exposure to innovative sectors, driving substantial capital inflows into VC-backed startups and PE-funded enterprises.

Despite the promising opportunities presented by the VC and PE boom, challenges persist. Market volatility, valuation pressures, regulatory complexities and geopolitical uncertainties pose risks that demand careful risk management strategies.

Furthermore, maintaining ethical standards, sustainable practices and alignment with stakeholders are critical for long-term success and value creation in the VC and PE ecosystem.

(The writer is CEO of Cosmos Financial Group; views are personal)

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IN BENGAL Madam — This is my response to the

news item "Bengal Guv. alleges snooping by State Police," published on June 21. I am too dumbstruck to react to such news. If the governor of a State feels insecure in the Raj Bhawan, how safe and secure are ordinary citizens of the State of Bengal? Earlier, there were allegations that Governor C.V. Ananda Bose had molested a Raj Bhawan lady staffer. This implies that Bose is himself a threat to the security of lady staffers.

His run-ins with the CM of Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, are well known. Bengal has become the theatre of the absurd, where everything imaginable as well as unimaginable is possible. If people holding high constitutional offices become the "torchbearers" of misconduct, it will be hard to find a place of refuge. Even this quote offers cold comfort to the people of Bengal. Life is tragic and absurd and none of it has any purpose at all. says T. C. Boyle, an American novelist. Or does absurdity have no upper

Avinash Godboley | Dewas

HEAT TAKING TOLL OF HEALTH

Madam — Shocking observations have been revealed in a survey conducted by the network organisation World Weather Attribution (WWA). The temperature has increased by 35 times; the current year is the highest. In the Northern Hemisphere region of the Earth, it has been observed that there is a severe heat wave before the monsoon season. The current year or season is the one with the highest heat stress. There has been a huge increase in greenhouse gases all over the world. Similarly, the increasing use of fossil fuels generates huge amounts of heat. However, the risk of heat stroke caused by such heat is predicted to increase. In this case, the body's cooling system completely collapses and if not treated in time, there is a possibility of human

These shocking observations have been

Paper leak rows

THE EDITOR



A comes NET row," published on June 21, this is my response. As if the NEET fiasco was not enough, we now have the NET exam being cancelled. With the alarming frequency of paper leaks happening in our country, it would not be an exaggeration to say that

recorded in the survey conducted in

South America, Guatemala, Mexico,

Honduras, Belize and El Salvador. All in

it has become a norm rather than an exception. Merely rolling a few heads in the NTA will not serve the purpose until structural issues are addressed.

NTA, which conducts entrance tests like CUET, JEE, NEET and UGC-NET, has failed to live up to expectations and rather failed miserably. It cannot guarantee the cybersecurity at thousands of examination centres and the conduct of invigilators. With such a huge number of students competing for such a small number of seats, crooked operators have all the opportunities to exploit the parents. NTA can learn a thing or two from the GRE and TOEFL as to how to conduct online exams smoothly. The end objective should be that not a single student should face injustice and suf-

Aarohi Sharma | Jammu

all, people's lives on this next earth will be difficult and unbearable due to heat. Dattaprasad Shirodkar | Mumbai

AIR POLLUTION MENACE

Madam — The Health Effects Institute recently released a report on air pollution. In the world, there has been a great deal of pollution due to air pollution and it has been reported that as many as 81 lakh deaths have occurred in the year 2021. India and China have the highest number of deaths and they account for 54 per cent of the total deaths. The year 2021 is set to have more deaths due to air pollution than any previous year. In 2021, around 169,000 children under the age of five died in India due to air pollution alone. India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Ethiopia are the countries. Air pollution is the fourth leading cause of death in many countries after high blood pressure, a poor diet and tobacco. Just read this news. Small particles in the air cause

death. How can this air pollution be eliminated or reduced? For this, vehicle smoke should be reduced. Along with that, trees should be planted and nurtured in large quantities. Clean water is also an important factor. It is advisable to reduce the use of gasoline and diesel vehicles and use battery-powered vehicles instead of that.

Thinking should also be started on how to reduce plastic waste, or not at all. In this regard, it is necessary to make a lot of efforts at the Government level. Only then will there be a reduction in air pollution. Citizens should know the importance of polluted air. Today, there is a lot of air pollution in the cities of Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai. Many schoolchildren have developed respiratory disorders and have to drive vehicles on the road for a day. When there was Corona and at that time all the traffic was closed. the air pollution was very low and the clear sky was its indicator.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneér@gmail.com the pioneer

FIRST COLUMN

REDISCOVERING THE JOY OF READING

Reading habits offer countless benefits, from intellectual stimulation to overall wellbeing



eading is essential for those who seek to rise above the ordinary. Cultivating a habit of reading can have numerous positive effects on our life starting from intellectual stimulation to emotional wellbeing. Finding time to read regularly is a valuable investment in oneself, whether one prefers to use physical books or e-books. There is no warmer feeling than reading your favourite book on a rainy day, covered in a cozy blanket with a cup of coffee in hand. The smell of fresh books, hiding pieces of an old love such as dry flowers, old photographs and hazy letters as bookmarks for books as they say have and will always be eternal gifts. In a world hustling and bursting with technological advancements every now and then, the way everyone engages with literature has undergone a significant transformation. The traditional means of reading a book have found themselves in tug-of-war with their digital and audio counterparts. Today, carrying a book library in the pocket makes it easier for people to access a wide range as per their convenience thereby removing the biggest barrier of travelling to a bookstore or a library and then selecting for the favourite one.

Moreover, e-books provide an environmentally friendly access when compared to physical books, as they reduce the demand for paper, which significantly reduces the demand for wood pulp from trees and transportation from printing facilities to distribution centres and then to bookstores or directly to consumers. Moreover, the production of physical books involves various materials and processes, including ink, chemicals and packaging materials, which can generate waste and pollution. E-books do not involve these manufacturing processes, thereby reducing the environmental footprint associated with production and waste disposal. While reading e-books requires electronic devices that consume energy, the environmental impact can be mitigated by using energy-efficient devices, renewable energy sources for charging and by considering the longer lifespan and potential reuse of electronic devices compared to physical books.



But what depresses the most is when these e-books are available on devices such as a tablet or a phone resulting in the biggest sources of distraction and thereby reducing the focused reading time. Moreover such devices also offer multimedia enhancements (like videos or interactive elements), which can either enhance or distract from the reading experience, depending on individual preferences. Some people prefer the tactile experience of physical books.

Several research and studies reflect a complex interplay of factors influencing the preference for e-books versus physical books. Physical books tend to offer better comprehension, retention and a more comfortable reading experience, while e-books provide convenience, portability and cost efficiency. The choice between the two often depends on the specific needs and preferences of the reader. Instead of immersing oneself in a book, social media browsing encourages guick, fragmented reading of short posts or articles, which can ultimately diminish the habit of sustained, deep reading. The immediate gratification and constant novelty of social media can make reading books seem less appealing or rewarding by comparison.

Even when attempting to read, the temptation to check social media notifications or browse feeds can interrupt concentration and disrupt the reading experience

It's important to note that the environmental impact of e-books versus physical books can vary depending on factors such as the energy efficiency of devices used, the source of electricity and how frequently devices are replaced but what matters is that the user also recognise the unique benefits of physical books, leading to a balanced approach where both formats coexist in their reading habits.

There's no better way to learn, evolve and relax than reading books.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

Centralised testing faces credibility crisis



High costs, allegations of corruption and systemic inefficiencies underscore the need for a comprehensive overhaul of the 'One Nation, One Test' policy



he country needs to go back to drawing board on centralising entrance tests as the big ones - JEE, NEET, CUET and UGC-NET - are having far too many glitches and questions raised on the

National Testing Agency (NTA).
The NEET scam and NET cancellation have shocked the youth and raises questions are as a little of the state of the st tions on credibility of the testing agency. Let the country note that within 48 hours of NEET results, four students took their own lives. Should not the country rethink on the One Nation-One Test? The tests are designed to make coaching redun-

Few have an idea of the cost of one NEET National Eligibility-cum-Entrance (Undergraduate) Test, previously called Pre-Medical Exam. It costs over Rs 400 crore borne by the parents of 2406079 candidates registered for the 2024 exam at the rate of Rs 1700 fee per applicant. The system does not say how much is the profit for NTA. It is common knowledge that no entrance fee is fully spent. Should it not be considered as a tax on the unemployed knowledge seekers!

There are approximately 108,915 MBBS seats available across 706 medical colleges for NEET 2024. Around 55,000 of these seats are in Government medical colleges; the rest are in private medical colleges. One wonders why private colleges are included which have a devious fee structure backed by severe capitation fees. The quality of faculty is also questionable. Of course, even newly set-up many State medical colleges too have such issues. Many even do not have a cardiologist or

neurologist. Add the cost of coaching, travelling and other expenses, together to cost quite a few hundred crores more, big drain on the economy plus parental and societal stress. The Kota coaching system has an estimated business of Rs 600 crore. There are reports that the UGC-NET having nine lakh aspirants was cancelled as there was paper leak. Each question paper was sold for Rs 5,000 for transfer



THE NATIONAL **ELIGIBILITY-CUM-ENTRANCE (UG)** TEST COSTS OVER Rs 400 CRORE **BORNE BY**

THE 2406079 CANDIDATES REGISTERED FOR THE 2024 EXAM AT THE RATE OF Rs 1700 FEE PER APPLICANT. THE SYSTEM DOES NOT SAY HOW MUCH IS THE PROFIT FOR NTA. SHOULD IT NOT BE CONSIDERED A

TAX ON THE **UNEMPLOYED KNOWLEDGE SEEKERS?**

to the students' Telegram app. For NEET Rs 30-35 lakh per student was charged as alleged by a student witness, who got the paper with its answers a day before. It's possibly one of the biggest scams that spanned from Vadodara and Godhra to Patna and where not! It has sparked countrywide protests. No wonder the moves against generation of black money has not succeeded. Add to this the various recruitments stalled for scams, 13 in UP, many in West Bengal and the worst known VYAPAM in Madhya Pradesh. The irregularities are thriving with the highest jobless numbers.

The NEET scam got exposed and how parents paid Rs 66 lakhs and more. Eight students from the same examination centre in Haryana who secured all-India rank (AIR) 62 to 69, had largely similar roll numbers. On 5 May 2024 at two NEET centres in Haryana, students received a wrong question-paper set, which was taken back after 25 minutes. A paper scam in Gujarat, featured a Vadodara-based coaching centre and at least 16 students who each paid Rs 10 lakh to pass the exam. Fresh accusations arose when news reports of a paper leak emerged only days after conduction of the competitive exam. A Godhra school teacher is accused of the NEET exam cheating scandal, Rs 7 lakh were found in his car, while cheques worth 2.50 crore were found from the office of the director of the coaching centre. Reportedly, this money was given by the students.

"There is a perception of misman-agement by the NTA", says ABVP general secretary Yagyawalkya Shukla. BJP MP Rakesh Sinha

against any nexus found between paper setter and coaching institutes. It has rattled everyone. The reality is the NTA does not have competence to hold the examinations as many professional autonomous institutions have been doing for decades. None could raise a finger against any of them, including the All India Institute of Medical Science. They also selected students with proper aptitude. An issue that has cropped up now with many of the national institutions with CUET in particular.

The only action against weeks after the NEET fiasco has been the cancellation of the examination for grace mark students. The NTA appears to be loosely controlled organisation. The tests are gateway to careers and future professional excellence. If it is mired with malpractices and money power, the future of the nation is at stake. Would those adapting devious methods could ever have ethical bindings! The implementation is shoddy. The NTA does not conduct the tests on its own. Implementers are largely burgeoning private sector 'service providers', ÎT companies and emerging outsourcing infra organisations for conducting such mammoth tests. The competence of NTA for ensuring cyber-security at thousands of centres is doubtful.

Even invigilators and other staff are hired casually leaving the system vulnerable to attacks, pilferage and compromise. The suspicion over the countrywide coaching organisations calls for rethink on the composition of the tests. Are they giving instructions or have it emerged as the most money-minting

try do away with this organised malpractice? The examinations need to be tailored in a way that students do not need any coach-

National convenor of Sanskriti Utthan Nyas Devendra Singh has demanded cancellation of the NEET test. The Shiksha Bachao Andolan founded by Dinanath Batra and Atul Kothari also wants the test cancelled.

Too much centralisation could be breeding irregularities. It is a diverse country with diverse State boards, languages and systems. Apart each genre of professional institutions has varied needs for selections. The previous systems of selections by many professional institutions, organised by themselves have rarely raised an eyebrow.

The NTA needs structural

reforms. Conducting professionai examinations are challenge Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan says, "We will take the final call". The entire university system cribs over CUET — Central University Entrance Test. It forces students to take a test even for subjects, which are not in demand. The huge numbers have put off academic calendars for the past few years. Let universities conduct their own admissions as before to rid the system of over centralisation, delays and trauma to the students and their families.

The academics must put their heads together to have least of central admission examinations and more decentralised process not only to keep the process sanitised but also put India on the world map for its education, that such compromised systems sully. (The writer is a policy analyst;

Kallakurichi liquor tragedy shows how deep the rot runs

The nexus between local politicians, law enforcement and illicit brewers makes mockery of prohibition laws in the State

Priday at 1 pm, the death toll in Kallakurichi hooch tragedy has risen to 49 with doctors saying that more persons are expected to leave earth to meet their maker. It is only because of the unprecedented increase in the number of persons succumbing to the spurious liquor that this incident has come to national limelight. The truth is that many people lose their lives on a daily basis after the consumption of spurious liquor in Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister M K Stalin has declared a solatium of Rs 10 lakh each to the families of the deceased and this would help him to buy peace with the people. A commission of Rishivandiyam



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

inquiry has been set up with a retired judge of the Madras High Court as chairman to find out the reason behind the liquor tragedy with instructions to submit a report within three months. The relatives of the victims allege that the bootlegging is done with the patronage of the DMK MLAs and nobody can stand up to him. The MLAs representing and When it comes to hooch,

Sankarapuram constituencies (both belong to the DMK) are a law unto them-

"Not even a flower shop will function here without the knowledge of the MLA. How can we accept that he did not know about illicit hooch being brewed here," according to K Ilavarasu (34), owner of a mobile phone repair shop in Karunapuram who has been quoted by a local newspaper. R Perumal (35), a resident of Madhavcheri who lost his brother, says, "Hooch will be brought in packets and sold at a common spot in the village. People from the Scheduled Caste community and Most Backward Class community buy them.

there is no rich or poor or dominant or oppressed caste. Police will come for inspection, but will silently leave after taking bribe."

Last year saw 17 persons getting killed in nearby Villupuram district after consuming spurious arrack brewed in the nearby hilly region. Residen"Not even a flower shop will function here without the knowledge of the MLA. How can we accept that he did not know about illicit hooch being brewed here," asks K Ilavarasu (34), owner of a mobile phone repair shop in Karunapuram.

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Scheduled Caste community and Most Backward Class community buy them. When it comes to hooch, there is no rich or poor or dominant or oppressed caste. Police will come for inspection, but will silently leave after taking a bribe." Residents of Karunapuram allege that a lethal cartel of police-DMK politicians-ille-

gal brewers exist in the region. "Those daring to complain against them are silenced once and for ever. Jungle raj prevails in this region," said a relation of one of the victims.

Prohibition has been found to be a total failure in Tamil Nadu. Dravidian politics thrived on the money generated by the sale of spurious By early 2000, the private with no options other than

lage. People from the liquor and to generate more the money State Government banned the manufacture and sale of arrack (the poor man's scotch). The daily wage earners toiling in the fields from day break to dusk get some relief when they consume arrack which was available at reasonably low With rates. Government's decision to ban the production and sale of arrack, thousands of jobs along with the tax revenue from sale of the stuff was lost to the Government. Toddy tapping too has been banned in the State, home to the founders of the Dravidian movement who were not

averse to the idea of sun-

downers.

The result was that the market was flooded with poor quality brands which charged premium rates. The daily wage earners were left

retail outlets too downed the bootleggers. Had the the shutters and the public Government not banned sector Tamil Nadu State toddy tapping and brewing Marketing Corporation of country liquor, the mass (TASMC) took over the murders of the kind which entire liquor trade in the we saw in Kallakurichi State. The Government's was would not have happened. the last word on the brand to Period. The objective of this be consumed by the tipwriteup is not to encourage plers and this was a violation people to take drinks. The of fundamental right grantillegal stuff that is brewed by ed under the Constitution of bootleggers is made with toxic chemicals like ammo-India. Only the brands of liquor manufacturers who nium sulfate and insects like were willing to part with a centipedes. There was an fixed amount to the powers instance in Kerala where that be were allowed to be arrack was made out of ethyl sold through the retail outalcohol which was used for preserving dead bodies in medical colleges. Should we furnish more details?

(The writer is a special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)