



Alter the status quo

The expansion of conflict in Manipur calls for decisive change

More than a year since an ethnic conflagration flared up, resulting in 221 deaths and the displacement of nearly 50,000 people, something remains rotten in the State of Manipur. The conflict has now spread to hitherto peaceful districts such as Jiribam even as the Imphal valley and other areas have seen rising extortion and abductions. The increase in armed militias in both the valley and hill areas, who are armed with weapons looted from constabularies, has contributed to this situation. For the past year, the Union government has sought to maintain a tenuous peace by subjecting the State to a de facto imposition of the provisions of Article 355 of the Constitution, without officially announcing them, even as it continues with the same political leadership so as to provide a fig leaf of power to the Chief Minister who is from the Bharatiya Janata Party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been barely involved even to seek a humanitarian pause in the conflict and to work towards a peaceful resolution, while Home Minister Amit Shah routinely calls up security briefings, but to little avail. In the latest meeting with a host of security and administrative officials, the Chief Minister was not invited. The Union government’s indecisive vacillation and the State government’s inability to rise above its leadership’s ethnic biases have ensured that the Manipur conflict remains on a slow burn even as the electorate in the State has already given a strong message on this situation. In the general election, the Opposition Congress party scored a decisive win in the Inner and Outer Manipur constituencies, despite the blatant intimidatory tactics by the militias to deter voters, especially in the valley.

The writing on the wall is clear. The persistence of the status quo is doing little to resolve the conflict and is only furthering the ethnic divide. The Union and the State governments must heed the people of Manipur’s call for change. A change in leadership is now inevitable at the helm of affairs of government but a mere shifting of chairs will not suffice. There must be a renewed attempt to curb the antisocial militias and to disarm them in the hill areas and in the valley, while simultaneously ensuring that civil society actors, who are committed to peace and amity cutting across ethnic sections, are empowered to talk to each other and work out the modalities of bringing back normalcy. The representatives of the governments in the neighbouring States and the newly elected parliamentarians can also help in bringing about a reconciliation between the hostile ethnic groups. But all this can happen only if there is a decisive change in the current state of affairs in Manipur.

Nicobar triangle

Without consultations, Centre should not embark on infrastructure project

The Union Tribal Affairs Ministry will be looking into the forest clearance paperwork of the ₹72,000-crore infrastructure project on Great Nicobar Island, a major initiative of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram told this newspaper. This is a significant step for the government, in its third term, as it brings to the surface the contentious and difficult choices that governments face while addressing the trilemma of infrastructure development, preserving pristine biodiversity respect and, being sensitive to the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, and tribals. The Great Nicobar Project involves developing a trans-shipment port, an international airport, township development, and a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant on the island. The project area is expected to cover over 130 sq. km. of pristine forest, and has been accorded a stage-1 environmental clearance – one of the mandatory prerequisites – by an expert committee. The government told Parliament in August 2023 that 9.6 lakh trees could be felled and ‘compensatory afforestation,’ for the loss of this unique rainforest ecosystem, had been planned, thousands of kilometres away, in the vastly different ecological zone of Haryana. The Galathea Bay in the Nicobar islands hosts multiple rare species including the leatherback turtle, and the project imperils their future.

The government contends that its motive is to leverage the strategic location with the Great Nicobar Island located only 90 km away from the western tip of the Malacca Strait, an important shipping route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. However, critics and some of the government’s policy advisers suggest that tourism is a key imperative for the exercise. The Environment Ministry, which is a regulator of environmental policy, has opted to be secretive about the project. Details on the environmental clearance process and the appraisal process, usually a public document, have been kept under wraps. There also seems to be haste on the part of the island administration to proceed while ignoring the rights of the local tribes – the Shompen in particular – regarding consent. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, a constitutional body, has demanded an explanation from the district administration on these grounds. The National Green Tribunal had tasked a committee, headed by the Secretary of the Environment Ministry, to submit a report on the approval of forest clearances. This too is not public. Without transparency, it would be foolhardy for the government to attempt such a massive upheaval of the islands and it should, with its new mandate, immediately correct course.

It is a well-established fact that the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) is both India’s water tower and also the critical provider of invaluable ecosystem goods and services. Despite this understanding, there has always been dissonance between the special development needs and the development model being pursued in the IHR. As the economy of the region is dependent on the health and the well-being of its natural resources, plundering the same in the name of development will inevitably and surely lead the IHR towards its economic ruin.

In view of some of the recent judgments of the Supreme Court of India, we seem to be headed towards a more robust rights-based regime where sustainable development would be a fundamental right. The tone and tenor of the Court’s judgments highlighting the competing rights of people and nature are a clear sign of the direction in which the development versus environment debate in India is headed. In *State of Telangana and Others vs Mohd. Abdul Qasim (Died) Per Lrs*, the Court had said that the need of the hour is to adopt an ecocentric view of the environment, where nature is at the core. The Court said, “Man being an enlightened species, is expected to act as a trustee of the Earth...The time has come for mankind to live sustainably and respect the rights of rivers, lakes, beaches, estuaries, ridges, trees, mountains, seas and air.... Man is bound by nature’s law.”

A model of destruction

According to this approach, nature is not an object of protection but a subject with fundamental rights, such as the right to exist, to survive, and to persist and regenerate vital cycles. The current development model being pursued in the IHR is in total contravention of this approach. We are witnessing a ‘bumper crop’ of hydroelectric power stations on the rivers and streams in the IHR, without any care for the rights of these rivers and streams. There is a reckless widening of existing hill roads to four lanes in the name of development – in any case, these roads are getting washed away in many places in the IHR every time a river is in spate.

A post-disaster need assessment report by the National Disaster Management Authority on the floods in 2023 in Himachal Pradesh identified, unsurprisingly, rampant construction in violation of norms, regulations (and even court orders in many cases) right on river beds and flood plains, on the steep slopes, in seismic zones, in landslide-prone areas and the loss of green cover as the reasons for the disaster. The Teesta dam breach in Sikkim and the monsoon floods and landslides in Himachal Pradesh – both events in 2023 – are a stark reminder of the havoc our



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Aspirations for growth and development in the Indian Himalayan Region need to be aligned with science and the rights of people and nature

development model is causing to the environment, ecology and communities, especially in the mountains. The mountains, climate, forests, rivers, air and land all are crying for their right to survive in the IHR. In whatever approach we choose to adopt, whether ecocentric or anthropocentric, there is a need to align aspirations for growth and development in the IHR with the science and the rights of both people and nature.

Intersectionality of rights

In another matter of public interest litigation (PIL) titled *Ashok Kumar Raghav vs Union of India and Ors.*, the Supreme Court asked the central government and the petitioner to suggest a way forward so as to enable the Court to pass directions on the carrying capacity of the Himalayan States and towns. In the case of the Great Indian Bustard, the Court has recognised the right of the people of this country to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change. Unfortunately the Court’s verdict in the Great Indian Bustard case is being interpreted in a very narrow sense – as if the Court has given a clean chit to all renewable energy projects over and above the concerns for biodiversity or any other right that might get compromised. The Court is not only cognisant but also committed to the conservation of species and has underscored the importance of taking proactive measures “not reactive” to protect the Great Indian Bustard. The Court modified the previous order where a blanket ban was imposed on a very large area despite the report of the Wildlife Institute of India, which had identified 13,663 square kilometres as the “priority area”, and the rest as “potential areas” and as “additional important areas” for the Great Indian Bustard. The Court has explained in the judgement the non-viability of underground power transmission lines.

In fact, the Court has explained in detail, with examples of many international and national obligations, to explain the intersectionality between the fundamental rights enshrined in Articles 14 and 21, specifically, and human rights which include the right to development and the newly minted right to be able to adapt to climate change. The top court went on to say: “without a clean environment which is stable and unimpacted by the vagaries of climate change, the right to life is not fully realised... The inability of underserved communities to adapt to climate change or cope with its effects violates the right to life as well as the right to equality. The right to equality under Article 14 and the right to life under Article 21 must be appreciated in the context of the decisions of this Court, the actions and commitments of the state on the national and international level, and scientific consensus on

climate change and its adverse effects”.

It is a given that unless infrastructure is sustainable and dependable, it cannot become the foundation for people’s pursuit of their developmental goals. Sustainability of infrastructure necessarily means that it is resilient to the adverse impacts of climate change and consequent disasters. This is essential to ensure equality, equity and equal access to people, to various opportunities all across the country – as is the mandate of Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Disasters are also known to amplify social inequality as the poor are the worst hit and the most inadequately equipped to deal with the consequences. To pursue a path of sustainable development can also be said to be a fundamental right, as a natural corollary or an integral part or a sub-set of the right to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change. The state must honour this. Hopefully, the Court’s judgment is a much-needed nudge and serves as the basis for a legal framework for necessary course correction for development in general and in the IHR in particular.

Development and disaster resilience

While there is no denying that as we are a lower-middle income country with a large and young population, rapid development is India’s destiny. The interconnection between disasters and unregulated development has become increasingly pronounced and visible. The only way forward is for disaster management to be incorporated in development planning, both from a perspective of prevention and resilience. Our actions in the name of development, in total disregard of nature in most cases, is to be blamed for these unnatural disasters resulting from natural hazards. The development plans, policies and laws that underpin them too play a pivotal role in the making of these disasters. There is an urgent need for planning stage convergence of different authorities so that when there is a plan for any development, all concerns about disaster and climate resilience are also factored in, and the project reaches implementation stage only after the green signal in these areas. We need both development and disaster resilience. We also need science, policy and action to be in conformity with each other, in an integrated approach with the involvement of all including policymakers, planners, the scientific fraternity and communities.

In view of these judgments of the Supreme Court and also the new fundamental right to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change, it is now a fundamental right for people in general and of IHR in particular to have a development model that is sustainable and in sync with the carrying capacity of the IHR.

From China tilt to a balancing with Beijing and Delhi



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With Male facing increasing domestic and foreign policy challenges, Mohamed Muizzu is possibly aiming at a reconciliation with India

convinced its top import partners, India and China, to pay for imports in local currency.

Ties with China and India’s policy

Second, China is falling short of Male’s expectations. Mr. Muizzu’s visit to China in January 2024 saw both countries signing over 20 Memorandum of Understanding. There was also agreement to revive the Belt and Road Initiative projects and free trade agreement with China. The Maldives also signed a defence pact with China in March 2024, has agreed to explore implementing the Global Security Initiative, has upgraded the relations to a ‘China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership’ from 2024 to 2028, and even permitted a Chinese ‘spy’ ship to dock in Male. On its part, besides a few strategic investments, Beijing is hesitant to invest in the country’s mega-infrastructure. China’s focus is on community development and housing projects, and capacity-building initiatives.

Reports estimate that the Maldives owes China around \$1.5 billion. While China promised a five years’ debt relief earlier, it is now disclosed that debt relief would complicate the prospects of future borrowing. The Chinese Ambassador has also expressed wariness in offering new loans because of Male’s increasing debt burden, declaring that Beijing would assist in the form of grants. This has fractured Mr. Muizzu’s hopes of attracting funds and investments from China, which happens through commercial loans, and not grants. Similarly, other countries have also been slow to reciprocate to his demands of economic partnerships and have primarily focused on capacity building and maritime security due to their other strategic preoccupations and commitments.

Third, India’s accommodative policy and fulfilment of Mr. Muizzu’s demands and requests have facilitated this rapprochement.

First, India has maintained high-level engagements despite Male’s anti-Indian rhetoric and close relations with China. India’s Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar has met his Maldivian counterpart on multiple occasions. In

addition, India replaced its 76 military personnel with civilian experts at the request of the new Maldivian government. It has increased its development assistance from ₹400 crore to ₹600 crore (a 50% increase) for 2024, and its export quota of food products to the Maldives by 5%, and construction items by 25%.

The signal from New Delhi

Amid these economic hardships and China’s lacklustre response, the Maldivian Foreign Minister, Moosa Zameer, visited India in May, marking the first high-level visit of the government. India expressed to him the need to uphold ‘reciprocal sensitivities’ and responded to the Maldives’ request by extending a \$50 million treasury bill for a year on zero interest (through the State Bank of India). This visit also saw India inviting Mr. Muizzu to Mr. Modi’s swearing-in.

On India’s part, the invitation extended to Mr. Muizzu indicates that New Delhi will continue to engage with Male, regardless of who is in power. There is hope that the Maldivian leader, now with a super-majority in the Maldivian Parliament, would reciprocate India’s accommodative policy by respecting its sensitivities. On the other hand, with nearly 65% of Indian EXIM loans yet to be disbursed and prospects of additional grants and concessional loans, Mr. Muizzu hopes that the invitation offers an opportunity to improve bilateral ties with India and rescue the country’s economy.

This is not to suggest that Mr. Muizzu has embraced a pro-India policy. Along with an attempt to deepen partnerships with others, his equation with China remains unchanged. Both countries even continue to maintain regular high-level exchanges. What has perhaps changed is his realising that he cannot completely alienate India and that he would benefit more by balancing and playing one country against the other rather than taking sides. As India and China compete and try to outdo each other in the region, Mr. Muizzu is possibly betting on increasing his agency to further the Maldives’ interests.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Toddy tapping

I write this letter as a retired (and first) Dean of Kanyakumari Government Medical College, Tamil Nadu. Every year, many fall victim to spurious (methanol-added) arrack. Those who are addicted to arrack consume this toxic liquor. To avoid this, the

government must think of opening toddy shops. Toddy is a natural product from palm and coconut trees. In Kerala, coconut toddy is common and is cheaper than Indian-made foreign liquor and arrack. Farmers can generate income for themselves and the government as well. The

government should grant licences to tape toddy from palmyra trees.
Dr. Arunachalam,
Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

The state of the nation

On going through newspapers and watching television, one is left with the indelible impression

that we are fast moving away from a civil society. In the toxic liquor tragedy in Tamil Nadu, it cannot be denied that officials are involved. What is it that is going to result from an inquiry into the NEET fiasco? The examples can go on. This is the sorry state of affairs in

India. There is hardly any probity in any sphere.
N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

Epic upset

With their brand of attacking cricket, the Afghanistan players have proved that they are no pushovers in the shorter

versions of cricket when they prevailed over the mighty Australians in the ongoing T20 World Cup (‘Sport’ page, June 24). For a country sharply divided along ethnic lines, the Afghanistan cricket team has been a unifier.
R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of passport-related services given to citizens in 2023

1.65 in crore. There was an annual growth of nearly 15% in the passport-related services rendered to citizens by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 2023, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said. PTI

The share of Indians who support taxing the super-rich

74 in percentage. A survey by the Earth4All initiative and Global Commons Alliance has revealed that of the 22,000 people from G-20 countries covered in the survey, 68% support taxing the super-rich to address hunger, inequality and climate crisis. PTI

The number of people who died during the Hajj pilgrimage

1,301 Over 1,000 people died during this year's Hajj in Saudi Arabia due to extreme heat. Saudi's Health Minister noted that 83% of them were unauthorised pilgrims who walked long distances in high temperatures. AP

Current account surplus recorded by India in March quarter

5.7 in \$ billion. India's current account surplus stood at 0.6% of the GDP in the March quarter, the RBI informed. For FY24, the current account deficit narrowed to \$23.2 billion (0.7% of GDP) as against the \$67 billion (2% of GDP) in FY23. PTI

Number of Tamil Nadu fishermen arrested by Sri Lanka

22 The Tamil Nadu fishermen were arrested and their three boats seized by Sri Lanka on June 22, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin conveyed to the Centre, as he sought immediate steps to secure their release. PTI

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The NITI Aayog's project in Great Nicobar

Why has the Congress party called for an 'immediate suspension' of all clearances granted to NITI Aayog's mega project on Great Nicobar island? What are the ecological and social concerns? Why is there a threat of frequent earthquakes?

EXPLAINER

Rishika Pardikar

The story so far:

On June 17, the Congress party demanded an “immediate suspension” of all clearances granted to NITI Aayog’s mega project on Great Nicobar island in the light of “violations of due process, legal and constitutional provisions protecting tribal communities, and the project’s disproportionate ecological and human cost.” The party also demanded a “thorough impartial review of the proposed project, including by the parliamentary committees concerned.” Other political parties have also raised concerns about the project. In its 2024 election manifesto, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) promised to “scrap the environmentally disastrous and pro-corporate Islands Development Plan for Andaman and Nicobar”. The Tribal Council of Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar and a host of environmentalists, wildlife conservationists, and tribal rights groups have also opposed the project.

Where is Great Nicobar and which are the communities living there?

The island of Great Nicobar is the southernmost tip of India and a part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago that comprises 600-odd islands. It is hilly and covered with lush rainforests that are sustained by around 3,500 mm of annual rainfall. The rainforests and beaches host numerous endangered and endemic species including the giant leatherback turtle, the Nicobar megapode, the Great Nicobar crake, the Nicobar crab-eating macaque, and the Nicobar tree shrew. It has an area of 910 sq km with mangroves and Pandan forests along its coast.

The island is home to two tribal communities – the Shompen and the Nicobarese. The Shompen, around 250 in total, mostly live in the interior forests and are relatively isolated from the rest of the population. They are predominantly hunter-gatherers and are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group within the list of Scheduled Tribes.

The Nicobarese community practises farming and fishing. It has two groups: the Great Nicobarese and the Little Nicobarese. They use different dialects of the Nicobarese language (the Shompen have their own unique language). The Great Nicobarese lived along the island’s southeast and west coast until the tsunami in 2004, after which the government resettled them in Campbell Bay. Today, there are around 450 Great Nicobarese on the island. Little Nicobarese, numbering around 850, mostly live in Afra Bay in Great Nicobar and also in two other islands in the archipelago, Pulomilo and Little Nicobar.

The majority on Great Nicobar comprises people who settled on the island from mainland India. Between 1968 and 1975, the Indian government settled retired military servicemen and their families from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, among a few others, here. Around 330 households were given around 15 acres of land across seven revenue villages on the island’s east coast: Campbell Bay, Govindnagar, Jogindernagar, Vijaynagar, Laxminagar, Gandhinagar, and Shastrinagar. Campbell Bay is also an administrative hub that includes local offices of the Andaman and Nicobar administration and the panchayat. There were also short-term and long-term migrations of fisherfolk, agricultural and construction labourers,



Ecological wealth: A view of the Indira Point in the Great Nicobar Island of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. GETTY IMAGES

businesspersons, and administrative staff comprising foresters, engineers, teachers, etc. from both the mainland and the Andaman Islands. The construction contractors came after the 2004 tsunami. Overall, the population of settlers on the island today is around 6,000. All population data is an approximation provided by researchers who have worked in Great Nicobar.

What is the NITI Aayog project?

In March 2021, NITI Aayog unveiled a ₹72,000 crore plan called ‘Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island at Andaman and Nicobar Islands’. It includes the construction of an international transshipment terminal, an international airport, a power plant, and a township. The project is to be implemented by a government undertaking called the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO).

The plan states: “The proposed port will allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment. The proposed airport will support the growth of maritime services and enable Great Nicobar Island to attract international and national visitors to experience the outstanding natural environment and participate in sustainable tourism activity.” Although NITI Aayog put forth the project in its present form, it has a long history. Plans for developing a port in Great Nicobar have been around since at least the 1970s, when the Trade Development Authority of India (now

called ‘India Trade Promotion Organisation’) conducted techno-economic feasibility studies. The core aim has persisted since then – a port located near one of the world’s busiest international sea routes (the Malacca Strait) which will allow increased participation in global maritime trade.

Why is there opposition?

The mega project has been heavily criticised for its ecological costs and for potential violations of tribal rights.

The project requires the diversion of about 130 sq km of forest land and the felling of around 10 lakh trees. In January, 2021 the Indian government denotified two wildlife sanctuaries – the Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary and the Megapode wildlife sanctuary – to make way for the project. In the same month, the government released a ‘National Marine Turtle Action Plan’ that lists Galathea Bay as a marine turtle habitat in India.

The transshipment terminal is expected to be developed at Galathea Bay, one of the world’s largest nesting sites for the giant leatherback turtle. Both this species and the Nicobar megapode are listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 – the highest level of protection for wild animals under Indian law (numerous species, especially endemic ones, are likely yet to be documented in Great Nicobar given the limited number of surveys conducted so far). In November 2022, the Tribal Council of Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar withdrew the no-objection certificate (NOC) it had provided for the project stating the administration had

concealed important information about the use of tribal reserve lands and that they had obtained tribal communities’ consent in a rushed process.

Some of the land classified as “uninhabited” in NITI Aayog’s plan is also part of the Great Nicobarese’s ancestral land. Since their post-tsunami resettlement, they have repeatedly sought to return to these lands – only to be met with administrative apathy. Today, the mega project also stands in the way of their demands to return.

As for the Shompen, one of the biggest threats is disease. Since the Shompen have had little contact with the outside world, they haven’t yet developed immunity to infectious diseases that affect India’s general population. Some Shompen settlements also overlap with the areas the NITI Aayog has proposed to be used for the transshipment terminal.

Earlier this month, the local panchayat of Campbell Bay raised concerns over the social impact assessment process for land acquisition for the airport. Researchers who work on disaster management have also raised concerns that proponents of the mega project have failed to adequately assess earthquake risk. The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago is located in the “ring of fire”: a seismically active region that experiences several earthquakes throughout the year. According to some estimates, the region has experienced close to 500 quakes of varying magnitude in the last decade. The area is in category V: the geographical zone with the most seismic hazard.

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THE GIST

On June 17, the Congress party demanded an “immediate suspension” of all clearances granted to NITI Aayog’s mega project on Great Nicobar island in light of “violations of due process, legal and constitutional provisions protecting tribal communities, and the project’s disproportionate ecological and human cost.”

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Incomplete picture

Centre must address concerns over competition, freedom

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India’s (TRAI’s) recommendations for formulating the National Broadcasting Policy are aimed at catapulting India into a global leadership position in broadcasting. Central to TRAI’s proposals is its ambition to promote high-quality content across diverse platforms — television, radio, and OTT services. In an era where digital piracy poses significant challenges, the policy’s focus on robust copyright protection is crucial.



By implementing stringent mechanisms to safeguard intellectual property rights, TRAI aims to ensure that content creators receive fair recognition and compensation for their contributions. This not only fosters a competitive marketplace but also encourages continuous innovation in content creation. While the proposals lay a solid foundation for the sector, TRAI has missed out on certain crucial aspects that remain pivotal for a robust policy framework. The convergence of traditional broadcasting with digital media necessitates a harmonised regulatory framework to ensure fair competition among service providers. Addressing disparities between regulatory regimes governing different media platforms — like traditional broadcasters and digital streaming services — will be essential in fostering an equitable playing field. Though TRAI has hinted at the convergence of regulations between streaming companies and broadcasting firms, it has not provided specific recommendations on achieving this parity.

TRAI has also ignored the long-standing demand from the industry for tariff forbearance, given that the average revenue per user has remained stagnant for nearly five years. Another area of concern is the balance between content regulation and freedom of expression. While TRAI acknowledges the importance of responsible content dissemination, clarity on regulatory guidelines, especially concerning censorship powers being discussed as part of the proposed Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, is crucial. Preserving creative freedom while upholding ethical standards is imperative to avoid any undue censorship that could stifle innovation and diversity of viewpoints.

The paper has also ignored the issue of cross-media ownership. While the regulator has rightfully emphasised revamping audience measurement systems, it overlooks the need to assess the extent of media consolidation. TRAI itself has previously highlighted significant cross-ownership between print and broadcast media. Some companies own content, distribution, and broadcast channels, raising concerns about media pluralism — an essential pillar of a strong democracy. Therefore, a robust policy needs to establish a mechanism to capture this complex ownership landscape and ensure healthy competition within the sector. While the TRAI paper sets a promising trajectory for the country’s broadcasting sector, the Centre should address these gaps as it embarks on the next phase of regulatory reforms to drive growth and innovation. By prioritising inclusivity, fostering creativity, and ensuring regulatory coherence, India can indeed emerge as a global powerhouse in broadcasting.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



A NARAYANAMOORTHY

It is the duty of any responsible government to provide lifeline water to its citizens. We may debate the quantum but this is what Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal tweeted on December 30, 2013, immediately after announcing 666 litres of free water per day or 20 kilolitres of water a month to every household connected with the meter.

I had written in these columns (businessline, January 2, 2014) that free water of this magnitude will have a deleterious impact on Delhi’s water sector, which has turned out to be correct now. When the entire country was in the grip of acute water scarcity of different magnitudes, the announcement of free water came as a shock to many policymakers and economists. Questions were asked whether this move would be economically viable for the Delhi Jal Board (DJB). Is it necessary to provide free water to every household? Will it be possible to supply the specified quantity of water to all households during the entire year? Will it not encourage inefficiency in water use? Since Delhi does not have any reliable perennial water source, where will the water come from? Given the unprecedented water crisis in Delhi, let us decode what free water supply can do.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS Many policymakers in India think that water is a free good that can be supplied freely to all households. This is not possible in today’s context. Water is increasingly becoming an economic good worldwide because of the huge costs involved in storing and distribution. Rainwater is harvested and stored in dams/reservoirs to supply for various purposes, including domestic use. Similarly, the groundwater exploited at an alarming rate for various purposes involves huge drilling and electricity costs. The cost for the management and distribution of water for each urban household is huge, and it is skyrocketing because of urban agglomeration.

The Delhi Government has acted without understanding the financial and other repercussions. Why provide water freely to all households when the per capita income of this State is much higher than the national average? Is it not against the ability to pay principle? At the time of introduction, this scheme was expected to cost about ₹160 crore per annum for DBJ, and to increase manifold in the future. How is DBJ going to manage this cost? According to one



Who’s responsible for Delhi’s water crisis?

SUCKED DRY. Delhi Government’s free water scheme for households is the prime reason. It has led to inefficient water use and massive exploitation of groundwater

estimate, DJB’s net cash revenue surplus increased from ₹40.56 crore in 2007-08 to ₹233.57 crore in 2013-14. The DJB’s dependence on the government for operational costs fell from ₹380 crore in 2009-10 to zero in 2013-14, a remarkable achievement. But due to the free water supply, the financial situation of DJB is in a mess now. DJB’s financial losses have increased from ₹344.05 crore in 2019-20 to ₹1,196.22 crore in 2021-22, and now the board reportedly has a total debt of around ₹73,000 crore.

PROMOTING INEFFICIENCY Unlike many northern States, Delhi does not have the luxury of a perennial source of surface water for its use. It needs water from neighbouring Haryana, which is not guaranteed. In fact, the then Haryana Chief Minister Bhupendra Singh Hooda once cautioned that Delhi is getting more than its due share and that Haryana cannot be held responsible for Delhi’s water woes. Besides, the groundwater stock in the State is precarious. The Central Ground Water Board (2020) estimates that the annual draft of groundwater is already more than its

The Delhi Government has acted without understanding the financial and other repercussions of providing free water to all households.

annual replenishable groundwater level of 0.29 billion cubic meters (bcm), leaving no scope for further exploitation.

Increased exploitation of groundwater will increase both private and public costs, which does not augur well for sustainable development. With increasing water scarcity, is it necessary to provide free water to all households? Free water accentuates scarcity by encouraging inefficient use, which is one of the main reasons for Delhi’s unprecedented water crisis.

The free water scheme pronounces that if the household consumes more than 20 kilolitres of water, it will have to pay for the entire water consumed with 10 per cent additional charges. How will this work? Who will monitor it? Will it not encourage the consumers to tamper with the meters? In most cities, domestic consumption of water is not monitored systematically as it is a costly exercise. Delhi presently supplies water to about 21.5 million people, with a pipeline network of 15,473 km. If the government tries to measure the consumption of water using meter, the operation and management costs may increase substantially. A recent CAG report underlines that “the Delhi Jal Board has neither a proper system to measure the water supply to different areas nor does it have access to reliable data on population in different areas”. It, therefore, cannot ensure equitable supply of water.

If the government is serious about improving the plight of the poor, it

should provide free water only to those households which are identified as economically poor.

It is proved beyond doubt that free supply of any good results in inefficiency. Water is no exception. There is ample evidence from different States that free supply of electricity to the farm sector has not only increased the exploitation of groundwater but also pushed State electricity boards into a financial mess. According to an UN estimate, each person needs 20-50 litres of water a day to ensure their basic needs for drinking, cooking and cleaning. If this is so, the supply of close to 700 litres of water per household a day will surely increase inefficiency.

A study by McKinsey Global Institute underlined that Delhi could experience the biggest increase in water demand from 2010 to 2025 because of rapid urban agglomeration. This means the capital cost requirement for managing the increased water demand will rise in the future.

How will the State generate resources with free supply of water? The Delhi Government must, therefore, rethink its free water policy and, instead, work on providing water to the poor at an affordable rate, without affecting the viability of DJB. If free water supply is allowed to continue, Delhi will face an unmanageable water crisis very soon.

The writer is former full-time Member (Official), Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, New Delhi. Views are personal

Focus shifting from auditors to audit committees

The NFRA now expects audit committees to delve deeper into the audit process and related-party transactions

R Anand

The recent observations of the chairman of National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) that the “audit panel of companies cannot escape blame by citing audit failures” has shifted the spotlight from auditors to the audit committee. It is clearly a wake-up call for all audit committees and time for serious stocktaking on their increasing roles and responsibilities.

The entire ecosystem of audit entails that the combined role of various stakeholders ensures reliability of the financial statements and that proper practices and procedures are followed, giving the required comfort to the regulators that all is well in governance and compliance. The key players in the ecosystem are: statutory auditors; internal auditors; IT and systems auditors; and audit committee. While it is mandatory to expect the audit committee to play the role enshrined in the regulations, the expectation of NFRA seems to be that it should go beyond that and, if need be, serve as a watchdog and bloodhound rolled into one — and maybe more of the latter than former.

Increasing use of analytics and sophisticated sampling techniques have made audit — both statutory and internal — highly technology oriented.

The expectation is that audit committees should now focus on the methodology adopted by auditors and appropriately capture the same in the minutes. They should question the audit process more deeply and satisfy themselves that all angles are well covered.

PROPER DOCUMENTATION Before the quarterly meetings, the audit committee chairman is expected to spend quality time with the statutory auditors to understand how the limited review or audit was carried out and be satisfied on the process adopted. One relevant question generally put across is whether there were any contentious accounting related issues discussed with the management and how were they resolved. The questions should now be more on the audit process and methodology, including the tools used. The next step now is to get this properly documented as part of notes or minutes of the audit committee meetings.

Likewise, the scope of internal audit, which is finalised at the beginning of the year, should no longer be a box-ticking affair but an elaborate exercise covering transactions and adherence to regulations and nimble footed enough to make mid-course corrections. There is an increasing trend now to have exclusive audit committee meetings



BRAINSTORMING. A more onerous role now for audit committees

along with with the statutory auditor just to discuss the scope of internal audit.

On related-party transactions (RPT) the role of the committee is to ensure compliance with regulations, arm’s length pricing and adequacy of documents. The key issue is whether the audit committee should ask the relevant questions, get the answers and move on or should it actually be verifying each transaction for correctness and go through every document with a fine-tooth comb?

In reality every audit committee chairman brings in the relevant accumulated knowledge and experience gathered over the years to test the veracity and reasonableness of RPTs and steers the discussion on those lines. If the expectations of the NFRA is for the

audit committee to go beyond this, then it is clearly a new ask and has to be reckoned in the context of the company and the industry in which it operates. The other major issue is to identify transactions with unrelated parties which could indirectly benefit a related party. Use of technology does help in achieving this but the audit committee is saddled with the onerous responsibility of ensuring that nothing is left out in the RPT landscape at the meetings. The problem of multiple subsidiaries and multiple layers leading to constant movement of funds from one entity to another and attendant RPT implications is a separate subject for discussion.

With the recent developments around NFRA’s expectations, the need of the hour is clear guidelines to audit committees on audit methodology and RPT. The endeavour should be to prevent mishaps through a process of education and thought leadership publications rather than wait for an incident to happen and then do a post mortem on how and why things went wrong. Further, in the zest to shift the onus from auditors to audit committees, one should not end up in a paradoxical situation of audit committees playing the bloodhound role and auditors, the watchdog role.

The writer is a chartered accountant

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

Rainwater harvesting The monsoon has just started in some parts of the country and soon it will spread to more areas. But many places are still facing water shortage. The groundwater levels have been decreasing year after year. One way to ease this problem is that every new house constructed must have a percolation pit within its premises. Panchayats, municipalities and corporations should provide percolation pits on roads that have sloping gradients. Rainwater harvesting is the process of accumulation and storage of rainwater for reuse. Rainwater can also be collected from rooftops. The rainwater harvesting system is one of the best

methods for conserving water.
Nagendra Kumar Vempally
Hyderabad

Funds flow to MSMEs Pitted against a labyrinthine matrix of land, licensing, training, infra support and regulations, finance ought to have been a less worrisome facet for MSMEs, the biggest employer in the country. Yet the sector is starved of funds, left largely to the largess of banks and whims of purchasers. Government departments and public sector units account for much of the outstanding dues to the sector. If some of China’s yesteryear MSMEs have grown to international standing today, it is because of the country’s vision for

the small-scale sector. Our Budget needs to be innovative, going into the specific rather than generic issues faced by MSMEs.
R Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

Rail safety This refers to ‘Safety first’ (June 24). The Kanchanjunga Express accident shows that Indian Railways has not learnt its lesson from the tragic and massive Balasore accident last year. The implementation of the Kavach system is going at turtle’s pace. The Railways and the government will have to find ways to speed up Kavach installation. The Railways will have to ensure that there’s no scope for human error. Having bullet

train is good, but safety of passengers is non-negotiable and paramount.
Bal Govind
Noida

Foreign policy The new BJP-led coalition government is swiftly back to business in its foreign policy outreach, especially in the neighbourhood. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s second term in the post began with a series of meetings with the Sri Lankan leadership. The readouts from both New Delhi and Colombo indicate that the focus of his visit was finding ways to expedite India’s many projects — in areas spanning energy, connectivity, housing — in Sri

Lanka that are apparently progressing at a slow pace.
Krishnan Ramani Subramaniam
Navi Mumbai

Rationalise tax rates The article ‘Usher in a simpler tax regime’ (June 24) really hit the nail on the head. It has mirrored the views of households in general and the salaried class in particular. Lowering personal income taxes will do a world of good to the aforesaid sections. It will enhance the disposable income of the people, leading to increase in consumption demand, investment, employment and output in the economy.
S Ramakrishnassayee
Chennai

Rebooting apparel sector

Tweaking PLI, tech upgrade are vital

Mithileshwar Thakur

Labour intensive sectors in India are going through a rough patch. While overall merchandise exports shrank only a bit during last fiscal year, all the traditional labour-intensive sectors witnessed sharper decline. Apparel industry obviously was no exception.

What is more worrisome is the fact that apparel export curve has almost flattened over last six years. Therefore, a serious re-think of strategy is the need of the hour.

The single biggest problem in the apparel sector has been lack of scale. Average number of machines in an Indian apparel manufacturing unit is 300-400 as against 800-1000 machines in competing countries.

While Production- Linked Incentive (PLI) in the textiles sector for MMF fabrics and MMF garments has been a great initiative to augment production capacities, it has not generated the excitement it should have, notwithstanding the flawless selection of products. The lukewarm response can largely be attributed to the higher investment threshold limits.

There is need to launch another version of PLI with lower investment criterion to enable participation of MSMEs.

SPEED-TO-THE-MARKET

Indian exporters mostly miss the bus due to unfavourable speed to the market despite the diverse range, variety, and high fashion quotient in their offerings.

The immediate answer to this problem could be in building warehouses in prominent locations, particularly in the free ports and trading hubs, for speedier access to consumers.

Many apparel players shy away from re-investing the profit into the industry on account of hassles of managing large workforce, drying up capital infusion in the sector. The government should grant direct tax concession on the ploughed back profit to encourage re-investment in the same sector.

The migrant nature of workforce in most of the apparel clusters results in erratic supply of labourers and acute shortage during peak period. This adversely impacts capacity utilisation and consequently cost of production.

The industry should thus be encouraged to move to labour surplus States for uninterrupted labour supply through incentive like “Relocation Compensation Package.”



APPAREL SECTOR. Looking for support

Existing old and outdated machinery need to be replaced. Machineries not manufactured in India like certain shuttle-less looms, knitting machines, non-woven machines etc. should be identified and their import duty rates reduced to zero for three years to facilitate cost-effective technological upgradation.

After this timeframe, a high tariff wall may be raised to encourage foreign investment in machinery manufacturing.

Abysmally low wages, LDC (Least Developed Country) status and duty-free access to EU give countries like Bangladesh a distinct unfair advantage over India. Therefore, the only way to stay competitive is to improve productivity through increased technological intervention.

Technology has a use in fast fashion forecasting, predicting consumer preferences, manufacturing smart textiles, designing smart factories, in intelligent designing and manufacturing, etc.

Increasing use of blockchain technology in traceability, robotics in quality control, IoT in RFID tags in wireless sensor networks and in end-to-end digital integration, just to name a few, will transform the entire industry.

Aggressive marketing to improve visibility of Indian textile and apparel products by having an India theme pavilion in all major international fairs and exhibitions can go a long way in building Brand India.

To harness the full potential of e-commerce, the value cap on e-commerce exports be raised from existing ₹10 lakh and e-commerce exporters be provided level playing field by allowing them to claim GST refunds and export incentives.

These measures will not only arrest the decline but also give much-needed booster dose to the apparel exports.

The writer is Secretary General, Apparel Export Promotion Council

Modi govt’s record on farm front

Agriculture growth has lagged overall GDP growth. Data in some States point towards growing rural distress

MACROSCAN.



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

The recently released report from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Evaluation, the ‘Statistical report on value of output from agriculture and allied sectors (2011-12 to 2022-23)’ provides some estimates of how the value of agricultural output has changed since 2011-12.

This is important information (even though the methodology involves several assumptions that could be called into question) since the 11-year period that is covered includes nine years in which the country has been ruled by the Modi government, and therefore is a useful indicator of how agriculture has fared under that regime.

This is especially relevant in the context of widespread farmers’ protests over the past few years. The outcome of the recent general elections has also been analysed by some observers to suggest that agrarian discontent may have been one of the factors behind the relatively poor performance of the ruling BJP, especially in some States.

Figure 1 provides evidence on the overall trajectory of output in agriculture and allied sectors. While there was some growth in all the sectors within this, it is striking that the total of agriculture and allied sectors’ output grew at a compound annual rate of only 3.7 per cent over this period, when the national accounts data suggest that GDP over this period increased at a compound annual rate (CAGR) of 5.7 per cent — in other words, these activities continued to lag behind aggregate GDP.

SLOW CROP GROWTH

Within this, crop output was the slowest to expand, at a CAGR of only 2.4 per cent, providing an obvious reason for dissatisfaction among cultivators.

Its share of the total output of this sector fell accordingly, from 62.4 per cent in 2011-12 to only 54.3 per cent in 2022-23.

The fastest growing sub-sector was fishing and aquaculture, which grew at 8.7 per cent CAGR, but is already experiencing ecological constraints and problems of sustainability.

Livestock production expanded at a CAGR of 5.5 per cent, still below the increase in GDP over this period.

Within crop output, the pattern is more mixed, as indicated by Figure 2 and Table 1. The most important food crops — cereals and pulses — have experienced relatively slow expansion of output, with CAGR of 2.0 per cent and 3.9 per cent respectively.

Cash crops like condiment and spices experienced the most rapid growth, with CAGR of 5.4 per cent, while horticulture (fruits and vegetables) increased at CAGR of 3.8 per cent. But there has been absolute decline in the value of output of fibres (cotton, jute, silk) as well as other crops, which together still account for more than 10 per cent of total value of crop output.

(The information on output of kitchen gardens mentioned in Table 1 should not be taken too seriously, as there has been no survey of this since 1991-92, and it is simply assumed that it has been increasing at the same rate as the total.)

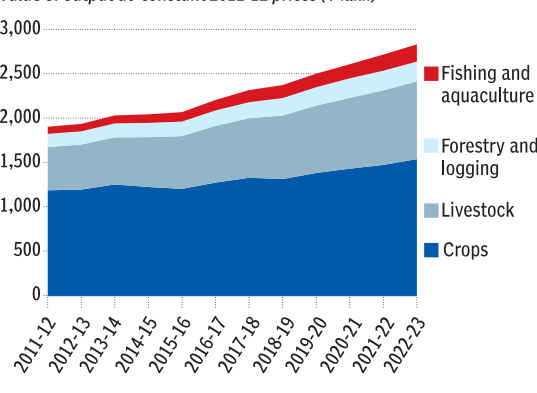
However, there are also significant differences across States, in part also reflecting the crop specialisations that are determined by climatic and ecological conditions. Figure 3 provides data on the CAGR of crop output by major States.

Some States (Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Haryana, Kerala and Uttarakhand) have experienced absolute declines in the value of crop output over this entire period, which is surely a striking fact. But in several other States, growth rates



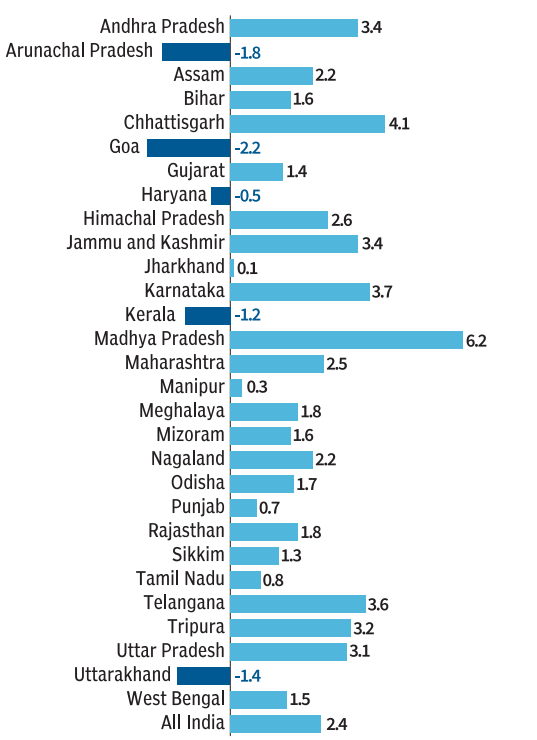
Output path

Value of output at constant 2011-12 prices (₹ lakh)



States’ show

Compound annual rates of growth of crop output by major state, 2011-12 to 2022-23



of crop output have been positive but still shockingly low, including Jharkhand, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Gujarat. However, this does not seem to be necessarily reflected in electoral responses, other than in Haryana, Punjab and to a more limited extent in Bihar.

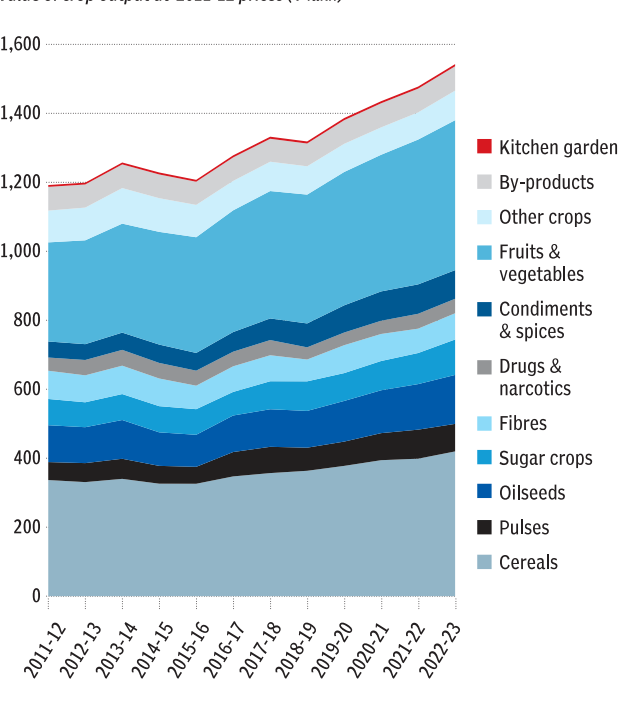
CHANGING CROP PATTERN

The aggregate performance reflects the changing pattern of output of particular crops. Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab,

There is significant variation among States on agriculture output growth. Despite this the overall agrarian picture looks bleak and needs immediate relief

Mixed pattern

Value of crop output at 2011-12 prices (₹ lakh)



Production mix

Compound annual rates of growth of crop output by category, 2011-12 to 2022-23

	Share of total crop output in 2011-12	CAGR (%)	Share of total crop output in 2022-23
Cereals	28.2	2.0	27.2
Pulses	4.4	3.9	5.2
Oilseeds	9	2.6	9.2
Sugar crops	6.4	2.8	6.6
Fibres	6.9	-0.7	4.9
Drugs & narcotics	3.2	0.8	2.7
Condiments & spices	3.9	5.4	5.4
Fruits & vegetables	24.1	3.8	28.2
Other crops	7.7	-0.7	5.6
By-products	5.8	0.2	4.6
Kitchen garden	0.4	1.8	0.4

production, but its production has fallen in absolute terms and production shares of Maharashtra and Telangana have increased. Sugarcane production continues to be dominated by Uttar Pradesh, and its share of output of that crop increased from 41 per cent to 54 per cent over this period.

Despite the regional variations, the broad national picture of both agricultural output and specifically crop output should be worrying for anyone concerned with the Indian economy and the fate of its people.

Overall, this is a relatively dismal performance of crop output within a mediocre trajectory of agriculture and allied sectors is of a piece with the wider public perception that agrarian issues have not been adequately dealt with by the Modi government, and urgent course correction is required.

Reforms must create more jobs, benefit all people: PM

Signalling a distinct Centre-Left tilt in the economic priorities of his United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, on Thursday said reforms were “not just about freeing private enterprise from the shackles of bureaucratic control,” and policies aimed at promoting growth must have to “advance the cause of distributive justice and create new employment opportunities”.

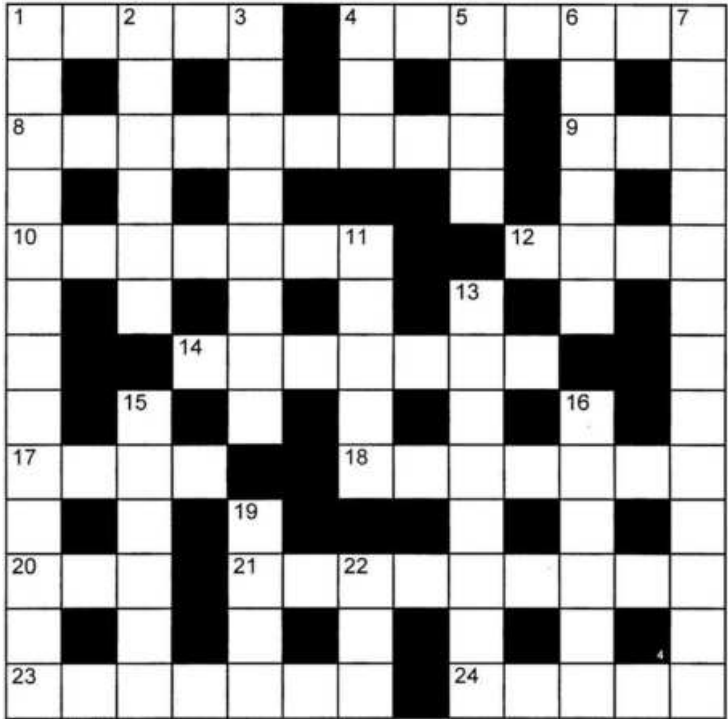
Reliance to acquire German firm Trevira for Rs 440 crore

Relaince Industries Ltd on Thursday announced that it was acquiring German polyester firm Trevira GmbH for 80 million euros (roughly Rs 440 crore). The acquisition will make RIL the world's largest polyester fibre and yarn producer. Trevira, which operates plants in Germany, Belgium and Denmark will add 1.3 lakh tonnes to RIL's existing polyester capacity.

New gas find off Orissa coast

Reliance Industries said today that it has struck gas off the Orissa coast OSN-97/2 block. Initial estimates indicate in-place reserves of four to five trillion cubic feet, Mukesh Ambani, CMD, said today.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2468



EASY

ACROSS

1. Passes through sieve (5)
4. Goes along as protector (7)
8. Old timing device (9)
9. Tavern (3)
10. Concerning sight (7)
12. Flat-topped forage cap (4)
14. Used a spoon (7)
17. Fat (4)
18. Garden heap (7)
20. Aged (3)
21. Speaking at large (2,7)
23. Glut (7)
24. Regretful (5)

DOWN

01. Those educated together (13)
02. Product, effect, advantage (6)
03. Wisdom (8)
04. An age, particular period (3)
05. Ready money (4)
06. Lifted (6)
07. In a mawkish manner (13)
11. Words for song (5)
13. On one's these, one is destitute (4-4)
15. Dealer, merchant (6)
16. Intense repugnance (6)
19. Smoothing implement (4)
22. Obtained (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. Minutely goes through it if trapped in the streets (5)
04. Goes along to protect company in endless form of stress (7)
08. Sort of figure a means of telling sixty minutes (9)
09. When sinning, don't vocalise about refreshing situation (3)
10. State to choose one first, but it's a form of illusion (7)
12. What soldier may have ahead, reversing parts of old weapon (4)
14. Tries the doctor out, having created some agitation (7)
17. Regular dripping may contain other fat (4)
18. Arrive endlessly with letters that will be of use in garden (7)
20. Instructed to remove top: nothing new about that (3)
21. Broadly speaking, where supreme commander places his trust? (2,7)
23. There's too much water breaking along shore to bind back (7)
24. An apologetic word that's contemptible (5)

DOWN

01. Classmates who train dons (13)
02. The product of the apples and pears, say (6)
03. A long tale at the business centre demonstrating wisdom (8)
04. Time when it's right to be at the heart of each half (3)
05. Get money for cheque when replacing much in the cloth (4)
06. An Academician on the wrong side got it together (6)
07. Posted one, in thought alone, with much emotion (13)
11. Words that ought to be noted (5)
13. The ray finishes, and on these one is penniless (4-4)
15. He deals with revolutionary painting? It's up to him! (6)
16. Who, by error, both got beheaded? It leaves one aghast (6)
19. A line ranged one behind the other will make things smooth (4)
22. Contracted to get the first that turns up (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2467

ACROSS 2. First 5. Pump 7. Crag 8. Creature 9. Mistress 11. Male 12. Determination 15. Grid 17. Identify 19. Terrible 21. Soon 22. Used 23. Guyed

DOWN 1. Carmine 2. Fog 3. Ruche 4. Treason 5. Put 6. Mural 10. Tread 11. Motet 13. Mailbag 14. Off-load 16. Reels 18. Every 20. Red 21. Sad

Seven years on

Reform of GST, rates included, is overdue

It has now been seven years since India's indirect tax regime was completely overhauled, with the introduction of goods and services tax (GST). There was a great deal of compromise about the final form of GST, including between the Union government and doubtful states. These compromises, it was understood at the time, would limit the efficiency improvements provided by GST. Many hoped, including this newspaper, that over time structural impediments within GST would be removed and the full efficiency gains would be realised. Seven years and two general elections on, it is clear that more effort needs to be put into basic improvements to the system.

GST is overseen by the GST Council, which brings together finance ministries from the states and the Union. The Council met this past weekend, but once again deferred deeper questions about GST improvements to subsequent meetings. This is not to say that it did not do important work. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman pointed out the decisions taken by the GST Council included changes to how demand notices could be challenged and to appeals, as well as other improvements to the compliance system. For example, non-fraudulent cases will no longer require interest or penalties, and the department will not appeal judgments against it to higher courts automatically, but be subject to revised monetary caps. Given that almost 2 per cent of assessments are being challenged, such changes are clearly of great importance. One of the promises of GST was ease of use, and that is not being lived up to as much as it should be.

The time has come to return to reforming the basic structure of GST. Why the dual structure of GST, at both state and central levels, is essential to indirect taxes must be questioned. The unfinished agenda of GST also includes rationalising rates and slabs. The indirect tax system was originally designed with a single rate, which would allow for clarity and efficiency. But instead, multiple rates were introduced, and the GST Council therefore could not resist the temptation of tweaking those rates in a populist manner. Even in the last meeting, the rate for packing boxes was brought down from 18 to 12 per cent. Such tweaks are an invitation to rent-seeking and a waste of the Council's time. The Council did, however, promise to discuss including petrol and diesel within the GST system. These, like alcohol, are still taxed by the states, and are a major source of cost and inefficiency within the system. Bringing them under GST is overdue.

An even more divisive question is what will be done with GST compensation cess surplus, which could total as much as ₹70,000 crore. The cess is levied on "sin goods", including tobacco and expensive automobiles. Part of the reason for the cess was to use it to repay the loans taken on behalf of states during the pandemic. But it seems there will be a considerable amount left over. The discussion on what to do with it has been postponed. Debate over how this windfall is to be used is natural. But it should not be allowed to delay or disturb deeper questions of GST reform.

Mutual benefits

Sheikh Hasina's visit reflected geopolitical convergence

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India just a fortnight after she attended the third inauguration of Narendra Modi's prime ministership underlined the mutuality of geopolitical interests between the two neighbours that enjoy deep historical links and cordial relations despite blips over a Teesta river water-sharing agreement and the issue of illegal immigration. Ms Hasina is the first foreign leader to visit India after the formation of the new government in New Delhi. Recently sworn in for a historic fifth term as Prime Minister, Ms Hasina is seeking to rebalance Bangladesh's asymmetric relations with China, and the latest two-day visit to New Delhi served to emphasise that recalibration. On India's part, Mr Modi has been seeking to mobilise South Asian allies with a "neighbourhood-first" approach to position itself as a regional power and credible counter-balance to China.

The broad thrust of the 10 agreements between the two countries reflected these overlapping objectives. They included a raft of agreements on defence, maritime security, the blue (or ocean) economy, space, telecommunications, green technologies, medicines, and bolstered ties in railway connectivity. These agreements represent a continuum with key initiatives between the two governments in 2023. Chief among them was the India-Bangladesh Friendship pipeline, to transport high-speed diesel from the Numaligarh Refinery, Assam, to northern Bangladesh. Under a proposed trilateral hydropower agreement, India also agreed to facilitate electricity exports through Bhutan to Bangladesh. The latter initially plans to import around 1,500 Mw from Bhutan, and there has been progress on this project in recent months. At the same time, India has sought to manage the problems over Teesta water-sharing, after an agreement has long been stalled by objections from Sikkim and West Bengal, by sending a technical team to advise Dhaka on a mega project to conserve and manage the Teesta river. This offer comes on the heels of discussions last month between China and Bangladesh to construct a \$1 billion development project in the Teesta basin. Besides, technical-level negotiations on renewing the Ganges Water Treaty of 1996 will start. Ms Hasina also addressed the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), inviting Indian businesses to invest in Bangladesh and promising investment in better infrastructure to improve logistics between the two countries.

But for all the declarations of friendship and ceremonial protocols in New Delhi, China remains the looming challenge for both countries. China dwarfs India in terms of trade with Bangladesh. It is Bangladesh's single-largest partner with bilateral trade worth \$24 billion. It is also the major source of raw materials for the engine of Bangladesh's economic growth — textiles and leather exports. Though Bangladesh is India's largest trade partner in South Asia, bilateral trade between the two is just \$14 billion. The point of friction between Beijing and Dhaka lies in projects under China's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Bangladesh. Although China has completed some 35 major infrastructure projects in Bangladesh under the BRI, financing has emerged as a key point of concern. Dhaka now owes Beijing \$4 billion or 6 per cent of its foreign debt for BRI projects, a predicament that has delayed the creation of a 5G network and some key highways. In contrast, India has extended three lines of credit as well as grant assistance to Bangladesh for infrastructure development in addition to community development and capacity-building projects. Handled well, this relatively benign approach could prove another solid building block for India-Bangladesh relations.

Reflections from the US

India remains a prized long-term bet, but investors are hesitant due to concerns over valuation

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



I had the opportunity to spend some time with global investors and allocators in the US — many of whom represent sophisticated long-term capital and are thought leaders in their field. I was also there just as the Indian election results were being announced that very week. Here are some of my key takeaways:

There was surprise at the election results, as they were very much against the consensus, but no panic. Everyone was happy that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was back, as they could not understand the economics of the Congress. Some were concerned about the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) ability to handle a coalition, but they were in the minority. Most felt that a strong coalition with the BJP at 240 seats was not such a bad thing and believed it would last for five years.

Coalitions ensure that multiple points of view are heard and may better reflect the diversity of the country. While tough reforms in land and labour may get delayed, the results make it clear that India is not at risk of becoming like Turkey or Hungary. The predictability and stability of our growth may actually be enhanced by these results. Most did not expect the coalition partners to demand more than state-specific resources and hoped that the results would bring greater focus on economic issues and policies.

There were some fears of the government lurching towards populism. Will that be taken as the lesson from the weaker-than-expected outcome for the ruling party? The upcoming Budget will be watched very closely for continuity of policy. The government, in its second term, prioritised public investment over giveaways. Will this continue? Can they hold the line against populism? The continuity among the key ministers has given hope that this signals continuity in policy settings as well. There will, of course, be an enhanced focus on employment, but that is the key concern among voters and needs greater policy effort anyway. Greater efforts on education and skilling are to be expected and welcomed as well.



AKASH PRAKASH

The key concern among investors is what reasons the BJP ascribes for its weaker-than-expected performance. How will this introspection change government policy? Will we lurch towards revenue expenditure at the cost of public investment? Will we relax the fiscal road map? Will big business be vilified? Will the government be able to incentivise global giants to set up in India through collaborative policy formulation?

There was also the expectation that this government will hit the ground running. Expectations remain high for policy reform, and everyone had heard of the 100-day plans ministries were asked to prepare. Indian markets were already priced for 7-8

per cent real gross domestic product (GDP) growth and 15 per cent-plus earnings per share growth. We have to deliver on this to sustain the premium valuations. A government slow off the blocks will be seen negatively and may rekindle worries about coalition politics.

On India allocations, the concern remains valuations. India is now clearly the most expensive market in the world. Domestic investors drive the markets, and while most understand the lack of alternatives for local investors, there is still worry on the sustainability of these flows. "How close to a bubble are we in local flows?" was a common question. Everyone was aware of the futures/options markets in India and the bubble-like spike in volumes.

The fact is that for the last 2.5 years, the net flow of foreign portfolio investors' money into India has been zero. India is now at best a neutral weight for most emerging markets investors, having always been an overweight historically. For those allocators who were smart enough to have been in India early, they are rebalancing from the country and taking profits. For new flows, we will have to look at the global funds, which have not been in India historically or took profits much earlier. India's continuously rising weights make it harder to totally ignore. Until markets catch a breath and consolidate for some

Hybrids in an EV era

The Indian passenger car market will soon see a fork in the road on its journey towards electrification. Until now, pure electric vehicles (EVs) have been the flavour of the day. But hybrid technology is now emerging as an important game-changer, providing a more potent and effective alternative to wean customers away from the internal combustion engine (ICE) to cleaner options.

Despite a limited range of hybrid vehicles on offer currently in India, the sale of hybrids have revved up, albeit from a small base, and surpassed EVs since the second half of last year. The trend continues this year as well. In the US, too, sales of EVs are starting to stagnate.

The EV landscape is on the brink of dramatic changes. Numero uno Maruti Suzuki's decision to press the accelerator on hybrid technology, including a low-cost variant, across much of its fleet — Baleno, Swift, Fronx, apart from its existing range of Grand Vitara and Invicto — is likely to shake up the automobile market. As much as a quarter of Maruti's sales could come from its expanded hybrid range, tapping into the growing environmental consciousness among Indian consumers.

However, that could very well spell trouble for the major Indian players, Tata Motors and Mahindra, who decided to entirely hitch their bandwagon to EVs, completely ditching hybrid as a more viable intermediate solution. The Indian government, which patiently supported the EV revolution, may soon have to bring a measure of parity in its incentive schemes. Toyota and Suzuki are aggressively campaigning for a cut in goods and services tax (GST) rates for hybrid

cars from 28 per cent to 12 per cent (as opposed to 5 per cent for EVs) — something that even Union Minister Nitin Gadkari appears to be increasingly in sync with. Tata Motors has been crying itself hoarse to prevent tax cuts for hybrids, but that may not cut ice for long.

So what's really going on? Hybrids score on three counts: They are cheaper to manufacture compared to EVs. And their cost of ownership falls somewhere in between an ICE engine car and an electric car. What's more, it is not dependent on a battery charging infrastructure, which eliminates range anxiety that has hobbled the growth of EVs in India and also eliminates the attendant hassles. Simply put, a hybrid car typically alternates between an ICE engine and a self-charging battery depending on the terrain. In city traffic, the car draws power from the battery. On the highway, it relies on its gasoline engine. And the switchover is seamless.

Toyota was the first global car maker to bet on hybrids with its Prius brand way back in 1997. And since then, it has had enough time to refine the technology. However, it was often mocked for not focusing sufficiently on EVs and the need to completely eliminate emissions. Its chairman Akio Toyoda stuck to his guns, allowing customers to choose between hybrid and electric. But now, as Elon Musk's Tesla starts to lose steam in the US, it seems certain that Mr Toyoda will have the last laugh.

In India, Toyota's unique partnership with Suzuki has set the cat among the pigeons. Primarily, a small-car maker, Maruti Suzuki realises the need to expand its product portfolio with bigger cars, especially SUVs.



STRATEGIC INTENT

INDRAJIT GUPTA

Coping with the data flood and drought



BOOK REVIEW

AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

The author captures the essence of his book in his quote of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's verse: "Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink". Coleridge was, of course, writing about Ancient Mariners who had to navigate salty oceans and Nitin Seth is writing about those in our times who must navigate our current world and its oceans of data: "Data, data everywhere, but not a drop of understanding".

Mr Seth is an IIT/IIM grad who has navigated the world of the data ocean as a consultant with McKinsey, a senior executive with Flipkart, and as an executive with Fidelity before venturing out on his own. So, one could say he has navigated through many parts of the oceans of data in which we all live.

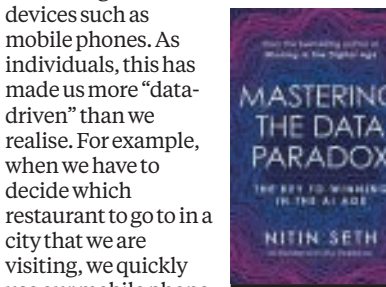
The "paradox" in the title refers to the fact that although we are constantly flooded with data, we are unable to easily access all the insights that this data can offer us. It is like living with a deluge and a drought at the same time. This paradox exists, he says, because gathering insights from this flood of data costs too much, or the teams tasked with gathering insights are not often successful at this task, or they don't often have the right data.

A key insight of this book is the author's description of three levels at

which the data flood exists. The first is easy to grasp: Data exists at the organisation level, in business firms and institutions of every scale and size. Data also exists at the level of individuals and thus raises issues of which we are all just beginning to become aware, such as data privacy. Data also exists, he points out, at a third level, the level of a nation. This last point raises a new set of issues because a nation's competitive advantage may lie in using this national level data wisely.

Mr Seth extensively discusses data at each of these three levels. As he points out, at each of these levels there are pluses and minuses in the methods we use to deal with data. For example, a lack of data privacy can threaten an individual's existence, but too much of it can be a threat to the society in which the person lives.

The data flood at the individual level in our contemporary society arises, as he points out, because of the multiple contacts we have at every moment with various digital devices such as mobile phones. As individuals, this has made us more "data-driven" than we realise. For example, when we have to decide which restaurant to go to in a city that we are visiting, we quickly use our mobile phone and look up apps such as Yelp and check what the crowd-source data there says.



What are the ratings given by users? What are the comments that users have made? Is the restaurant we are thinking

of going to kid-friendly? The restaurant choice issue is just one of the many spheres where the average person looks for a data-driven decision. It could be what books are worth reading and at what prices are they available — and many, many more examples. As the writer points out, we are probably not fully conscious of how we as individuals have become dependent on data to live our lives.

Towards the end of the book, Mr Seth takes great pains to point out how we need to exercise "wisdom" in dealing with the ocean of

data flooding our enterprises, our individual lives and our nation. As he points out, when we have a lot of data, we have a false sense of belief that we understand the problem we are dealing

with. But the danger is that we may not have seen the consequences of our decisions. Taking a larger view is what he calls "wisdom". He describes a systematic process to get to use wisdom in a data-first world.

This is the author's second book. His earlier book, *Winning in the Digital Age* published in 2020, made a big impact because it clearly explained what was quite mysterious at that time: The Digital Transformation Process.

Some prospective readers of this book may take one look at its gigantic size and look away from it. But I must point out that the largeness of size comes from the author using charts and workflow diagrams liberally throughout the book to explain or illustrate the point he is making. These diagrams are like those used in business schools and corporate presentations and certainly make complex ideas easy to understand.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Blurred vision
on Khalistan

Ottawa needs to reassess its priorities to bring relations with New Delhi back on an even keel

External affairs minister S Jaishankar has paid tribute to the victims of the terrorist bombing of Air India flight 182 on June 23, 1985, on the 39th anniversary of the carnage, describing it as one of the worst acts of terrorism in history. The Indian high commission in Ottawa held a memorial for the victims, a majority of them Canadians of Indian origin, and noted that the perpetrators and co-conspirators of the dastardly attack remain free. This came days after the Canadian Parliament observed a minute’s silence to pay tribute to Khalistani activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, whom India had declared a terrorist before he was killed by gunmen last year. These events, almost running on parallel tracks, are symptomatic of the marked slide in relations between New Delhi and Ottawa.

It would be pertinent to point out that the bombing of Air India flight 182 was the worst aviation-related act of terrorism until the 9/11 attacks in the US and is acknowledged by Canadian authorities as the worst terrorist attack in that country’s history. It killed all 329 people on the airliner, including 268 Canadian citizens, and 24 Indians. Canada’s investigation of the bombing is now best remembered for the way investigators failed to follow up on important leads and destroyed key evidence. In more contemporary times, Canada’s reluctance to address the presence of a domestic constituency that celebrates terrorist acts against India in the name of Khalistan is astonishing, considering the ground the world has covered on global terrorism since 9/11. The arguments for national sovereignty and freedom of speech raised by the Justin Trudeau government do not hold up against groups that routinely target India and advocate the creation of a separate theocratic state carved out of India — a demand with almost no resonance among Sikhs in India.

Trudeau’s message that Canada stands against hate, intolerance and division rings hollow since his government refuses to acknowledge that allowing the discredited idea of Khalistan to flourish has potentially devastating consequences. Worse, this has let relations between the two democracies slide, which now threatens to impact people-to-people contacts, as evident in the dramatic fall in the issuing of Canadian student visas to Indians. The onus is now on Canada to revive this important relationship and find ways to address the issue of violent extremism and separatism.

Anand, Azad and the
future of Dalit politics

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supremo Mayawati has reinstated nephew Akash Anand as the national coordinator of the party and her heir over seven weeks after she removed him from these positions during the general elections. The party performed poorly as the election turned into a straight contest between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led NDA and INDIA bloc of the Congress and Samajwadi Party (SP). It failed to win a single seat — down from 10 in the 17th Lok Sabha — and its vote share fell below 10%. However, Chandrashekhra Azad, a potential rival to Mayawati’s leadership claim over UP’s Dalit population, won the Nagina seat with a majority of over 150,000 votes. Azad’s victory and the INDIA bloc’s success serve as a warning to the BSP, which has seen its support dip after being in office in UP for a full term from 2007 to 2012. The results also reflect a churn in Dalit politics.

Azad’s Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) is a middling outfit compared to the pan-Indian, legacy-rich, and resourceful BSP. Azad has risen from the grassroots through agitational politics whereas Anand draws his influence from aunt Mayawati’s legacy. Azad has also sought to link up with Kanshi Ram’s legacy of mobilisational politics. This is interesting for barring the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in Tamil Nadu, which has two MPs (it is part of the INDIA bloc, led by the DMK, in the state), most Dalit outfits have eschewed agitational politics. The Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) and Hindustan Awam Morcha (Secular), which have representatives in Parliament, are examples of this tendency. The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi of Prakash Ambedkar, that rejected the overtures of the INDIA bloc in Maharashtra, failed to win a seat.

This raises the question if there is scope for a group that defines itself in narrow identities to stand its ground against parties that seek to be representative of politics that offer the umbrella of broader social coalitions in a polarised society divided between the Hindutva and social justice/secularism camps. Can Anand or Azad break this pattern?

The importance of
being the Speaker

Constitutional reform that guarantees the independence of the office — and removes some of its contentious roles — is of utmost importance to ensure the sanctity of parliamentary democracy

In the 2024 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost its majority and has since returned to power at the head of a coalition government. With a newly strengthened and emboldened Opposition, it is anticipated that Parliament might see livelier debates and discussions than it has for the last decade when the BJP enjoyed a simple majority on its own. In this context, the first issue that is on everyone’s radar is the election of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, which is due to take place on the 26th of June. Opposition leader Aditya Thackeray has publicly warned the BJP’s coalition allies to ensure the election of a non-partisan Speaker, or risk being “broken up” by the BJP in due course. Meanwhile, there are reports that the BJP is resolute that its own nominee will be the Speaker, and that it might even depart from parliamentary convention, where the position of the deputy speaker goes to the Opposition. But what is it, precisely, that makes the post of the Speaker such a coveted one?

In a parliamentary democracy, the

government is formed out of the majority party or coalition and performs the work of day-to-day governance. The legislative agenda also tends to arise from the government and tends to carry the day in Parliament because of the strength of numbers. The parliamentary Opposition’s job, on the other hand, is to scrutinise and challenge the government and perform the vital function of oversight. It can do this through multiple ways: for instance, through putting questions to the government in Parliament, through working in — and sometimes chairing — parliamentary committees, and so on. Indeed, as BR Ambedkar noted in *Federation Versus Freedom*, his 1939 critique of the 1935 Government of India Act, the Opposition can scrutinise the government’s record in two main ways — through a debate on the budget, and by asking questions in the House.

Now, the proceedings in the House — which enable the Opposition to perform its functions — are under the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of the Speaker. It is the Speaker, for example, who decides which member of Parliament (MP)’s question to call out, or what the composition of parliamentary committees will be. Thus, the ability of the Opposition to do its job effectively requires the Speaker to be non-partisan.

Parliamentary democracies attempt to ensure this by insulating the Speaker from the majority party or coalition. Either by law or by constitutional convention, the Speaker must give up their party affiliation. Their election often

goes unchallenged by the Opposition, as an effort is made to find a consensus figure to play the role. And there are strong norms that compel Speakers to perform their roles impartially. Speakers who breach these norms could well find themselves exposed to cross-party disapproval, and — eventually — the loss of their position.

In India, however, the Speaker’s independence is neither codified by the Constitution, nor is it enforced through strong constitutional conventions or norms. The Speaker is, in essence, the nominee of the ruling party or coalition — which, of course, has no incentive to nominate an independent-minded person to occupy the Chair. Indian constitutionalism, therefore, has a design — or structural — flaw, where the very individual who is meant to protect the interests of Parliament against the executive is, essentially, beholden to the executive.

In the same text that we have noted here, Ambedkar also observed that the two ways that the executive could avoid accountability were either by weakening Parliament, or by changing its composition. In recent times, we have seen examples of both, facilitated by a partisan Speaker. In the 2014-2019 Parliament, the Speaker simply refused to list an Opposition-led no-confidence motion against the government for debate and voting. In the 2019-2024 Parliament, the Speaker expelled a whole raft of Opposition MPs ahead of the discussion on far-reaching bills, such as the new criminal laws — which were eventually



Gautam Bhatia



With a newly strengthened and emboldened Opposition, it is anticipated that Parliament might see livelier debates and discussions

BLOOMBERG

passed in the near-absence of the Opposition.

As if this were not problematic enough, over the years, Indian legislators have rashly voted to increase the Speaker’s powers — including through constitutional amendments. The most consequential of these is making the Speaker the adjudicating authority in cases involving MPs being disqualified for violating the anti-defection law. By simply sitting on a disqualification petition — or by deciding it in a mala fide way — the Speaker can essentially make the anti-defection law toothless, and facilitate horse-trading. This has happened on more than one occasion in various state legislatures, and it was perhaps the example that Aditya Thackeray had in mind as, during the controversy over the “real Shiv Sena” in Maharashtra in 2022, the Speaker’s allegedly partisan actions were criticised by no less than the Supreme Court. There is, therefore, the concern that a partisan Speaker would essentially allow the dominant party at the Centre to “break” its opponents, and allow such actions to go unpunished by simply refusing to implement the anti-defection law.

It should now be clear why jockeying over the Speaker’s role has become so important. In a functioning parliamentary democracy, the Speaker would be a low-profile, non-partisan office, sim-

ply concerned with running the day-to-day affairs of the House. In India, however, the Speaker not only controls the House, but has also been placed in charge of the future of political parties, when one dominant party tries to engineer defections from its rivals. The final nail in the coffin is the Indian Constitution’s failure to guarantee the independence of the Speaker from the ruling party, which — in turn — creates incentives for the ruling party to control the Speaker, and through the Speaker it can control the Opposition and neutralise Parliament.

The ongoing fight over the Speaker’s post, therefore, reveals to us certain major design flaws in the constitutional scheme that governs the relationship between the executive and Parliament, and between the ruling party/coalition and the Opposition. If we are to avoid a situation where the executive and the ruling party can suppress the Opposition and the Parliament, constitutional reform that guarantees genuine Speaker independence — and removes some of their other roles, such as adjudicating defection cases — is of utmost importance. Otherwise, the “parliamentary” aspect of India’s parliamentary democracy risks being very close to something like a sham.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based advocate. The views expressed are personal

Can India keep its net
zero by 2070 promise?

What quantum of coal-based power generation capacity is under construction today? The government has pegged this at 80 gigawatts (GW). However, if one reads the report of the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), only about 29 GW is under construction, with a paltry 5% from the private sector. This begs the question of what definitions of “under construction” are used by the CEA and the government. Will a plant still be at the drawing stage and qualify as being under construction, or is this label conferred only after the plant has been approved by the board? Or is it only after orders have been placed for the main plant that it is said to be under construction? The CEA report only considers the last case. So, there is little clarity on the status of the remaining 50-odd GW of capacity.

When the CEA published its revised optimal generation mix report in April 2023, it projected a peak demand of 335 GW in 2029-30, and the required coal-based capacity was estimated at about 250 GW. The generation mix is, of course, a cost optimisation exercise, and the share of each source — coal, hydro, nuclear, solar, wind and batteries — depends on the cost of generation that has been assumed. All these numbers are merely indicative since the power sector is decentralised, and actual capacity addition is a function of many variables and not just cost. Coal-based capacity existing when the CEA finalised its optimal mix report (in 2023) totalled 210 GW. Therefore, the additional capacity that must be set up between 2023 and 2030 stands at ~40 GW. Plans to add 80 GW thus factor in twice the additional capacity envisaged just a year ago (in 2023)! Incidentally, for the period 2020-21 to 2023-24, India’s cumulative target for thermal capacity generation was about 41.9 GW, and we achieved about 16.2 GW (38% of the target). The point here is that we may be planning for 80 GW, but what will actually be achieved is uncertain. That demand is rising faster than supply can be gauged from the plant load factor of thermal plants — a measure of capacity utilisation — going up to 76% in April from 71% in January.

The capacity addition target has been set at 80 GW for two likely reasons. One, the projected demand by 2030 would probably exceed

what the CEA envisaged while finalising its optimal generation mix report. A maximum demand of 250 GWs has already been clocked in the final days of May. This is expected to have reached 260 GW in subsequent weeks. Two, the coal-based generation target has been set so high, likely due to inadequate addition of renewables capacity. Though tenders finalised in the first few months of 2024 have exceeded the target, there is still a long way to go. We need to add about 40 GW of renewables every year from now till 2030 to meet the targeted capacity, whereas our average achievement is about 10 GW per year! It would be pertinent to add that certain government policies have actually retarded the growth of renewables. The imposition of basic customs duty, insistence on buying equipment from an identified list of manufacturers, lack of access to grid connectivity, a cumbersome land acquisition process are all major obstacles. The mixed signals from the government exacerbate matters. To illustrate, not very long ago, it was announced that no new coal-based stations would be built.

That said, in the past few months, the government has left no stone unturned to ensure that coal-based generation is maximised. The directions to domestic coal generators on importing and blending coal or the directions given to imported coal generators to keep running their plants at full capacity are some examples. Similar directions have now been given to gas-based generators as well. Earlier, there was talk of keeping coal-based generating stations alive even after the expiry of their power purchase agreements (PPAs), usually valid for 25 years. The idea was to pool all such generators and draw up some fresh PPA. This, however, has not taken shape, possibly because of the reluctance of the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC). The government, of course, can’t solely be blamed for going ahead with coal-based generation; unless we add capacity, we will not be able to meet the 2030 demand. As it is, capacity addition from sources such as hydro, gas, or nuclear is low for various reasons.

Against this backdrop, India may have to compromise its commitment to become net zero by 2070 though the government claims that the added emphasis on coal generation will not affect our resolve. The power sector accounts for about 40% of India’s total carbon footprint. The new coal plants will be generating for the next 25 years at least (which possibly could be 40 years) after commissioning. This will limit the setting up of new renewable generation capacity given the cumulative utilisation factor of renewable capacity vis-à-vis traditional capacity. Each megawatt (MW) of coal-based capacity kept running will crowd out 4 MW of solar capacity.

Clearly, we are in a bind as pursuing both the goals, i.e., maximising coal-based generation and net zero by 2070, run contrary to each other. Tackling decarbonisation in transport and industry is a complicated matter. One can keep saying we are on the net zero path, but the reality is something else!

Somit Dasgupta is senior visiting fellow, Icrier, and former member (economic and commercial), the Central Electricity Authority. The views expressed are personal



The power sector accounts for about 40% of India’s total carbon footprint

REUTERS

{ BENJAMIN NETANYAHU }

ISRAEL PRIME MINISTER

I am prepared to make a partial deal that will return to us some of the hostages. But we are committed to continuing the war after a pause, in order to complete the goal of eliminating Hamas

Case against NEET goes
beyond failings of NTA

On June 4, the declaration of results from the general elections coincided with the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-UG 2024 results, both leading to unexpected outcomes. Interestingly, it has been the NEET results that have led to greater controversy, broad-based introspection and judicial intervention. After the Supreme Court (SC) stepped in to question irregularities in awarding grace marks, the National Testing Agency (NTA) agreed to conduct a retest for 1,563 candidates, which was held on Sunday. The NEET-PG test was postponed after allegations of a paper leak. In any case, the government seems to be focussed on temporary antidotes at best, while deep-rooted causes remain unaddressed and the prognosis for the future of NEET appears to be grave.

The One Country One Test paradigm attracted controversy from its very inception in 2012. Till 2015, NEET was not conducted on the basis of the SC order declaring it to be unconstitutional. However, in April 2016, the SC, in the case of *Sanikalp Charitable Trust and another vs Union of India and Ors* (2016), reviewed its earlier decision and mandated NEET to be the single entrance test for medical courses across India. Notably, Tamil Nadu, one of the states exempted from NEET initially, has been protesting against its implementation.

The present controversy has arisen due to suspicious marking practices that have led to an unusually high number of candidates scoring perfectly 720 out of 720 marks as well as awarding of grace marks based on a loss of time by applying the normalisation formula. This formula was endorsed by the SC in the case of *Disha Panchal and others vs Union of India* (2019) when candidates for the Common Law Admission Test faced glitches in the examination portal. While the Grievance Redressal Committee has reviewed the case of 1,563 candidates who appeared in the NEET exam this year and received grace marks, it has not explained other anomalies in patterns in this year’s results.

Though this retest has been accepted by the SC, it does not deal with the arbitrariness of the grace marks based on a normalisation formula that was neither informed to candidates prior to the exam nor accepted by any court of law to be used in such a manner. Conducting a fresh examination for a select number of students has the effect of giving them additional preparation time and holding the exam under different con-

ditions altogether. This, inevitably, raises the issue of disrupting the level playing field that was in existence during the original test. There will also be questions about the differing difficulty levels of the two test papers. It is curious to note that around 750 of the 1,563 candidates skipped retest, which casts serious doubts over the genuineness of candidates.

However, larger and more fundamental questions around NEET remain unresolved. The One Nation One Test model promotes a one-size-fits-all approach that can be inherently discriminatory. In a country with a diverse school curriculum, learning difficulties, and affordability issues, the common test paradigm will only favour those who are placed on the higher echelons.

The committee, chaired by justice (ret.) AK Rajan, was appointed by the government of Tamil Nadu to study the impact of the NEET exam. After undertaking a detailed analysis of family backgrounds and educational backgrounds of students admitted to study medicine over 10 years or so, the Justice Rajan Committee concluded that the introduction of a common exam such as NEET disadvantaged candidates from rural, non-English speaking and economically weaker backgrounds. Shifting the metric from the school leaving examination to an additional, extra-curricular test has made the role of coaching centres critical to success.

NEET has been an affront to social justice from the beginning. Now, NEET has been marred by arbitrariness in its procedure. Though the recent attention is a result of the dubious marking practices, the larger issues around fairness and equity remain unresolved. As a concept, a common test cannot determine access to all colleges to study medicine. Even the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) only controls admission mostly to national law universities. In contrast, NEET has taken over admission to colleges run by the state government and also private colleges. It places undue importance on one type of educational syllabus over all others. Even if marking irregularities or incompetence of the NTA is factored out, the NEET model of examination will fail the test on principles of inequality and anti-federalism.

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OUR VIEW



Let pump dams fill gaps in clean power supplies

Adani's investment in pumped storage hydropower projects should be viewed in the context of India's need to tackle wind and solar power intermittency for a smooth green transition

As India pushes forth with its transition to clean energy, storage is a challenge that confronts us. Windmills and solar panels serve well so long as the wind blows and sun shines. To fill in the gaps when they don't and assure users a steady flow of electricity, we need to either store generated energy in chargeable batteries, which costs a lot, or create clean capacity with a control knob to raise or reduce output at will. In this backdrop, the Adani Group's latest investment plan is notable. According to a *Mint* report, Adani Green Energy Ltd plans to invest approximately ₹25,000-27,500 crore in pumped-storage hydropower (PSH) dams over the next five odd years, with PSH capacity of 5 gigawatts as its initial goal. Having already invested heavily in wind and solar projects, Adani expects to move fast on this, aiming to scale up its PSH capacity to 25GW eventually. Players like Tata Power, JSW and the state-run NTPC also plan pump dams. Earlier this year, the Union environment ministry had cleared PSH projects worth over ₹80,000 crore, but Adani's outlay is now the largest. Its entry will boost the country's drive for sustainable power generation.

What sets PSH units apart is that the power they generate can go by the sum of our needs rather than the vagaries of nature. This means they can be linked to grids to solve the problem of supply intermittency faced by other sources that do not use fossil fuels. Regular old dams hold water in vast lakes; by opening sluice gates to let it cascade onto watermills that rotate under its force to create electricity, they can vary their output, going full pep to maximum capacity if need be. The same applies to PSH units, which are typically smaller but differ in a

significant way. Their reservoirs, built as usual at some height, are self-fed with water that's routinely pumped back up after use (using less power of course). Pumps relieve such dams of the need for natural water inflows. A steep hillside, for example, is all they need. So, while PSH generators are capital intensive, they face fewer limitations of geography than classic river dams built in hilly regions. Spotting the appropriate topography to create a little lake is not short of its own challenges, but water recycling expands the country's scope for hydropower manifold. Although the basic idea has been around for long, technical advances in recent years are said to have given it better energy efficiency in terms of its input-output ratio.

To fully appreciate the value of a control knob to plug gaps in clean supply, consider India's current scenario. Peak electricity demand this summer overshoot our fossil-fuel capacity of around 237GW, and even though we have over 179GW of other capacity, large parts of India suffered outages. While patchy grid link-ups explain much of this discrepancy between what we can produce and what users get to use, overall, what's needed for us to rely on clean sources in the future—as we must—is a mission to back up renewable power with generators whose output is easy to vary. A robust network of PSH plants would fit the bill. Water-driven turbines only need large volumes of this fluid kept in reserve, with wind and sunlight conditions in no position to play spoilsport. Granted, pump dams are expensive—which is why their ideal role is as gap fillers. Of the 500GW that India is aiming for from non-fossil-fuel sources by 2030, more than just a sliver ought to be from pump dams. Seen from the sky, little lakes atop hills are the missing piece in our power puzzle.

GUEST VIEW

Having life insurance coverage is one thing, its adequacy another

The sum assured should be around 10 times one's annual income to secure the future of dependents



TARUN CHUGH
is managing director and chief executive officer, Bajaj Allianz Life.

As a football enthusiast, I find the sport exhilarating. It demands patience, persistence and timing. Its unpredictability adds to its allure. Life, much like a football match, is inherently a series of unpredictable events, emphasizing the necessity of having adequate defences in place, both on field and in terms of financial planning. Appropriate strategies and calculated moves can make all the difference in securing our life goals.

Bear Bryant famously said: "Offence sells tickets, defence wins championships." A solid financial plan with the right mix of investment tools builds the defence that you need to secure your financial future. With increasing financial literacy, rising income levels and greater awareness, along with greater technological adoption and policy reforms, more families in India are recognizing the need for long-term financial planning, including the importance of incorporating life insurance early on as a versatile tool for protection.

As term life insurance serves as a safety net for loved ones faced with unforeseen circumstances arising from a tragic demise, everyone should have a policy. It doesn't matter whether you are in your early 20s, late 30s, a single mother or a father with dependents.

The concept's value explains why life insurance is among the top three most preferred savings instruments in the

overall household financial savings mix. It has grown at a compounded annual rate of 11% from 2018-19 to 2022-23, contributing 18% to total financial savings. Its penetration inspires optimism. Nearly 60-70% of families in India have some or another kind of life insurance cover (credit protection, individual life insurance products, PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, etc). It's a positive sign.

However, the key question is whether the cover that people in India currently have is enough.

Despite India being one of the world's fastest growing economies, World Bank data suggests that the total sum assured as a proportion of GDP in India is barely 70%, as compared to 251% in the US, 143% in Thailand and 153% in Malaysia. This indicates a significant gap in the amount of insurance coverage. When an insurance policy is purchased, the buyer doesn't always factor in the adequacy of the life cover should the need of its use arise.

Insufficient coverage could mean that families receive inadequate financial assistance, addressing only a fraction of their needs and rendering the purpose of term plans ineffective. Without adequate life cover, families may be forced to liquidate assets or redeem investments to pay for key financial requirements, which could derail their life goals.

It is also a good sign that Indians are increasingly recognizing the need to stay sufficiently protected by insurance policies. But what is an optimal level of life-insurance cover? This can be determined through a comprehensive assessment of current income, savings, liabilities and the family situation. The general rule-of-thumb is to secure cover that is 10 times one's annual income. This will keep the policyholder's family financially well supported in the event of his/her death.

In recent times, the sector's regulator, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), has embarked on a programme of reforms

to facilitate 'Insurance for All by 2047.' Its efforts include improving the business and regulatory environment as well as instituting a risk-based capital regime and implementing International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) and the Risk-Based Supervision Framework—all towards deepening India's insurance penetration within the next few years. While IRDAI's overarching goal is to enable the sector's growth and make insurance accessible to as many Indians as possible, the sector is also seeing constant expansion of the digital ecosystem that is helping insurers pursue their objectives better.

Together, the insurance industry and its regulator are taking numerous measures. These include the introduction of simple and innovative products, revamping of distribution channels and the adoption of new technologies to enable faster and more transparent processes. Not only must we increase accessibility to life insurance, as stated earlier, we also need to promote coverage adequacy. We should encourage households to review their portfolios.

Remember, like any other financial instrument, a policy purchase needs to be a very well-informed decision. It must take into account one's income, debts and future family expenses. And once a term plan is bought, one should periodically review the coverage, much as we evaluate other expenses and taxes. Foreseeable life events—which can range from a marriage and birth of a child to buying a dream home—can significantly alter one's insurance needs.


Regular evaluations can ensure that one's policy stays aligned with likely requirements. Revisiting your coverage doesn't just safeguard policyholders against under-insurance, it also helps rationalize premiums to be paid so that they are not needlessly high.

Just as a robust defence game-plan in football ensures a winning season, the right defence plan in your financial portfolio can see your family through and keep their life goals within reach.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT



As the saying goes, the Stone Age did not end because we ran out of stones; we transitioned to better solutions. The same opportunity lies before us with energy efficiency and clean energy.

STEVEN CHU

MY VIEW | TRUTH, LIES, AND STATISTICS

Data users need a more responsive statistics ministry

PRAMIT BHATTACHARYA



is a Chennai-based journalist.

Earlier this year, the US bureau of labour statistics landed in an unusual controversy. An email sent to a group of 'super users' about methodological tweaks in inflation calculations for the month of January found its way to the press. Since the group of super users included leading investment banks and hedge funds, it raised suspicions about the agency sharing market-sensitive information with a closed group. The agency claimed that it did not maintain any list of super users, and that the mail sent by one of its officials was an isolated 'mistake'.

A subsequent investigation by Ben Casselman and Jeanna Smialek of *The New York Times* ('New questions on how a key agency shared inflation data', 5 April) showed that the official concerned did maintain a list of super users, and had regular email correspondence with them. The official did not share any data in advance. He simply provided contextual and methodological clarifications on the US retail

inflation gauge. "Such details, though highly technical, can be of significant interest to forecasters, who compete to predict inflation figures to hundredths of a percentage point," wrote Casselman and Smialek. "Those estimates, in turn, are used by investors making bets on the huge batches of securities that are tied to inflation or interest rates."

Since professional forecasters and even the Federal Reserve have been wrong on the inflation trajectory in the US in recent years, the stakes in getting inflation forecasts right have increased significantly. This seems to have driven up the volume of questions faced by the American bureau of labour statistics. The unnamed official who created the super user mailing list presumably did so to help such analysts figure out the data better. However, by creating a closed and secret group, he managed to raise suspicions about whether the agency was providing an undue advantage to a select group of investors.

The episode highlights the importance of having standard communication protocols. Statisticians must aim to present as many details as feasible—and in as clear a manner as possible—in their data releases. But often, that won't be enough for data users.

They may have follow-up questions that can only be answered by data producers. A modern statistical agency needs to institutionalize a mechanism for responding to such questions. One way forward is to follow the example of central banks that publish responses to individual queries on their websites. So, even if a hedge fund analyst raises a query, that analyst gets the information at the same time as the wider public.

The need for such a mechanism is higher in emerging markets such as India where official databases are riddled with gaps and inconsistencies, and where statisticians routinely make use of heroic assumptions to fill in database gaps.

Over the past few years, India's official statisticians had clammed up in the face of growing criticisms. In a data user conference on national accounts last year, the press was warned not to identify any official in their reports. No cameras were allowed. As this column had argued earlier ('Official statisticians must learn to

communicate better', 25 September 2023), the reticence of the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (Mospi) was a defeatist response to the criticisms that were directed at it.

Mospi's mandarins seem to have finally realized that a culture of secrecy lowers trust in official statistics. Last week, Mospi live-streamed a data users conference on the household consumption survey for 2022-23. This is a welcome departure from the recent past. But it is not enough. Mospi needs to publish a schedule of all its ongoing surveys and forthcoming data releases. At the moment, such a schedule is maintained only for a few statistical products such as the inflation index and gross domestic product (GDP) figures. After each release, Mospi must open a window for data users to post queries online, and address those questions in an open conference.

If a listed company can be expected to meet basic transparency norms in its deal-

ings with shareholders, there is no reason why citizens in a democracy should not expect the same standards from a statistical agency funded by them. If Mospi becomes more responsive to Indian citizens, it will also be addressing the needs of non-citizens interested in India and the Indian economy. Some of them may then find it easier to invest in the Indian economy. Statistical reforms can lower the cost of doing business while improving the quality of public discourse. This would also help India differentiate itself from China, where questioning official statistics is actively discouraged.

Some statistical reforms will need legislative changes and wide stakeholder consultation ('Statistical reforms will not get far without a consensus', *Mint*, 11 June 2024). However, there is a lot of scope to improve Mospi's functioning even while that process unfolds.

It only takes executive action to improve communication protocols, or to establish a code of practice for official statisticians. Such protocols will help Mospi respond effectively to the needs and queries of data users within and outside the government. A responsive statistics ministry will also find it easier to ask for bigger budgets and push for more substantive structural reforms.

Even protocol reforms could enable better communication and raise trust in India's statistics and economy



The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A TAX LESS TAXING

GST council's moves to ease compliance burden, reduce litigation is welcome. It has more work to do

ON SATURDAY, THE GST council, which met for the first time since the formation of the new Union government, tweaked tax rates on some items, and took a series of steps to bring down litigation and ease compliance for taxpayers. The Council has recommended waiving the interest and penalties on demand notices under Section 73 for three financial years if tax is fully paid by March 2025, bringing down the amounts of pre-deposit required to file an appeal, and introducing monetary limits for the tax department to file appeals. While these are steps in the right direction, other equally pressing issues warrant urgent attention.

One is the issue of rate rationalisation. In September 2021, the GST Council set up a Group of Ministers (GoM) to examine the matter. The committee had submitted an interim report in June 2022. As per reports, this issue is likely to be discussed when the Council meets next, with a "presentation on the work done so far and the unfinished agenda". However, this involves maintaining a delicate balance. One proposal has been to merge two tax slabs. But, the Council would also need to keep in mind the issue of revenue neutrality. A study by the RBI had earlier shown that while the Chief Economic Advisor's report had pegged the revenue neutral rate at 15.3 per cent, the weighted average GST rate stood at 14.4 per cent in May 2017, and subsequently dropped to 11.6 per cent by September 2019. The Council also needs to deliberate on the issue of getting items which are currently not under the GST framework, such as petroleum products, into its ambit. This will be challenging as both the Centre and the states get a sizeable portion of their revenues from petroleum taxes, and states levy their own taxes, exercising a degree of control.

Then there is the issue of the compensation cess. While originally the cess was levied for a five-year period ending on June 30, 2022, it was subsequently extended to March 31, 2026 to help repay the loans taken by the central government to compensate states for the loss in revenues during the pandemic. The Centre had borrowed Rs 1.1 lakh crore in 2020-21 and Rs 1.59 lakh crore in 2021-22. However, reportedly, there are expectations that these loans could be paid off in 2025-26 itself. The Council would thus need to decide whether or not the cess should be discontinued thereafter. Considering the criticality of these issues, they need to be deliberated extensively in the GST council. The Centre must ensure that in these deliberations the concerns of state governments, especially their revenue-related anxieties are addressed, and a consensus is evolved on the measures that need to be taken.

BLAME AND STIGMA

Tamil Nadu hooch deaths do not point only to administrative failures. They speak of a social welfare deficit

THE DEATH OF 57 people and hospitalisation of dozens following the consumption of illicit liquor in the village of Karunapuram in Tamil Nadu's Kallakurichi district is a tragedy that could have been avoided. Like the 22 people who died after consuming a methanol-laced brew in Villupuram and Chengalpattu districts in May last year, the bulk of the Kallakurichi victims are from the poorest sections of society — conservancy and headload workers. The latest tragedy too, which began unfolding on Thursday, is a case of methanol poisoning. It points to the urgent need to address larger lapses, failing which the state government's immediate response of arresting five people, including the person who allegedly sold the spurious liquor, transferring key officials and appointing a one-man commission under a retired judge to investigate the Kallakurichi incident, would be mere band-aids.

A key question is how methanol, a highly controlled substance used to manufacture a range of products from fabrics to paints and which can lead to liver failure, blindness and death if ingested, makes its way into the hands of those brewing and selling illicit liquor. That it has been linked to two tragedies in Tamil Nadu in the span of a year points to a serious oversight on the part of the state government, especially as red flags were raised about its use for the last two years. On Friday, the Madras High Court, while hearing a petition demanding a probe into the incident, also pulled up the government for failing to act despite reports of illicit liquor being widely available in the area. Clearly, stricter regulation and enforcement of the law are called for, if further tragedies are to be prevented.

Even as the toll from Kallakuruchi mounted, prominent voices criticised the Tamil Nadu government's failure to act against liquor consumption and called for total prohibition. While such a step may seem an obvious solution, it would only drive the illegal liquor trade further underground and put more lives at risk. What is needed is greater outreach to raise awareness about the dangers of consuming spurious liquor, as well as de-addiction programmes that are accessible to the poorest and most vulnerable. These cannot be left to voluntary organisations alone, and require the active involvement of the government. Even as liquor regulations are enforced, the deeper social problem of alcohol dependence framed by the Kallakurichi deaths calls for a compassionate approach that does not stigmatise the victims.

THE KEY IS IN PARIS

Squatters have managed to save an iconic theatre space. In the age of billion-dollar films, it's a worthy French resistance

EVERY ART FORM needs an open mic night. A place to learn and listen, to experiment and hone the craft without the inevitable pressures of commerce, of a general audience and the guardians of their hurt sentiments ruining a work, made for its own sake. For filmmakers, such spaces are the hardest to find: It used to take a team, equipment and considerable funds to make even the smallest film. In the age of the smartphone and YouTube, the process is cheaper — and the audience can vary. The hope for the filmmaker-as-artist, though, is alive in its birthplace. In Paris, lies The Key.

In 2019, a group of young filmmakers, students and enthusiasts occupied Le Clef (The Key), once an iconic art house cinema that screened the emerging New Wave films in the '70s, and from the colonies — Asia and Africa — in the next decades. It was set to close down, after being sold when the group began squatting there, screening films — from the classics to the experimental — even projecting them onto the walls of buildings in the historic Latin Quarter, where the theatre is located, during the pandemic. The squatters made sure the building was never empty, ensuring it survived. Now, they are back — as owners. After raising enough funds, including from filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese, they are refurbishing the theatre.

Le Clef marks a rare victory for the collective — the squatters and broader society — in an age of profit. Every member of the erstwhile occupiers has a key to the premises, and patrons are expected to "pay what they can" to watch films. It is also a space for independent filmmakers to show their work. In the age of Marvel and billion-dollar budgets, it is a French resistance worth the name.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THERE IS NO question that the NEET exam scandal is a colossal breach of trust. In any high stakes examination system, there will be attempts to circumvent the system. Even the famed Chinese Gaokao system was subject to cases of identity theft. But the scale this time is staggering. The paper leaks spread from Gujarat to Bihar. The NTA had to preemptively cancel other exams. This suggests a wide-spread systemic rot, not an episodic lapse. The early indications from Bihar suggest that this racket might extend to other government exams as well. Across exams, almost three million students are now subject to unimaginable psychological pressure, financial hardship and pedagogical uncertainty. It is lucky for the government that the scandal broke after the election. It would otherwise have gone into the election with its reputation for governance in ruins. It now starts a new tenure with a shameful trust deficit.

There are matters of immediate concern: Should retests be conducted? How can students who put their lives on hold and travel in inhospitable conditions be compensated? What safeguards does the examination system need? How will institutions cope with the changed calendar? But beyond the immediate crisis, this scandal poses large questions for India's democracy and the governance of India's institutions.

The Indian Republic runs on two legitimating devices: Elections and exams. In reality, both can be distorted by the operations of power and money. But both are, all things considered, the fairest forms of procedural legitimization, at least compared to any other institution in society. They are the only two sites where fairness can at least be demanded. Both also produce enough churn and mobility, again compared to any other institutional setting, to be the source of hopes and dreams.

The entire weight of fairness in our system is borne by the examination system: Not by equal access to schools, pedagogical quality or prospects for employment after exams. Exams function as a legitimating ideology in a system marked by extreme scarcity. The more relative scarcity we produce, by failing to create more and better institutions, by failing to create jobs, the more the stakes in the exam system. So a collapse in trust in the exam system is tantamount to a collapse in trust in the system as a whole.

Society views exams as vehicles of fairness and opportunities. Scandals erode this faith

A breach of trust

mount to a collapse in trust in the system as a whole. Imagine a day where trust in the UPSC exam collapses. More than a revolution, that might make the Indian state collapse.

Our obsession with exams is a reflection for procedurally signalling justice. First, it provides a legitimating device for the students that are in fact chosen; they have rightly earned their place. Second, it is probably the only means of social mobility available to large numbers of young Indians. The increasing success of students who beat social and financial odds (though still not nearly as large as it should be), adds to the myth of fairness. The fact that many privileged students have seceded from aspects of the exam system, like IIT-JEE or UPSC, because it is too tough, and prefer to find their pathways elsewhere only adds to the mystique.

Exams are the only means we know for putting students on a single commensurate scale: The myth of meritocracy requires commensuration. And as much as educators decry the emphasis on exams, rather than learning, three things are incontrovertible. As in many cultures, they are lodged in an ideology of filial obligation: Parents can fulfil their obligations best by creating the best possible conditions for exam preparation; students can express their sincerity by preparing — so much of the learning in India's education system is happening in the preparation for exams.

Exams are a test of a certain kind of skill: If nothing else, ambition, concentration, endurance, commitment and character. India's coaching industry is much derided. But coaching is an inevitable consequence where competitive stakes are high. The blunt truth is that in many cases, coaching is actually teaching you more than your regular institutions are. The tuition mania is not just competition, it makes up for lack of school or college preparation. The tragedy is that there are very few options for those who do not make it to this system — the consequences of failure can be crushing. Given the low probabilities for success, aspirants can sometimes set themselves up for bigger failures, not because of lack of effort, but because of a single-mindedness that did not yield a desired result — we make people fail despite immense effort.

So the mania for exams is deeply rooted in

our constructions of fairness, commensurability and opportunity. Vested interests play on this. Just as the form of privatisation in Indian Higher Education was driven by a politician-educator nexus, the creation of centralised exams is also driven by a political economy of coaching. In this government, this shift in education has also been marked by a deadly combination of ideological control and administrative incompetence.

There are some areas where national exams are inevitable and make sense. But the question to ask is: Why has there been so little resistance to excessive centralised exam mania? When NEET was enacted, Tamil Nadu raised valid objections on federalism grounds, but most other states, irrespective of party, were willing to cede ground. However, there are new national exams that are a travesty: In fact one of the things we need to review is where national exams are necessary.

This might also reduce the load on NTA, which might help improve its performance. CUET is one such example. It is an entirely unnecessary exam that simply adds another layer of uncertainty and hardship without any pedagogical gain. But the ease with which it was accepted is astounding. Part of what facilitated that centralisation was lack of trust. We don't trust state boards, we cannot do normalisation and commensuration (strictly speaking not true), and so we need centralisation.

In the case of central universities, the facilitation was made possible by successive governments taking a battering ram to public universities, and wresting control of them away from competent academics. Unfortunately, the abdication of the academic community was almost total, ceding control of every aspect of higher education to the central government. Ironically, the thrust in centralised exam mania in higher education was created by a distrust of everyone else: State governments cannot be trusted, boards cannot be trusted, and universities cannot be trusted. But, a centralised bureaucratic agency conducting exams can. Now that trust has also come crashing down, leaving destroyed lives and a devastated system in its wake.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



RAJIB DASGUPTA

HEAT IS BOTH an environmental and occupational health hazard. The National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCC-HH) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare reported 46 heat-related deaths and over 19,000 cases of suspected heat stroke across the country in May 2024. The two key statistics that make heat-related news are maximum temperature and deaths.

This newspaper reported on June 18, "Noida: Amid heat wave, 7 people found dead with no injury marks". According to the police spokesperson, the causes of death would be subject to the post-mortem reports but were tentatively presumed to be on account of heat wave conditions. The National Heat-Related Illness (HRI) and Death Surveillance under the NPCC-HH defines "heat-related death" as a death in which exposure to high ambient temperature either caused the death or significantly contributed to it.

Two important caveats: First, the diagnosis is based on a history of exposure to high ambient temperature and reasonable exclusion of other causes of hyperthermia. Second, the diagnosis may be established from the circumstances surrounding the death, investigative reports on environmental temperature, and/or measured antemortem body temperature at the time of the collapse. It states that "autopsy findings are nonspecific, and autopsy is not mandatory in all cases of heat-related illnesses." The over-emphasis on the autopsy runs the risk of a denial of diagnosis.

WHO DIES IN A HEATWAVE

Heat Action Plans must look to protect the socially and economically vulnerable

As important as the "science" are the social dimensions of HRIs: Who are those who died, and why? In theory, heat-related deaths and illnesses are preventable. The ones who died and were identified in Noida included a ragpicker, a manual worker and a security guard — all migrants. An analysis of deaths in three days in Delhi hospitals also suggests a similar profile: A 40-year-old female manual labourer, a 39-year-old car male car mechanic and a 60-year-old male security guard.

All instances of heat-related morbidity and mortality are not cases of heat cramps, exhaustion, heat syncope, or heat stroke. Heat stroke has a high case fatality rate. Equally or more important in terms is the fact that heat conditions exacerbate underlying illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, mental health, and asthma; transmission of some infectious diseases is facilitated too.

Increasing attention is being paid globally to unpacking community and social determinants, at the city and local area levels, that aggravate heat health-related risks. These include ethnicity, cultural or linguistic isolation, income, food insecurity, and inability to afford energy bills. Add to that, socioeconomic status and the neighbourhood social environment, housing characteristics and neighbourhood characteristics such as crime and safety and urban heat islands.

Heat action plans (HAPs) in India — at national, state or city levels — cannot be faulted for not addressing vulnerability factors. The

"local" elements are limited to a few heat maps based on composite indices. Delhi's HAP for example flags (i) vulnerable areas: Less urbanised minimal access to water and sanitation, minimal household amenities; and, (ii) vulnerable groups: Economically weaker sections; elderly, children, women, and work categories — construction and factory workers, sweepers, labourers, and vendors. The action points or dos and don'ts are currently population-wide, with very few specificities according to the identified vulnerabilities. There is an urgent need for HAPs to graduate to the next level — conduct within-city analyses and use available methodologies to create local vulnerability maps that incorporate urban microclimate patterns.

The conceptual boundaries and interventions of the current HAPs are limited by what Critical Heat Study experts term the privileging by "hazard bureaucracies" of "objective" meteorological and thermometric measures over "subjective" sensory and lived experiences and obscuring political dimensions of heat inequity. Addressing these inequities will entail engaging with more complex socioeconomic issues linked to those with greater risks of heat illness and premature death.

The writer is professor (Community Health), JNU and a collaborator in the Wellcome Trust Project: Economic and Health Impact Assessment of Heat Adaptation Action: Case studies from India



ARMY IN BOMBAY

FOLLOWING THE ARREST OF Shiv Sena leader, Madhukar Sarpotdar under the NSA, the army was deployed in several sensitive areas across Bombay, on June 24. Sarpotdar was arrested due to an "inflammatory speech" made in public, after which many protestors surrounded the Kherwadi police station, calling for the Shiv Sena leader's release.

AKALI PLANS

WITH THE GOLDEN Temple cordoned off, Shaheedon ka Gurudwara has become the site for discussions about the future plans of

the Akali Dal and the SPCG, with important Sikh leaders like the present Akali chief and SPCG president setting up temporary offices in the neighbourhood. Several sewadars arrested at the Golden Temple, are also staying there after their release. The Akali and SPCG leaders are scheduled to formally meet on June 29 to discuss their future roadmap.

ATTACK BY IRAN

ON JUNE 24, Iraq announced that its naval and air forces attacked four large naval bases, located south of the Kharg island in the Gulf. The Iraqi spokesperson claimed that the attack was made to strengthen Iraq's blockade

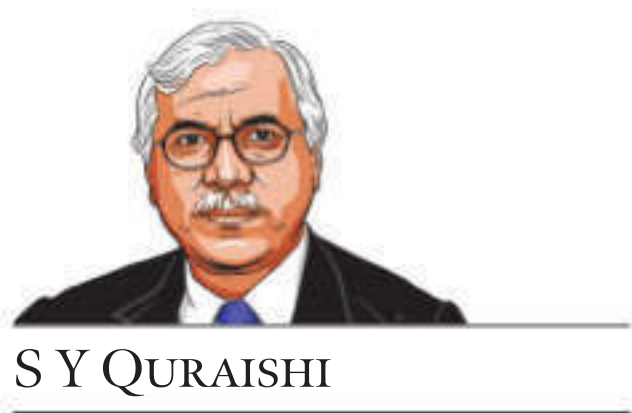
on Kharg island — its primary oil terminal. More than 20 vessels have been attacked in the Gulf since the year began — by either Iran or Iraq, as hostilities continue between the two warring states.

PRIEST KILLED

A TEMPLE PRIEST, Sita Ram, was murdered by unidentified individuals at Gardhiwala in Hoshiarpur district on the night of June 24. Meanwhile, security forces shot dead an alleged extremist and apprehended four others, during clashes with security personnel at Bhurewal village in the Tarn Taran area of Amritsar district.

One election, one phase

In age of climate change and social media, multi-phase elections are no longer viable. With steps introduced by Election Commission in last two decades, they can easily be completed in one phase



S Y QURAISHI

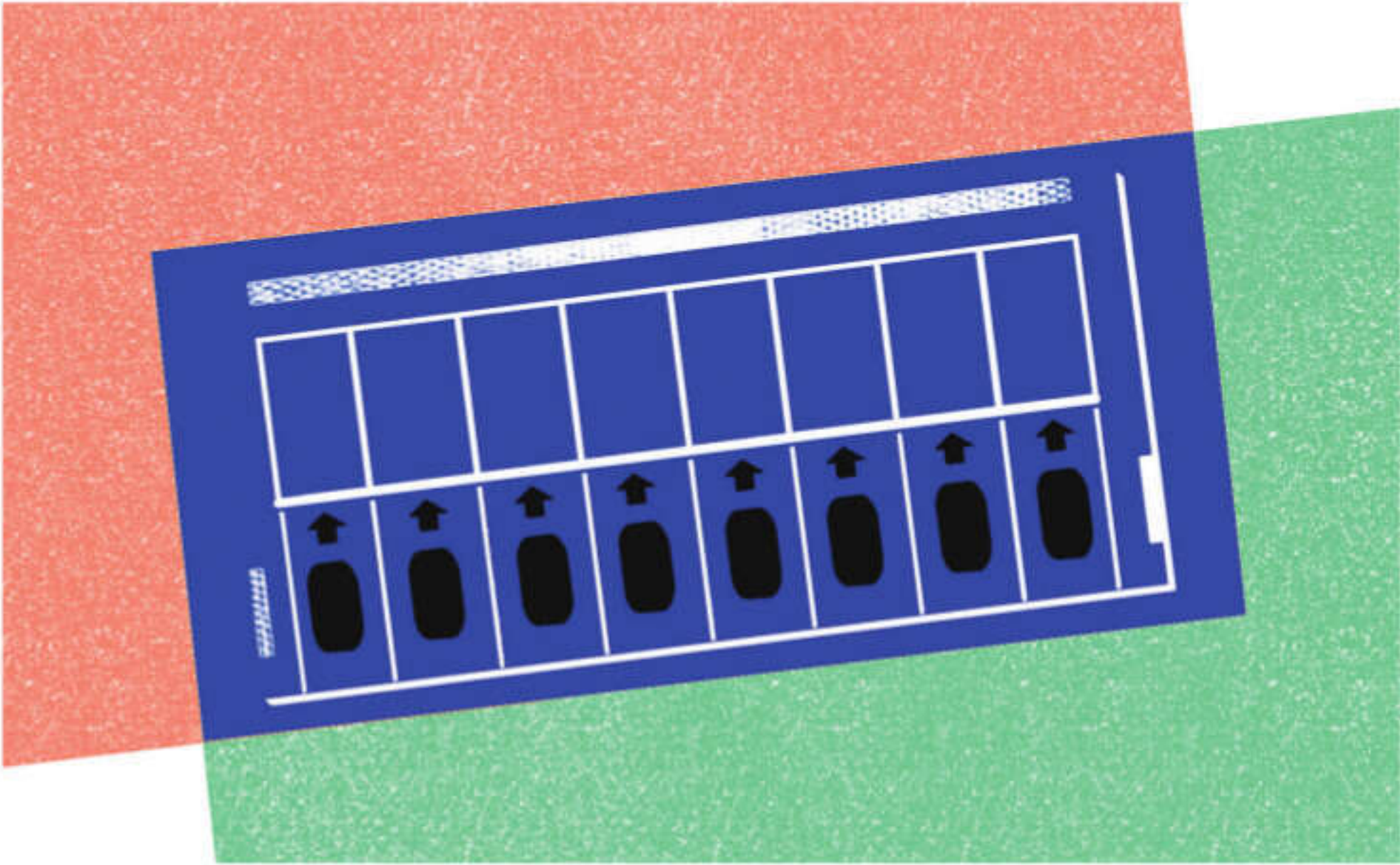
THE LOGIC OF multi-phase elections has increasingly come under question in the last decade. I have been asked this question umpteen number of times and have always defended it, mentioning that the only reason for it is the protection of lives — of voters and the polling staff. People have accepted this reply as reasonable, but not anymore.

It is increasingly clear that the problems arising out of multi-phase elections far outweigh the benefits. The recent seven-phase election was held in 45-50 degrees temperatures, leading to several deaths. The prolonged election was questioned by almost all political parties, the media, not to mention the voters. Even the Chief Election Commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, admitted that the one lesson the Election Commission (EC) learnt from the latest election was that it should have been shorter.

At the time multi-phase elections were introduced, the situation was radically different. The use of muscle power was rampant. Violence, including murders, on polling day or during the campaign was common. In the mid-1990s, T N Seshan introduced the deployment of central armed police forces. The number of paramilitary personnel made available to the EC was always limited as many of them had to be withdrawn from sensitive areas where they were deployed, including at the borders. There was never enough personnel to cover all the sensitive and hypersensitive polling booths, so they had to be rotated from one phase to the next. This led to the introduction of multiple phases that was welcomed by all political parties who believed that the local police was either weak or vulnerable to political pressure.

While this measure definitely made elections peaceful, with acrimonious electoral competition and social media explosion in recent years, it has created more problems than it had solved. While the forces take four to five days (seven to 11 days in the recent elections) to move from one phase to the other, criminals move much faster. Rumours, fake news and hate speech spread in seconds, which, in multiple phases, have disastrous consequences. In fact, this year's Lok Sabha elections took place over two-and-a-half months, with the longest ever gaps between phases, and high levels of communal rhetoric. Social media widely disseminated fake news, disinformation and hate speech. The Guardian reported that Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, approved AI-manipulated political adverts during India's 2024 election that spread disinformation, including against Muslims, besides false claims about Opposition leaders.

The social media explosion in the last decade has created a dangerous situation. In January this year, there were 751 million internet users (up from 65 million in 2014), at a



CR Sasikumar

penetration rate of 52.4 per cent of the total population. Almost half of them use Facebook. WhatsApp and YouTube are not far behind. CSDS data shows that nearly four times more people use Facebook today than they did in the previous general election. The cheap data revolution, triggered by the launch of the Jio phone network in September 2016, has also transformed Indian politics. Political parties are vying with each other to ride the wave.

Social media's dangerous influence over the general public has come to light repeatedly. A recent study from Tech Global Institute found that 85 per cent of political content uploaded by Indian influencers across different platforms did not disclose if it was sponsored content, thereby hampering transparency and accountability during elections.

Now, the question would be whether going back to a single-phase poll would ensure peaceful elections. I daresay, most certainly, with a range of steps introduced by the EC in the last two decades. The EC has introduced vulnerability mapping of all polling stations in the country, which identifies potential troublemakers who are brought to book under the CRPC with a bond for good conduct. Nearly half a million such persons have been identified in recent times. Campaigns to seize illegal arms have been effective. Even licenced arms are ordered to be surrendered. Most importantly, the non-bailable warrants (NBW) against criminals, including murderers, rapists, kidnappers, etc, which used to stay unexecuted under political pressure for months, even years, with the absconders reported as "untraceable", are now a thing of the past. The restoration of peace in hitherto militancy and terror-prone areas, as repeatedly claimed by the government, including by no less a person than the Home Minister, strengthens the argument.

There are many existing laws and provi-

At the time multi-phase elections were introduced, the situation was radically different. The use of muscle power was rampant. Violence, including murders, on polling day or during the campaign was common. In the mid-1990s, T N Seshan introduced the deployment of central armed police forces. This led to the introduction of multiple phases that was welcomed by all political parties who believed that the local police was either weak or vulnerable to political pressure.

sions that can be invoked to ensure peaceful elections. Several powerful provisions in IPC can be applied to control hate speech, cyber crimes and online abuse. These are Section 295A (intentionally insulting religion or belief), Section 153A (promoting enmity between people), Section 499 (defamation), and Section 505 (statements conducing to public mischief), 506 (criminal intimidation). There is also the Representation of the People Act (RP), Section 125 (promoting enmity between classes in connection with election). All these sections provide imprisonment of one to three years.

All we need is to ensure their prompt and even-handed implementation.

A general election can easily be completed in a single phase. All that is needed is about 4,000-5,000 companies, now easily available with the raising of a large number of battalions of different paramilitary forces and restoration of peace in most trouble-prone areas. The RP Act provides 26 days from the notification of the election to the last day of poll. We can add about seven days for political activity such as selection of candidates. Thus, 33-35 days is all we need to conduct a general election. It will reduce the duration of the paramilitary forces being pulled out, save crores of rupees spent on prolonged campaigns and spare our top leaders the trouble of addressing hundreds of election meetings disrupting normal work. Above all, it will cut down the time for mischief and hate mongering. Hasn't our Prime Minister repeatedly expressed concern about the money spent and work coming to a standstill because of prolonged elections? It is time we addressed his concern.

The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and author of India's Experiment with Democracy: The Life of a Nation Through its Elections

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Our views of each other do not develop from India to China or China to India. They often develop from India to Washington to China. Ideas about India are also filtered through Washington before reaching China." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Cleaning up the exams

A two-phase, on-demand computer-based admission test could be less taxing for students and reduce the coaching industry's hold



SURESH PRABHU AND SHOBHIT MATHUR

EVERY SUMMER SEES an onslaught of competitive examinations in India, unlike anywhere else in the world. Millions of anxious students, their minds conditioned by years of coaching class regimens, accompanied by nervous parents, descend on designated test centres to undertake make-or-break examinations. The systemic strain of administering such gargantuan single-day tests, which shape the lives of millions, is immense. Despite the best efforts of testing agencies, errors occur, with the result that the people of India are losing trust in the testing process. There is public outcry and litigation every year and, ironically, the coaching industry becomes the saviour of the students. It is time that we reimagine the design of competitive exams in India. We need to look at the established models globally and apply them to the Indian context. The need of the hour is a two-phase, on-demand computer-based admission test. It can simultaneously be designed to be a win for the students and a loss for the coaching industry.

Let's begin with how the content of the test should be prepared. Creating a standardised test at scale for India necessitates a comprehensive development life-cycle overseen by educational experts. Definitive test objectives aligned to undergraduate or graduate admissions criteria must be outlined initially and publicly declared. The content itself — with the questions undergoing various reviews — must be authored by a carefully vetted panel of subject matter experts (SMEs) to ensure representation of the mandated skill sets. The list of these SMEs should be released to build public trust and also appreciate the service of the contributors. Structured protocols for editing, pretesting, statistical analysis using advanced psychometric techniques, like item response theory, should constitute the qualification pipeline. Only questions empirically gauged for clarity, relevance, and fairness should get inducted into operational test forms assembled through equating procedures — a gold standard that tests like the GRE have perfected over decades. A sample of these questions should be released as official guides and official mock tests to the public to build confidence and reduce the role of coaching centres. A large enough pool of such questions needs to be compiled to allow administering of tests without repetition of questions. For example, for preparing the pool of questions for NEET, about 1,000 selected SMEs can contribute 500 questions each. If 80 per cent of these questions get short-

listed from each SME after review, a pool of 400,000 questions is ready in the first year. This pool can be enhanced with more questions added to it each year.

The first phase of the exam would serve as an initial screening that is open year-round at designated computerised test centres nationwide. The test for each test taker is randomly created on demand from the curated pool of questions. For example, in the current format of NEET, 200 questions will be randomly chosen, curating the test for each candidate from the available pool of 400,000 questions mentioned earlier. Since the test is individualised and randomised, there is no chance of a "paper leak". Candidates could take this computer-delivered assessment multiple times at their convenience rather than according to a rigid annual schedule. By distributing the load seamlessly over 12 months, this phase eliminates the logistical bottlenecks currently straining test centres. Moreover, it enhances accessibility — students who wish to repeat the test can take it all year round. They can make better decisions regarding their futures, based on the outcomes of the first phase test. This also reduces the role of coaching outfits that thrive on encouraging test repetition and charging coaching fees for preparation. The top scorers, specifically those within a predetermined multiple of available seats, would then qualify for the second secure phase. For example, five times the number of seats available can be shortlisted for the second phase.

Conducted annually under proctored conditions, Phase 2 allows for extensive screening of this winnowed cohort with comprehensive fraud prevention measures at the test centres. Phase 2 of the test will be designed in a similar fashion as Phase 1. With AI-based proctoring getting better each day, it should be deployed to increase scrutiny of the testing centres. This proposed two-tier process reduces stress on the students by allowing multiple Phase 1 attempts aligned with individual academic trajectories. It also disincentivises the excessive money spent annually on coaching classes — money and time that can be better deployed towards strengthening mainstream schooling and developing a broader skill set in the formative years.

By embracing this model and adapting it to specific tests, India can solve its current competitive examination woes. This would optimise the national talent pipeline. It reduces stress on the students, reduces the stigma of failure and saves precious time and money that can be employed to better use. It eliminates systemic pain points while enhancing standardisation and trust — pillars of a truly robust testing ecosystem. As the nation with the world's largest youth demographic, aiming to be a global power, such a reformation of the competitive exam system is no longer just an option, but an imperative.

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MANJEET KRIPALANI

Navigating a multipolar world

New government's foreign policy task will be to combine economic with political

ON JUNE 9, a new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi was sworn in. For the first time in a decade, the Bharatiya Janata Party has missed the majority mark. While a coalition government will have implications for India's domestic policies, on the foreign policy front there will be continuity. S Jaishankar, at the helm of the foreign ministry, has a set goal to make India a "leading power". This aligns with the BJP's projection of India as *Vishvabandhu* — a friend of the world, but one to whom the nation comes first.

At the Bratislava Forum in June 2022, Jaishankar changed the political narrative on India, when he reminded the world that "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems but the world's problems are not Europe's problems." It resonated everywhere, especially at home and in the Global South — and even in Europe, when a year later, at the Munich Security Conference, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that Jaishankar "had a point". India's goodwill, built over decades of being a neutral and non-aggressive power, has served the country well for the last five years, despite major geopolitical changes.

For the next five years, however, India will need a differentiated narrative — one that is based on the country's 8.2 per cent GDP growth, entry into global trade regimes, and the digital model. How will Jaishankar straddle the political and the economic?

There will be continuities and shifts.

The first continuity pertains to South Asia. Visible at the inauguration of the new government were India's neighbours,

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, along with Indian Ocean partners, Mauritius and Seychelles. All of South Asia except Pakistan was present, indicating that greater economic integration and more geopolitical cohesion in the Subcontinent is on the agenda.

Second, there was much talk of the Global South during India's G20 presidency in 2023, crowned by the inclusion of the African Union into the G20. Last November, PM Modi inaugurated the (Dakshin) Development and Knowledge Sharing Initiative Global South Centre for Excellence, conceived for knowledge-sharing for locally relevant solutions and capacity-building. Expect more events than actual achievements. But that's a start.

Third, India has built relationships with the great powers, especially the US. With the US and Russia, it has a continuing 2+2 ministerial (foreign and defence ministries) dialogue. India is in more multilateral groupings with the great powers than ever before — the G20, Quad, SCO, BRICS, I2U2, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. New Delhi has managed its friendship with Moscow well, keeping the political engagement and oil and defence equipment imports going. Despite China's stubborn refusal to withdraw its military from India's northern border, India is still not at war with it — an example that the great powers should emulate.

India is also close to the other five G7 countries: Japan, France, the UK, Italy, and Germany, and since 2019, has been a permanent invitee to G7 summits.

Stepping into trade regimes with the great powers is still not a reality. These ini-

tiatives have in the last two years been taken by middle powers like Australia, the UAE and the four non-EU EFTA countries.

Coming to shifts, India's global conversation has to transition from the political to the economic. Delhi has made many commitments to investors, and the biggest is that India can be a trusted +1 alternative to China. Expect a greater effort on the Make in India initiative and the expansion and professionalisation of supply chains and attendant infrastructure. Corporate India will be encouraged to increase investments in manufacturing.

India will need to position itself as a services exporter, beyond IT services. Much of the Global South is rich in human capital and will be following India's example. A new coalition partner in the government, the Telugu Desam Party, is completing the building of Amaravati. Its goal is to have a modern capital — one that can compete on the tech front domestically (with Bangalore and Hyderabad) and internationally.

India's digital public infrastructure model is already accepted and promoted in developed and developing countries. With commerce minister Piyush Goyal retaining his job, India will carefully, and with some confidence, enter more trade agreements — bilateral and regional. A South Asian trade agreement can be a triumph.

Like PM Modi, Indian ambassadors are now becoming salesmen. Their primary agenda is now to bring home investments. A few embassies used to have a junior commercial attaché; now this position carries seniority and weight.

The last five years have seen instability. Covid, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Gaza conflict and the sanctions imposed by the great powers have pushed the global system to the brink. The middle powers — countries with economic, regional and military heft — are beginning to be heard. Many like Australia, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Singapore, and Germany punch above their weight.

The emerging middle powers have significant talent and populations. This is where India fits in, along with Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, and Indonesia. India will increase its engagement with its peer group.

Lately, India has been wooed by governments of all inclinations and has sought engagement with all. Modi's first overseas trip in his third term as PM was to Italy, as a guest at the G7 meeting on June 13. His next engagement will be the SCO summit in July, and more importantly, the BRICS summit in October in Russia.

India is an important participant in several groupings, old and new. Its goal is economic and financial progress, and just global governance. This is a reflection of the emerging multipolar world order, with neither the "exorbitant privilege" of dollar domination, nor the reserve-currency obsession of the Yuan.

India is central to the on-going global shifts. By keeping itself anchored, it helps to keep the world steady.

The writer is Executive Director and co-founder, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HAMPERING GROWTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Why exam scams happen' (IE, June 24). Education is a crucial resource for one's ability to resist societal hierarchies. In India, it has always been looked at as a tool for poor families to climb the social ladder. But in this rushed understanding, education is measured through one's scores or examination outcomes. This undermines the real essence of learning. This poor "examination-oriented" education system has not only put lakhs of students and their parents in a vicious cycle of despair and financial distress but it also hampers the research capacity of people in a country that is well on its path to development.

Aishwarya Shetty, Mumbai

INDO-BANGLA TIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Cementing ties' (IE, June 24). Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina held talks with PM Narendra Modi, underlining the commitment of both nations to bolster ties. In November last year, when PM Hasina was under pressure not only from the Bangladesh Opposition but also the US, PM Modi joined her in inaugurating three infrastructure projects. This gave a major fillip to PM Hasina's poll campaign. China has been eyeing the estimated \$1 billion project amid New Delhi's reservations. In a fresh assertion of its independent foreign policy, New Delhi is engaging closely with Dhaka.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Cementing ties' (IE, June 24). Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina's trip to India was the first bilateral state visit by a foreign leader after the formation of the new BJP-led NDA government. Her and Modi discussed maritime cooperation and blue economy, railway connectivity, space sector, digital partnership, healthcare and defence production. PM Modi and Hasina have developed a good rapport over the past decade. China seems keen on the Teesta project as India remains sceptical. Hasina's bonhomie with India will be put to the test next month, when she is expected to travel to China.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

WELFARE FOR ALL

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Adversaries again' (IE, June 24). Sushma Swaraj once said, "People can overlook any shortcoming, but they will not tolerate arrogance." This holds true today. The government must prioritise the welfare of all citizens, especially the underprivileged, and enact policies with long-term benefits in mind. Infrastructure development is key to economic growth, but the quality must remain up to the mark as well. Many roads have been built, but their current conditions are under public scrutiny. Providing youth employment and good governance are also essential. By addressing these issues, the ruling party can still secure a favourable mandate from the people in the next election.

Ajay Corriea, Vasai



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

What is Enemy Agents Ordinance, tough law applicable in J&K?

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

JAMMU AND Kashmir Director General of Police (DGP) RR Swain on Sunday said those found assisting militants in J&K should be tried by investigating agencies under the Enemy Agents Ordinance, 2005. The law is more stringent than the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and has the punishment of either a life term or a death sentence. “The fighters can’t be brought under the realm of investigation, they should be shot dead. Those who support them, if we are talking of investigation there, I’ve said somewhere that they will be treated as en-

emy agents,” DGP Swain said.

What is the Enemy Agents Ordinance?

The J&K Enemy Agents Ordinance was first issued in 1917 by the then Dogra Maharaja of J&K. It is referred to as an ‘ordinance’ since laws made during the Dogra rule were called ordinances.

According to the ordinance, “whosoever is an enemy agent or, with an intent to aid the enemy, conspires with any other person to any act which is designed or likely to give assistance to the enemy or to impede the military or air operations of Indian forces or to endanger life or is guilty of incendiarism shall be punishable with death or rigorous imprisonment for life or with rigorous imprisonment

for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to fine”.

After Partition in 1947, the ordinance was incorporated as a law in the erstwhile state and was also amended.

In 2019, when Article 370 of the Constitution was repealed, J&K’s legal framework also underwent several changes. The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act was passed, which listed out state laws that were to continue while several others were repealed and replaced with Indian laws.

While the security laws such as Enemy Agents Ordinance and Public Safety Act remained; the Ranbir Penal Code was replaced

with the Indian Penal Code. Other laws including The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 or Forest Act, and The Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 were extended to J&K as well.

How are trials conducted under the ordinance?

The trial under the Enemy Agents Ordinance is conducted by a special judge who is appointed by the “government in consultation with the High Court”. Under the ordinance, the accused cannot engage a lawyer to defend herself unless permitted

EXPLAINED
LAW

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POLICY

Law against cheating

Rules under The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act have been notified. As Govt struggles to contain the fallout of exam cancellations, how can the law help in the future?

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

THE CENTRE on Monday notified the Rules required to operationalise The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, the anti-cheating law passed by Parliament in February. The law itself came into force on June 21, after it was notified in the official gazette.

The Rules notified by the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, provide a framework of actions to prevent the use of unfair means in public examinations, including appointing Centre Coordinators, venue in-charges, and Regional Officers.

The government is under great pressure from the opposition and protesting students across the country after being forced to postpone the UGC-NET, CSIR UGC NET, and NEET PG competitive exams. The CBI is investigating NEET UG after investigators in Bihar found evidence of a paper leak.

What the Rules say

COMPUTER-BASED TEST: The Rules lay down full parameters of Computer Based Tests (CBT) — from the registration of candidates, allocation of centres, and issue of admit cards to the opening and distribution of question papers, evaluation of answers, and the final recommendations.

“The opening and distribution of question papers...means downloading the question paper from the main server to the local server in the public examination centre...uploading and digitally transferring the question papers to individual computers authorised for the candidates...,” the Rules say.

The central government’s National Recruitment Agency shall prepare the norms, standards, and guidelines for CBTs in consultation with stakeholders. Once finalised, these norms will be notified by the Centre.

The notified norms, standards, and guidelines shall cover both physical and digital infrastructure and activities, including the standard operating procedure (SOP) for registration of public examination centres; space requirements at CBT centres and layout of seating; specifications and layout of computer nodes, server and network infrastructure, and the electronic platform; candidate check-in, biometric registration, security and screening; setting and loading of question papers; invigilation; and all post-examination activities.

CENTRE COORDINATOR: The Rules provide for the appointment of a Centre Coordinator for Public Examinations, who may be “serving or retired employees of the Central Government, State Government, Public Sector Undertakings, Public Sector Banks, Government Universities, autonomous bodies and other Government Organisations”.



Media persons outside the Economic Offences Unit (EOU) office in Patna as a CBI team arrives to probe the alleged irregularities in NEET UG exam on Monday. *PTI*

According to the Rules, the Centre Coordinator shall be the representative of the public examination authority for coordination of activities of the various service providers and the examination authority, and for overseeing the compliance of all norms, standards, and guidelines for the exam.

The Rules also lay down the definition of “service provider” for the purposes of the Act.

Public examination

Which exams are covered by the law? Section 2(k) of The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 defines a “public examination” as “any examination conducted by the public examination authority” listed in the Schedule of the Act, or any “such other authority as may be notified by the Central Government”.

The Schedule lists five public examination authorities: (i) Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), which conducts the Civil Services Examination, Combined Defence Services Examinations, Combined Medical Services Examination, Engineering Services Examination, etc.; (ii) Staff Selection Commission (SSC), which recruits for Group C (non-technical) and Group B (non-gazetted) jobs in the central government; (iii) the Railway Recruitment Boards (RRBs), which recruit Groups C and D staff in the Indian Railways; (iv) Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS), which hires at all levels for nationalised banks and regional rural banks (RRBs); and (v) National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts the JEE (Main), NEET-UG, UGC-NET, the Common University Entrance Test (CUET), etc.

Apart from these designated public examination authorities, all “Ministries or Departments of the Central Government and

by the court.

“In any proceedings before the Special Judge and in proceeding before a Judge reviewing under section 9 the proceedings of a Special Judge when the Special Judge or the reviewing Judge grants permission in this behalf, a person accused of an offence triable under this Ordinance may be defended by a pleader,” according to the ordinance.

There is no provision for appeal against the verdict, and the decision of the special judge can only be reviewed “by a person chosen by the Government from the judges of the High Court and the decision of that person shall be final”.

The ordinance also bars any disclosure or publication of the case tried under it. “Any

person who, without the previous authorisation of the Government, discloses or publishes any information with respect to any proceedings or with respects to any person proceeded against under this Ordinance, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both,” according to the ordinance.

Has anyone been tried under this ordinance?

There are scores of Kashmiris who are or have been tried and sentenced under the Enemy Agents Ordinance. Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front founder Maqbool Bhat, who was hanged in Tihar Jail in 1984, was charged under the ordinance.

THIS WORD MEANS

KERALAM

Kerala Assembly wants to rename the state as Keralam, the Malayalam word for the state



A house boat in Alappuzha, Kerala. *Wikimedia Commons*

THE KERALA Assembly on Monday unanimously passed a resolution urging the Centre to rename the state as “Keralam” in the Constitution. This is the second time in the past year that such a resolution has been passed.

Resolution

The resolution, moved by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, states: “The name of our state in Malayalam is Keralam... However, the name of our state in the first Schedule of the Constitution has been written as Kerala. This Assembly is unanimously requesting the Union Government to take immediate steps under Article 3 of the Constitution to change the name of the state to Keralam.”

A similar resolution was passed on August 9 last year. Vijayan said that it needed reintroduction due to some technical issues.

The previous resolution sought amendments to the First Schedule of the Constitution (list of various states). It also meant to seek an amendment to the Eighth Schedule (list of official languages). But on further examination, it was realised that the wording did not include the latter demand. Hence, the resolution was modified and reintroduced, Vijayan told the Assembly.

Etymology

There are several theories regarding the etymological roots of Kerala/Keralam. The earliest mention of the word can be found in Emperor Ashoka’s Rock Edict II, dated to 257 BCE. The edict reads: “Everywhere in the dominions of King Priyadarsin, Beloved of the gods, [how Ashoka was addressed as] as well as those of his frontier sovereigns, such as the

Chodas [Cholas], Pandyas, Satiyaputra, Ketalaputra [Keralaputra]...” (translated by epigraphist D R Bhandarkar).

Keralaputra, literally “son of Kerala” in Sanskrit, refers to the dynasty of the Cheras, rulers of one of the three main kingdoms of southern India at the time. German linguist Dr Herman Gundert noted that the word ‘keram’ is Canarese (or Kannada) for ‘cheram’, which is used to refer to the coastal land between Gokarna (in Karnataka) and Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu, India’s southern tip). The origin of the term could possibly be from ‘cher’, which means to join in Old Tamil.

Statehood

The demand for a united Malayalam-speaking state first gathered momentum in the 1920s, and aimed to integrate the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and the Malabar district of the Madras Presidency.

After Independence, on July 1, 1949 the two Malayalam-speaking princely states were integrated to form the state of Travancore-Cochin. The state of Kerala was finally created after the State Reorganisation Commission’s recommendation creating states on linguistic-bases. The Commission under Syed Fazl Ali recommended the inclusion of the district of Malabar and the taluk of Kasargod to the Malayalam-speaking people’s state. It also recommended the exclusion of the four Southern taluks of Travancore, viz Tovala, Agastheeswaram, Kalkulam and Vilayankode together with some parts of Shenkottai (all these taluks now part of Tamil Nadu).

The state of Kerala came into being on November 1, 1956.

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Power markets in India: their working, advantages, and the road ahead

AGGAM WALIA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

TO MEET peak power demand during the unusually hot summer, the government has allowed the trading of surplus electricity generated from “linkage coal” in the country’s power markets.

Coal linkages are typically made by the government to thermal units against long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) with distribution companies (discoms). Power markets offer a flexible, reliable, and transparent alternative to PPAs, enabling generators to respond swiftly to demand fluctuations and sell surplus power at market-determined prices.

PPAs and power markets

To sell their electricity, generation units in India have traditionally used long-term PPAs that typically span 25 years. These agreements commit generators to supply power to buyers, usually public utilities, at

fixed rates. PPAs are gradually losing favour due to their inflexibility in adapting to dynamic market conditions, and their tendency to lock in significant generating capacity.

Power markets, on the other hand, allow generators to respond to short-term demand fluctuations and sell surplus power independently of PPAs at market prices. The flexibility is particularly beneficial for generators of renewable energy, who may produce excess power during the off-peak hours. Instead of curtailing generation, the surplus can be traded on the market.

Price-based demand response involves multiple parties, and typically results in greater reliability and transparency in trading compared to bilateral contracts. This market-driven approach enables generators to optimise their output and revenue, while helping utilities meet variable power demands more efficiently.

How power markets work

Buyers make bids for the purchase of electricity, and sellers make offers. The mar-

ket clearing price — the price at which electricity is traded — is determined by the equilibrium of demand bids and supply offers.

Power markets are categorised on the basis of electricity delivery timing and duration of contract.

The spot market includes the real-time market (RTM) for near-immediate delivery and the intraday market for same-day trades hours before delivery. Contract markets, on the other hand, facilitate longer-term trades.

The day-ahead market (DAM) deals with closed auctions for 15-minute time blocks for the following day, while the term-ahead market (TAM) handles trades from 3 hours to 11 days in advance.

The renewable energy certificates (REC) mechanism allows utilities to meet renewable purchase obligations (RPOs) by buying RECs, each representing 1 MWh of renewable electricity. This system benefits states that lack sufficient renewable capacity, and

enables them to purchase RECs for green energy generated elsewhere.

Utilities that exceed RPO targets can trade extra RECs to allow other utilities to meet their targets.

Power exchanges in India

Power markets are hosted on a power exchange. Exchanges facilitate competitive pricing, improved resource allocation, and greater market liquidity in the power sector.

Power exchanges were first introduced in Europe in 1990-91, and they now operate in about 50 countries around the world. The Electricity Act of 2003 established the framework for exchange operations in India, and exchanges commenced in 2008.

The spot market was introduced in 2020, which further enhanced the flexibility and responsiveness of the power trading system.

India has three major power exchanges regulated by the Central Electricity

EXPLAINED
ENERGY

Regulatory Commission (CERC), where generators, utilities, and large consumers trade electricity. The Indian Energy Exchange Ltd (IEX) dominates with more than 90% market share, followed by Power Exchange India Limited (PXIL) and Hindustan Power Exchange Ltd (HPX).

In FY 2023-24, IEX traded about 110 billion units (BU) of electricity, growing 14% year-on-year. This represents almost 7% of India’s total power demand, which reached 1,626 BU in FY24. The government has recently amended various regulations to encourage and incentivise participation in power exchanges, reflecting their growing importance in India’s electricity market.

Road ahead for exchanges

Indian regulators are exploring market coupling and capacity markets as the next evolutionary step for the country’s power markets.

Market coupling is a process that matches bids from all power exchanges to discover a uniform market clearing price,

which also acts as a reliable reference price for policymakers. The concept, first introduced in CERC’s Power Market Regulations, 2021, could lead to more efficient price discovery, reduced price disparities across regions, and increased market stability.

Capacity markets, on the other hand, would allow generators to be paid for their available capacity, not just for the electricity they produce.

This mechanism is aimed at ensuring long-term grid reliability by incentivising investment in generation capacity, particularly for peaking power plants that may not run frequently but are crucial during high-demand periods.

Only a few countries, including the United Kingdom, parts of Australia, and South Korea, have developed capacity markets.

The introduction of these advanced market structures would align India’s power markets more closely with mature international markets, potentially attracting more investment and fostering greater competition in the sector.

Losing shine at Cannes

Indian agencies must embrace technology, but creativity connecting brands to consumers remains a winner

THE INDIAN CONTINGENT is back from the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès in Cannes with just 18 metals. The fall in the tally has been a steep 28% from last year's 25, leading to the hard question: What will it take for Indian creativity to roar at the Cannes Lions? Considering that the Indian ad industry is booming — ₹93,166 crore in 2023 according to Dentsu India — and that India has been sending entries for well over three decades now, why is the industry still unable to figure out what works with international juries? Some agency hands say Indian agencies don't have the money to play the Cannes game well; the ads were great but the entry documents were not reflective of their potential; and possibly winning awards at Cannes has no role to play in the agencies' domestic business because what wins in Cannes is mostly ads created for the Cannes jury.

It is also being said, of course with some justification, that this year's tally should not be scoffed at and even getting a place on the shortlists are creditable as only 10% of entries make the cut. But these arguments are like sour grapes. After all, when you play the World Cup finals, you play to win, not to get a feel of the competition. Take the last five years. India has averaged a 3%-plus conversion rate from entries to win. This year, India sent 826 entries, logged 57 shortlists, and struck one Grand Prix, two golds, seven silvers, and nine bronzes. The conversion rate from entries to win is 2.17%. Go back two years to 2022. India had 921 entries, 121 shortlists, 47 metals, and a conversion rate of 5.21%.

The point to remember from all the award winners is that it's creativity that wins, not budget size. The world has evolved from billboards to augmented reality, but every time one sees a winner, there is a powerful idea packaged in a way that appeals to the current generation of consumers. For example, the Fevicol campaign will work even if it shows a cursor that gets stuck on a screen — it might irritate the consumer briefly but the residual memory of a powerful idea will still evoke a smile. Also, there's no point in distinguishing between "creative" and "effective". Take Leo Burnett's ad for Gatorade, which won a gold in the creative data category and a bronze in the Entertainment Lions for Sport category this year. The campaign is a tech-based intervention in partnership with Google Maps to provide open playing spaces to people in crowded cities. The agency used Google Maps' data to pinpoint the exact time when certain public spaces in New Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru would be empty so that Gatorade could lay down a turf where people could play. That was a clever use of technology to solve a very locally relevant issue.

So the argument that an international jury fails to connect with local ideas and local stories just flies out of the window. The overall takeaway from Cannes is clear: Technology will continue to change the way we communicate and market products and services, what remains constant is the need for a disruptive idea that connects a brand to its consumers in an increasingly distracted world. Clear objectives, matched with proven results, plus great storytelling, equals an agency's best shot at winning. There's no escaping this.

More debt better than more climate disasters

THERE'S GOOD DEBT and there's bad debt. Good debt is a \$465-million government loan for your fledgling electric-car company that helps it become the world's biggest automaker. Bad debt is maxing out your credit cards to buy cartoon apes in 2022.

Depending on your politics, you might consider a government taking out loans to finance the clean-energy transition to be bad debt. But economists keep pointing out that a little bit of deficit spending to fight climate change today will save a whole lot of deficit spending tomorrow, to not only fight a rear-guard action against global heating but also to clean up the expensive mess it will make. Unfortunately, the politics of green government spending aren't exactly having a banner year. European parliamentary elections hit green parties particularly hard, the UK's Labour Party has scaled back its climate plans, and the deeply climate-unfriendly Donald Trump stands a real chance of winning a return to the White House in November.

A lot of this anti-green momentum comes down to popular anxiety about high living costs in the wake of the Covid pandemic. Though clean energy is on the whole cheaper than fossil fuels, the transition can be costly in the short term, and poorly designed plans can saddle lower- and middle-income people with the burden, as my *Bloomberg Opinion* colleague Lara Williams has written. It's become an effective wedge issue for right-wing politicians around the world. Inflation has also forced central banks to boost interest rates, making green investments much more expensive and raising the costs of servicing government debt that ballooned during the pandemic.

But none of this is happening in a vacuum. Whether voters or politicians care or not, the climate is changing, and the costs of that change are mounting. The US alone suffered a record 28 climate-related disasters last year costing \$1 billion or more each, according to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. It's matching that pace so far this year, even before what will probably be an active Atlantic hurricane season, turbocharged by sauna-like ocean water and the La Niña weather pattern. Adjusted for inflation, the US has averaged 20 such disasters per year over the past 5 years, compared with an average of just three per year in the 1980s.

Climate change's biggest fiscal hit to governments may not be disaster clean-up and prevention but increased health care spending. Most of the estimated 2.2% boost to annual government spending triggered by unabated climate change will be chalked up to higher health care costs, according to an estimate by ETH Zurich climate economist Lint Barrage. Hotter weather exacerbates heart disease, diabetes, asthma, mental illness, and other chronic conditions, while encouraging the spread of infectious diseases from dengue fever to toxic mushrooms.

Hotter weather also saps worker productivity and cognitive development in children. Throw that in with all the other climate-fuelled nightmares, and economic activity will suffer. A heating planet could leave global GDP 20% lower by mid-century, according to one study. It might already have shaved 37% off GDP since 1970, according to a recent National Bureau of Economic Research study. That's a lot of lost tax revenue for governments, particularly if they stubbornly refuse to tax the carbon spewed while powering their economies.

The net result is that delaying climate spending now will lead to even more climate spending in the future, when prices will be even higher and the need will be even more dire.

Zeroing out global emissions by 2050 to avoid the worst climate outcomes will cost \$215 trillion, *Bloomberg NEF* recently estimated, a 10% increase over their estimate just a year earlier. That's a bargain relative to the costs of inaction, but much of it will be borne by governments. Given that the benefits won't immediately fill up a gas tank or a cereal bowl, it won't be an easy political sell.

As it stands, green spending is losing the race against global heating. Failing to make these investments now is the fiscal equivalent of maxing out our credit cards on cartoon apes and then making only the minimum monthly payments, racking up huge interest charges in the process. It's a great way to go bankrupt.

TO ADDRESS INCOME INEQUALITY, THE BUDGET MUST INCENTIVISE JOBS, HEALTH & EDUCATION

It's not about Peter vs Paul

THE LONG SEASON of political slugfest is over for the time being with the Lok Sabha elections out of the way. Much of it was just noise, except for one recurring theme — income inequality. It was used by the ruling regime and the Opposition to take cheap potshots at each other, but it is a serious issue that needs deep introspection. One hopes next month's Budget will take some decisive steps to at least signal that the government means business.

The numbers show inequality has deepened in recent years. Consider this: the top 10% of the urban population spends over three times what the median person spends. According to the 2022-23 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey, the gap is 2.6 times in rural areas.

It's obvious that no country can prosper and remain a vigorous democracy when so few have so much and so many have so little. The issue of income and wealth inequality is one of the great moral, economic, and political crises that we face — and it must be dealt with.

One big indicator of growing inequality is that companies focusing on premium products have done better than those catering to lower market segments. For example, Nestlé, serving primarily premium products, has fared better than Hindustan Unilever, which has a broader spread of brands. Within that spread, Unilever's premium brands have been doing much better.

In this context, economists like Thomas Piketty are right in saying that inequality has become an "epidemic" in India. The top 1% of India today holds 40% of the country's wealth — 21 billionaires have the same wealth as 700 million Indians, according to Oxfam. The "State of Working India Report 2023" shows 42% of graduates under 25 are unemployed. Wage disparities are another driver of inequality. NSSO data

shows that the wages of salaried workers and labourers have been stagnating, or even declining. The solution, however, does not lie in robbing Peter to pay Paul and adopt "Robin Hood economics". Many have suggested the imposition of a wealth tax or inheritance tax to generate funds for the poor. But it is an idea that harkens back to the worst aspects of India's socialist past. Four decades ago, the Congress had abolished such taxes as collections from them were a pitance. The then finance minister acknowledged in his Budget speech that collections from the tax were "only about ₹20 crore" and its cost of administration was "relatively high".

The idea should not be to make the rich poorer, as that is a zero-sum game. Such a discourse forgets that the wealthy also generate jobs and fund innovation. And, to borrow from Milton Friedman, it ignores the danger that blind redistribution could destroy the incentive to create wealth. The core issue of inequality can be addressed by expanding the economic pie so that the poor benefit as well. The LS poll results showed that voters were angry at lack of opportunities, not because a few Indians are very rich. In any case, economic growth has a far greater impact on poverty alleviation than inequality.

A cornerstone of rampant inequality is the pervasive scarcity of jobs, and no amount of government handouts can substitute for jobs

amount of government handouts can substitute for jobs. The unemployment rate among the educated remains a worrisome trend. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23, the unemployment rate is highest among graduates at 13.4%, followed by those with diplomas at 12.2%, and 12.1% for postgraduates. Governments — whether Bharatiya Janata Party or Congress-led — have launched reforms and pushed for economic growth over the past three decades, but they have failed to generate enough employment and move the workforce from low-income farming to well-paying non-farm jobs. Agriculture continues to employ more than 45% of the workforce but contributes less than 20% to gross value added, resulting in high inequality of wealth and income.

Projections indicate that over the next decade, India will need to create 90 million non-farm jobs to manage the inevitable migration of labour from agriculture and provide meaningful employment opportunities to the working-age population. One of the reasons for poor remuneration is poorly designed contractual jobs. For example, many states appoint school-teachers on contract with a starting salary of just ₹7,500, while the minimum wage for them is expected to be ₹18,000. There was a recent report indicating that many delivery boys for Ama-

Cloud computing for a digital economy



PAYAL MALIK

Visiting professor, ICRIER
Views are personal

We need strategies beyond digital regulation to combat hyperscalers. Open, effective cloud access and DPI in cloud computing seem like the best bet

CLOUD COMPUTING IS the engine that powers several emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI). These services deliver data storage and computing digitally. The key value proposition driving its rapid enterprise adoption is its ability to enable access to IT resources on demand without the need for significant upfront capital investments. It also has other advantages such as scalability, rapid provisioning, advanced security, and minimal management effort. The Indian public cloud services market was estimated at \$7.51 billion in 2023, and its growth is expected to have a significant impact on India's economy, contributing \$310-380 billion by 2026 (~8% of GDP) and 14 million new jobs.

The cloud computing market is dominated by a few "hyperscalers" — large cloud service providers (CSPs) such as Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud Platform which provide services such as computing and storage at enterprise scale. The rapid growth of the cloud computing market must be viewed within the context of the increasing market shares of these hyperscalers. Potential competition concerns are heightened by vertically integrated hyperscalers, some of which also have a dominant presence in adjacent markets such as on-premises software, search engines, and e-commerce. Certain commercial policies that are employed by legacy software vendors (who also offer cloud infrastructure services) to exclude cloud competitors and gain market share are increasingly falling under the scrutiny of competition authorities.

Creating a competitive CSP market is critical to facilitate a multi-cloud approach that optimally combines the

services of multiple providers based on factors such as cost, speed, scalability, and security requirements. While Indian CSPs differentiate themselves from hyperscalers in terms of cost-efficiency and personalised support, the latter's business practices create technical and financial barriers for switching and multi-clouding. On the technical side, limited interoperability (i.e. ability of services hosted on different CSPs to seamlessly interconnect) and restrictions on the portability of data and applications due to the use of proprietary application programming interfaces (APIs) lead to vendor lock-in. Since services hosted on different CSPs cannot interact, enterprises tend to use multiple CSPs in silos to serve different purposes. Self-preferencing licensing restrictions pose another set of technical barriers, with cloud players who are dominant in the legacy software market, limiting the compatibility of their essential software with a third-party cloud infrastructure or increasing the costs for third-party deployment through excessive licensing fees.

On the financial side, cloud credits (i.e. the option provided to new customers, such as start-ups, to utilise services up to a predefined limit without any cost during trial) and committed spend discounts (i.e. volume discounts targeted towards high-end enterprise users, offered as a percentage upon achieving cloud spending targets) have emerged as significant barriers. These incentives encourage single sourcing

from large providers, and CSP entrants are unable to profitably match the value and coverage offered by hyperscalers.

Antitrust intervention based on a deeper understanding of the cloud market may be the first step to correct any market failures. Global antitrust and regulatory authorities, including the Federal Trade Commission, Office of Commissions, and Autorité de la concurrence, have conducted studies on the cloud computing market to gain a better understanding of competition concerns. There have been cases such as Microsoft's acquisition of Activision Blizzard, where antitrust intervention to address competition concerns in cloud gaming led to modifications. However, merger regulations and ex-post interventions would bring little succour to competitors and may be insufficient to address the market failures of a proprietary cloud ecosystem where entry will be effective only at the fringes. Such entry will not be sufficient for customers to adopt a multi-cloud to realise the complete benefits of the ecosystem and of different applications integrating and transferring data across cloud systems.

In India, the paradigm of digital public infrastructure (DPI) is being increasingly adopted in areas such as digital payments, e-commerce, and e-health to overcome the interoperability challenge and ensure the improved aggregation of demand and supply by using open-source technologies. DPI is also being adopted in the cloud computing space. The Open Cloud Compute project aims to decen-

tralise and expand computing infrastructure by connecting cloud providers of various sizes through open and interoperable APIs. A decentralised network that connects smaller providers would ease entry and create incentives for improving technical synergies between providers, potentially reducing lock-in for proprietary ecosystems. This could also provide for more cost-efficient and customised solutions, in addition to enhanced security and reliability from a distributed network vis-à-vis centralised data centres.

Unlike previous technological revolutions, India has embraced the AI revolution at the same time and with the same intensity as the rest of the world. Cloud computing capacity is the shovel that we need to emerge as one of the winners in the AI gold rush. Computing capacity, or compute, is a fundamental component of large AI systems as well as algorithmic innovation and vast data sets. It is also one of the most difficult elements for smaller businesses to set up in-house. We also need creative strategies beyond digital regulation to combat the concentrated power of hyperscalers, and providing open, sustainable, and effective cloud access and DPI in cloud computing seems like our best bet. Enabling cloud computing innovation that serves interests beyond the commercial gains of Big Tech requires public goods investments in digital infrastructure and models that have the capability to scale and support decentralised power.

Coauthored with **Harishankar Jagadeesh** and **Bhargavee Das**, respectively, fellow (consultant), and research assistant, ICRIER

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Do it right

The first challenge facing the new coalition government is to resolve the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test imbroglio and put in place a flawless and fair testing system. However, the ineptitude of the National Testing Agency has not burst into the open all of a sudden. If the Union and the state public service commissions and

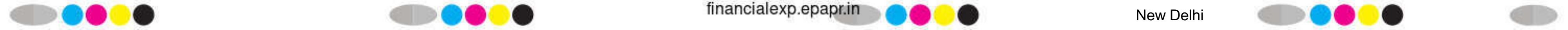
universities can conduct exams without making a mess of them, an agency or agencies tasked with conducting competitive entrance exams should also be able to do so. It is time we also think in terms of decentralising testing, better ways of assessing aptitude, preferring testing over a few years to three hours and saving students the agony. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

Smart agriculture needed

Apropos of "Rebooting agriculture" (FE, June 24), Prime Minister Modi has done well to appoint Shivraj Singh Chouhan as the agricultural minister and one hopes that the step will result in farmers getting a better price for their produce. The weather is more unpredictable than ever and could

affect production. Sustainable agriculture is the need of the hour. Overutilisation of natural resources have led a bleak situation in Punjab and Haryana. Farmers should be convinced to switch over to better remunerative crops than water-guzzling ones such as sugarcane. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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REASONABLE TO EXPECT BETTER TURNOUT IN J&K ASSEMBLY POLLS

WITH the deadline for the J&K assembly elections imposed by the Supreme Court a little over three months away, the process of poll roll revision has just kicked off. This will be the first state election after the BJP lost its majority in the Lok Sabha, sliding to 240 seats from 303 in the 2019 general elections. The party continues to remain in power due to its pre-poll NDA tie-up, though without the afterglow of 2014 and 2019. J&K saw unprecedented voter enthusiasm in the recent general elections, the first after the Centre took away its special powers under Article 370 on August 5, 2019. At 58.58 percent, the polling percentage was the highest in 35 years. The absence of fear of the gun apparently contributed to the full expression of the people's will at the hustings. Violence resumed only around the time the verdict was out and the Pakistani leadership was greeting Narendra Modi for his third consecutive term as prime minister. Significantly, Pakistan lost sway in the Kashmir valley ever since the repression of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his followers by their military establishment.

That Kashmiris decisively voted out the National Conference and PDP heavyweights Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti in Baramulla and Anantnag-Rajouri indicated their disenchantment with the leadership of the two prominent regional parties. But they gave the NC two seats elsewhere. Omar lost to a jailed independent, Engineer Rashid, by over two lakh votes; Mufti was trounced by over three lakh votes. The BJP picked up the other two seats. In all, the BJP did well only in one-third of 90 assembly segments in J&K in the Lok Sabha polls. Whether the delimitation exercise that raised the number of assembly seats from 83 to 90—47 in Kashmir and 43 in Jammu—would benefit the BJP remains to be seen.

The voter turnout could go up further in the assembly polls because local issues normally have more resonance in the mind space than national ones. Preparations for the elections can begin only after the annual 50-day Amarnath Yatra is wrapped up on August 19. That will give the poll panel about six weeks to hold the elections after redeploying the security forces. Whatever the outcome, the post-poll restoration of statehood for J&K is a given, but not Article 370 because of constitutional impediments.

KCR NEEDS TO KEEP CADRE MORALE HIGH

THE elections may be over, but politics in Telangana continues with the same momentum. The Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) is facing a pincer attack from the ruling Congress and the BJP. Though it is the main opposition in the assembly, the BRS drew a blank in the Lok Sabha polls, even losing deposit in eight constituencies. In this backdrop, a number of its legislators are veering towards the Congress and the BJP to survive the next five years. It's an irony of fate that the BRS now finds itself in more or less the same position as the Congress did after the 2014 and 2019 elections in the state.

But the Congress, despite losing leaders, had the advantage of being an old institution engraved in the public psyche and had been the main opposition by default. The BRS, on the other hand, has been around for a little over two decades and has to contend with a resurgent BJP too. It may not be able to hold on to some legislators who are under the scanner of central agencies. A few state council members, too, are said to be headed the same way. If the Congress has its way, as its leaders openly claim, the BRS could lose 20 MLAs. In the Rajya Sabha, the party has already lost one of its five members to the Congress. With little representation in parliament and its numbers likely to come down in the state assembly and council, the BRS has only one option left—to be among the people and keep its cadre intact. It is easier said, as the saffron party, after doubling its state Lok Sabha count from four to eight, has set its sights on 88 seats in the next assembly. It is also looking at appointing a state chief who can wean away backward caste leaders and cadre from the BRS.

A parallel could be drawn between BRS chief K Chandrasekhara Rao and TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu. After 2019, Naidu was isolated on all sides. But he was able to bounce back by keeping the morale of his cadre high. Can KCR do a Naidu? For that, he needs to take up public causes and get rid of the tag of a family party. Otherwise, fighting a two-front war is not going to be easy.

QUICK TAKE

CLIMATE RESILIENCE & BANGLADESH

THE re-elected Bangladeshi PM's visit to India to meet our re-elected PM is a good augury. Our second-highest tourist arrivals last year were from Bangladesh; five Indian states share a 4,096-km border with the neighbour. So the two PMs' talks on defence, logistics, water-sharing and trade are important on both sides. It is essential now to combine our efforts on climate resilience. The World Bank estimates cyclones cost Bangladesh about \$1 billion annually; by 2050, a third of the country's agricultural GDP could be lost and 13 million people rendered internally displaced. This would cause enormous trouble in the region. The time to start acting is now.

IN geopolitics, a Great Game is a reference to the build-up to a potential contest in a region where a clash of interests between two or more influential powers appears inevitable. The term was first used academically by Professor H W C Davis in 1926. It referred to the 19th-century Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia. It was not just the confrontation but the strategy of establishing spheres of influence in the various sub-regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia by both Russia and Great Britain that subsequently became an established characteristic of the strategy of any Great Game.

West Asia is prone to and ideally suited to similar Great Game strategies. The US and Russia lobbied hard through the Cold War. The US invariably backed Israel, but maintained a cordial relationship with most of the energy-producing Arab nations. For the US, the stability of West Asia and keeping it conflict-free was a priority to ensure its own continuity of energy interests. The former Soviet Union mainly backed the militant Arab states of Egypt and Syria to remain embedded in its area of interest and prevent any strategic imbalance in favour of the US. Both the Soviet Union and the US were far from their home shores, but there was a clear differentiation in approach adopted by them. The US chose to establish military bases, particularly at maritime locations, and parked assets and troops at various facilities, thus also offering incidental security to some monarchies. Russia did not resort to this; although, for them, the stakes were very high to ensure that they had a foothold in warm waters outside the Black Sea.

The Russians came back in 2015 to ensure their interests in Syria, particularly the military facilities, remained intact and were not overrun by the menace of the marauding Daesh, which was then threatening all of West Asia. An earlier contention of US interests in West Asia invariably revolved around hydrocarbons. As more shale gas reserves were discovered, the US appeared to have lost comparative strategic interest in the region in favour of the Indo-Pacific, which after 2015 became the attractive 'go-to' domain of worldwide strategic interests. Why did it come back with a bang as it did, especially in the times of Donald Trump?

The Trump administration wasn't wrong in its supposed assumption

Big powers have been meddling in West Asia for long. Now China has made huge investments there. Will it be able to extend its influence?

A NEW GREAT GAME IS AFOOT IN WEST ASIA



that West Asia would always remain the strategic centre of the world, despite many Shangri La dialogues. Take a look, how? A majority of trade routes intersect in the region; the Suez Canal remains a key asset of the region. Energy-wise, it still remains the central zone, providing energy to two of the world's very important manufacturing hubs Japan and China, besides to populous and fast-emerging India. Conflicts here always had a way of ensuring the rest of the world got involved with the spin-offs. For the better part of the last 75 years, the ideological drivers of conflict have all emanated from here. Political Islam was born here and its contribution to instability in crucial regions around the world is well recognised.

In recent times, the mass migration from conflict-ridden zones have mainly been from West Asia, bringing in their wake social turbulence in the stable societies of Europe. The one phenomenon that has yet to hit West Asia is the politics of overt nuclearisation; the covert part has been rife for some time. That is why the above board and also simmering conflicts have the potential to trigger events that could become uncontrollable and lead to much more. Iran's general proxy war strategy in multiple sub-regions, Syria's civil war, Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis in Yemen and now the raging Israeli war against the Palestinians in Gaza, all bear the potential of going completely

DEBATING EMPATHY AT THE DINING TABLE



barren cows and rams." Later in the essay, he writes: "Overridden by ritualism, there was hardly a day on which there was no cow sacrifice to which the Brahmin was not invited by some non-Brahmin. For the Brahmin every day was a beef-steak day."

But once the Vedic period got over and the Brahmins had to preserve their identity against the onslaught of new trends, beef eaters became untouchable.

an animal for food when we have other, less bloody options. This applies to other animals we consume. Pork, lamb or chicken. Because of our discretion—we do not prefer dogs or cats—we may think we are more civilised. But this position is relative to the culture we live in.

Contrary to rumours, Indians can be a cruel people. In Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, more than 97 percent of the population have no problems eating something non-vegetarian at every meal. Fish included. It has been scientifically proven that fish are capable of experiencing pain.

The question though is not the eating, but the killing. Do humans consider only their pain valid? Or are all animals in the food chain worthy of being protected from pain? This is a complicated question. Because if humans consider themselves exceptional, they have little obligation to the nature around them. Indeed, by the same argument of exceptionality, an American life could be seen as more valuable than a human life in India or Sudan.

Humans are contradictory creatures. Unlike other beings, we are capable of feeling pain in the abstract. Empathy: We see a movie and cry though the characters are not real. We help a dog in distress or haul a cow out of a swamp. Then we go home and eat whatever is at hand.

The evolutionary argument justifying this daily massacre is that though the human brain is only 2 percent of the body weight, it consumes 20 percent of the energy, and that animal proteins are a more efficient food source. But does this argument hold in the face of plant-based options? Or lab-generated meat?

The real argument in favour of vegetarianism is that it leads to a more tolerant world. If alleviation of pain and care for all animal life are the defining standards of civilisation, there are higher chances of a more equitable society and fewer wars. It looks to me that it is on the dining table that we continue to decide how to live or die.

ble. Abstinence from meat became a mark of distinction.

As I said, I am not a diehard vegetarian, nor a Brahmin. But I am beginning to see the merit in a modest kind of vegetarianism, or Brahminism, if you will.

A cow is a large animal with a centrally developed nervous system. It experiences emotions like love, fear and physical sensations like pain. The animals are transported across long distances to slaughterhouses in awful conditions. Their slaughter itself is extremely painful.

One argument against eating beef is not the holiness of the animal and its association with some of the Hindu deities. It is that we are inflicting great pain on

MAILBAG

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Passing marks

Ref: *Voice of people: BJP's coalition government* (Jun 24). One wonders how a learned advocate can seem to be so blind. The BJP got less seats as compared to expectations. But the Congress just got passing marks. Instead of introspection, he is undermining public opinion.
Rajaram Bhat, Mysuru

ECI's reputation

An eminent lawyer and parliamentarian should not have maligned the central crime investigation agencies and the ECI as the cause of Modi's decline. Why has he ignored that the so-called 'honest' politicians sent behind bars did not get any respite even from the apex court despite lawyers like Singhvi and Sibal himself defending the accused?
Hulasa Behera, Bhubaneswar

Praiseworthy column

Ref: *Things that have led great people to enlightenment* (Jun 24). The author deserves praise for depicting the brief life history of Iranian poet Hafiz. The Ramanuja episode on caste division was touching. It is pertinent that the saint hails from a state where caste strife is one of the most virulent in the nation.
Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur

New system

Ref: *Rahul pens emotional letter to Wayanad before taking oath as Rae Bareilly MP* (Jun 24). The present system that an individual can stand for elections at more than one place must be scrapped. If he or she wins both seats, the candidate has to discard the other seat. A new system to tackle this problem is long overdue.
V K Kumar, Thiruvananthapuram

Thin ice

On the first day of parliament, PM Narendra Modi lambasted the opposition about the Emergency 50 years ago, as if there is no better topic for him to speak about. He seems to have forgotten that his government is on crutches today as the people have downed his party's strength to less than simple majority. Even the head of the BJP's ideological parent body RSS criticised him and his party indirectly about the way they functioned in the past.
BS Badarinarayana, Bengaluru

Political backing

Scores of people lost their lives consuming illicit liquor in Kallakurichi in Tamil Nadu. It is reported that the hooch makers have strong political backing. If it is so, expecting stringent action against them is foolhardy. The solatium announced by the government should be recovered from the illegal businessmen behind this tragedy.
Mohan Kunnakat, Vaniambikulam

Time to Reset the 4% Inflation Target?

Possibility not too distant on structural changes

Views expressed in the latest rate-setting meeting of RBI include those who feel the repo rate is high and needs to be cut. Two external members of the six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) made a strong pitch for cutting the rate, held at 6.5% since February 2023, minutes of the June meeting released last week showed. These two members, reports said, also favoured a change in the policy stance from withdrawal of accommodation to neutral. There are two aspects to the minority view in RBI's MPC for a rate cut. One, as inflation trends downwards, the real repo rate is increasing so long as RBI holds the line. Two, there could be a sacrifice in economic growth on account of interest rates staying higher for longer. The majority view sees inflation control becoming tougher as it approaches the target and is wary of spikes in food inflation.

If RBI continues to hold rates, it will be subjecting the economy to a 2% real repo rate, almost double what is a growth-oriented level. The economy grew above 8% last year as the real repo rate was climbing towards 2%. Growth projections for the current year have been trimmed as higher-for-longer interest rates work their way through the system. The question MPC's rate-cutters are posing is whether this sacrifice in growth is worth it. After all, a high repo rate does little to tame food inflation. Core inflation, excluding volatile food and energy prices, does not justify the interest rate level.

The risk of inflation overshooting its target may have a lower impact on economic growth in a scenario of a slow rise in real wages. A revival in consumption and investment will be needed to keep the economy growing at 8%. Any further slowdown in consumption has spillover effects on investment, which may warrant RBI's caution over lowering interest rates till inflation is at or below target. The inflation target may need to be reset if the economy can sustain higher growth rates at lower inflation levels. Structural changes in the economy make that possibility not too distant.



Tackling Heat Needs Adequate Planning

More than 1,300 pilgrims, including 68 Indians, died during this year's Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca due to extreme heat, with temperatures reaching 52° C between June 14 and 19. During this period, 1.8 mn pilgrims, including 1.6 mn from outside Saudi Arabia, performed rituals in and around Mecca. Saudi authorities stated that 83% of the deceased were pilgrims without proper permits who walked long distances without adequate protection and support.

For large gatherings and events, particularly those held in summer months, the venue's holding capacity must be considered. Since ticketing may not be an option for big gatherings, a change in approach is required. Dealing with extreme heat cannot be reduced to a people management issue. Given the high frequency and intensity of heatwaves, temperatures could rise to levels that pose a threat even for people with legitimate permits or tickets. Addressing extreme heat requires adopting a risk-management approach. By treating heat as a risk, similar to fire, organisers of such events and administrations must implement measures to mitigate it.



The climate impact of planned events must also be considered, and measures to mitigate and lessen these risks must be integrated into the planning process. This means accounting for sudden temperature rises, providing water and other cooling options, improving sanitation, providing cool mobility options and creating a strong medical support system to deal with impacts and emergencies. Climate change has ushered in an era of high heat, and addressing it requires taking the heat risk with utmost seriousness because it can become a life-and-death issue.



JUST IN JEST

And, once again, our jaw gently drops at a First World problem

Pay Without Work, And a Complaint?

We know. Viksit India, Bharat, whatever — especially the way that the outgoing British prime minister's father-in-law doesn't see humanity having better things to do than to stay in office for rani and country — wants viksit problems. As in 'First World' conundrums. And, so, we have Laurence Van Wassenhove, a French woman, who has taken telecom giant, Orange, to court. What is the because? For almost 30 years, she received — horror of horrors! — her full salary without being assigned any work.

We know. If you're a Gujarati or Bengali — the kind of person who can make money out of nothing and the kind who make nothing out of money, respectively — this will sound odd. But complaining about earning without working is probably a spiritual thing associated with Judeo-Christian concepts of sin. As the court proceedings unfold, Laurence's lawyer argues that this prolonged salary-without-work situation led to 'moral harassment'. Meanwhile, Orange insists they acted appropriately, considering her medical condition — partial paralysis and epilepsy. But, meanwhile, while some people complain about not being given enough work to earn their salary, the rest of us are raising our hands to endanger our sockets to say, 'Pay me to not work!' Especially for us in India, where showing that we work is more important than us actually working, this case is utterly puzzling.

AI drinks energy up – quantum computing may reduce demand even though the tech is new

Don't Count Your Chickens...



Supratik Guha

Computing has been on a tear for the past 70 years. Ratcheted by increases in computing power, it has altered the way banks transact, the way we communicate, administer medical treatment, design almost every commercial product and fight wars.

Semiconductor chip tech powers computing's growth. However, a significant challenge besets the future of computing. Recent innovations in AI, such as ChatGPT, have made computing power needs double every 3-4 months. Semiconductor tech is going to have a difficult time keeping up with this demand. If we try to meet this demand with our current knowledge of semiconductor tech, we risk negatively impacting climate and global energy sustainability.

Today's chips consume untenable amounts of energy for the sophisticated computing tasks we wish them to execute. If we were to continue increasing computing power at the same rate we have been used to, then the energy consumed by computing alone would begin to rival the world's total energy consumption in about 30 years. This calls for dramatic changes to the science and technology of computing.

The energy issue is tied to the methodology of computer processor design. Today's modern computing machines compute via a complex dance of information shuttling back and forth between memory where information is stored, and logic where information is processed. It is in this sequential process that much of the energy efficiency of conventional or classical computing is lost when used to crunch through AI workloads. Disruptively breaking computing's energy efficiency barrier has become a focus of global R&D activity.



Energy draining

Researchers and engineers tackle this problem with a variety of techniques: ▶ Integrating finer meshes of specialised computing chips and memory units linked with high-speed wiring. ▶ Building a chip out in three dimensions instead of the current flatland approach.

Creating algorithms that can be less wasteful in energy consumption. This line of attack adheres to what is called classical computing. However, tech often advances by jumping into new spaces that bring disruptive changes. Quantum information processing is one such space. A quantum data link can provide secure, tamper-proof data communications protected by the laws of physics.

A quantum computer may provide a tremendous computing speed-up advantage over conventional computing for certain problems. While so far there are only a handful of such problem classes, they are important for both commercial and national security purposes: code-breaking a rival's encrypted data transmission, predicting the exact properties of molecules (useful for the manufacture of materials and pharmaceuticals), and classifying large amounts of data (such as for AI) are a few examples.

Unfortunately, quantum technologies have been substantially hyped up by the PR machines of academia and industry alike, leading to heightened expectations. Given the substantial but surmountable engineering challenges incumbent on a brand-new approach that requires exquisite precision and control, useful quantum information systems will take some time to become reality.

Developments in quantum and classical semiconductor technologies will drive future information processing systems. Quantum systems will likely be embedded within conventional systems: a quantum internet will exist in partnership with a classical internet, and a quantum processor might be embedded into a modern classical computer of the future in the manner that we incorporate graphics accelerators today. The two approaches have some differences in their ecosystems.

Semiconductors are a proven technology with established players. The US, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and China dominate different parts of its food chain. Budgets here are enormous: TSMC has an annual capex of \$30 bn. The US has devoted \$11 bn for research over the next four years in R&D, and another \$39 bn for manufacturing through the nation's CHIPS and Science Act.

Compared to semiconductor tech, Quantum is less well-defined and is an emerging high-risk-very-high payoff area for which the food chain has not yet been firmly established in terms of specific applications, design, manufacturing, supply chain or tech dominance. The US and China have been early movers with research investments upwards of \$1 bn annually. India has announced its National Quantum Mission.

There is a second difference. The 70-year-old semiconductor tech ecosys-

Today's chips consume excessive energy. If computing power continues to increase at its current rate, energy consumption from computing could match global energy consumption within 30 years



tem is a well-oiled machine with a multidisciplinary set of stakeholders. Quantum is a fundamental science transitioning into technology driven primarily by physicists and chemists. To transition to technology, engineering challenges need to be met.

The world's engineering and computer science departments need to get involved in developing its strategy and execution — fundamental science alone will not cut it. This transfiguration is simple in concept but often tricky to execute and requires significant thought into workforce development and deliberate professional inclusiveness. It needs to be an integral part of any nation's quantum strategy if it has to be effective.

The writer is a professor at the Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering, University of Chicago

Gender Diversity Needs Work



Kiran Somvanshi

'We want them, but we can't retain them.' This line best captures the sentiment regarding the low participation of women in public and professional spheres in India.

This year, 797 women candidates contested the general elections, constituting 9.6% of the total 8,337 candidates. Only 74 of them won a seat in the 18th Lok Sabha — four fewer than the number of women in the 17th Lok Sabha. This comes less than a year after the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, which reserves one-third of seats in Lok Sabha and assemblies for women.

According to a study by staffing firm Xpheno, five of India's leading IT companies — Infosys, TCS, Wipro, LTI-Mindtree and HCL Tech — witnessed a cumulative net exit of around 25,000 women in FY24. Incidentally, this was a year when IT companies were reportedly compelling their staff to resume working from the office.

The narrative has moved from 'where

are the women?' to 'how can we retain them?' What follows is talk about reservations, corporate mandates and more efforts to foster gender diversity and inclusion. However, certain challenges in the way institutions function make it difficult for women to remain hired for long. But there are effective ways to retain women:

▶ **Mindset, not merit** The standard argument that women should be hired on merit and not to comply with a mandate is as flawed as the argument of all companies insisting on hiring only experienced people. Opportunity begets experience, no opportunity no experience. Similarly, political parties want more women voters to vote, but they fall short of fielding more women candidates, doubting their winnability. ▶ **Mind the gap** It's unfair to call women the better half, when in practice, they do end up being the worse-off half. India slipped two ranks to being 129th of the 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024. There is still an overt and covert gap in treatment, expectations, empowerment and remuneration given to women in comparison to men. Closing the gap tends to be directly proportional to increasing women's participation. For instance, Ireland — the country that has topped the gender gap index ranking for over 15 years —



Mind the gap

has a high female workforce participation rate of 70%. It also had a woman prime minister from 2017 to 2024. ▶ **70 or 84 hours a week?** The recent debate about whether Indians should work more hours a week should be reviewed from a gender perspective. A typical working woman ends up working much more than 70 hours a week in any given week, clocking in several hours of unaccounted (and unpaid) household and care-giving work.

▶ **Flexi work** A recent finding by gig platform Flexing it showed a 300% increase in FY24 over FY22 in the number of female consultants in India signing up for freelance roles. The growth rate for women has been faster indicating they increasingly prefer remote work. But the moot question is: are companies ready to offer flexible opportunities to their employees?

▶ **Women at the top beget more women** In general elections, TMC proved in political life what is seen in corporate life. Having women CEOs leads to a greater number of women on boards and senior management, for example, Colgate-Palmolive India, Godrej Consumer Products and Apollo Hospitals. At 38%, the Kolkata-headquartered party led by Mamata Banerjee commanded the highest proportion of women MPs elected to the 18th Lok Sabha. Its women candidates have also delivered a high success rate — of the 12 women fielded by the party for the elections this year, 11 won.

▶ **Walk the talk** There is an underlying hypocrisy that has crept into corporate communication and fostered using jargon. DEI has to be felt more than spoken about. This concept becomes a great talking point in the case of an organisation that has less than 20% women in the workforce, and not so in workplaces with a high representation of women employees. Hiring more women, giving them responsible roles while providing flexibility and paying them fairly requires empathy and a progressive mindset. Equity demands supporting employees as per their requirements instead of having 'one size fits all' policies.

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Property Digitisation Benefits All



Manish Jaiswal & Nikhil S Jamwal

One of the first things the new government has done after taking office is announce assistance for 3 crore homes under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). This is a massive step that reinforces Govt's commitment to affordable housing. Three crore homes, with a construction cost of ₹1,500 per sq ft, have the potential to enhance GDP by over \$500 bn. Already worth an estimated ₹1 lakh crore, the market has bright prospects due to the vast number of customers who want their homes, the potential to improve last-mile connectivity and spark large-scale urbanisation.

However, one issue hinders the sector: property identification. A combination of archaic methods, local complexities and the sheer size of the hinterland has made this an arduous task, making it difficult to settle disputes and prove claims in a court of law. Digitisation of property records and identification can potentially eliminate most of these issues.

Three specific tools are needed for

digitisation: ▶ **Embrace drone tech** Given the extensive and ever-changing terrain of the country and the complex legal and administrative structure, it is difficult to maintain precise and comprehensive records of property ownership. Property identification and demarcation must be done with drone tech and products like Google Maps.

The gov's Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas (SVAMITVA) initiative represents a strategic move to address these challenges, promoting transparency and improving the efficiency of property administration. Utilising drone tech to delineate each land parcel and integrating this data with enhanced Google Maps will reduce uncertainties, disputes and the potential for land-related fraud.

▶ **Fast-track ULPIN** The process of land identification hinges on the accu-



Harness cutting-edge tech

rate capture of land parcel coordinates, which relies on thorough surveys and the creation of geospatial cadastral maps. In line with this, the gov is rolling out the Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) project under the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP).

ULPIN will assign a unique identifier to each land parcel. However, the project's progress has been slow, and there is a pressing need to expand its reach to include rural areas and gram panchayat jurisdictions. This expansion will benefit the affordable housing sector by linking complete loan data for properties used as collateral to these unique IDs, thereby curtailing the practice of securing multiple loans against a single property and mitigating the risk of fraudulent activities. This unique identifier would also facilitate Central Registry of Securitisation Asset Reconstruction and Security Interest (CERSAI) reporting and eliminate ambiguities.

Currently, identifying land records of rights/khatauni is not an easy task for revenue departments and files are managed manually at the tehsil office. For individuals, pulling out land information takes a lot of work. The process is not transparent, and people have to wait without clarity on turnaround time. An identification number given to each land parcel would ease things for both sides — revenue officers 'patwaris' and 'lekhpals', and for home buyers. Extensive training of

revenue officers on cadastral maps and modern geospatial tech should also be done.

▶ **Tailored solutions** In semi-urban and peri-urban markets, small-scale colonisers/agriculturalists own large chunks of land, which are given numbers from revenue departments. These are called 'khasra', or survey numbers. At places, khasras are carved into residential/commercial plots of different sizes for sale.

However, these plots do not have numbers, which makes their identification difficult. That is where unique property IDs will play a major role. They will bring transparency and reduce property fraud. They will also help build lenders' confidence in easier access to underwriting through digital means.

Adopting a unique property identification system for each land parcel signifies a revolutionary shift in land management practices. By harnessing cutting-edge tech and forward-thinking methodologies, India is forging a path toward a more transparent, efficient and equitable land administration system. This endeavour represents not just a leap in tech innovation but also a stride toward social and economic advancement, potentially benefiting countless landowners/lenders and regulators nationwide.

Jaiswal is MD-CEO, and Jamwal is national technical manager, Griihum Housing Finance



THE SPEAKING TREE

Cosmic Meditation

ULLHAS PAGEY

Nasa recently announced that the Boeing Starliner's return to Earth from the International Space Station with its inaugural crew will be delayed. Its crew includes astronaut Sunita Williams, who carried the Bhagwad Gita on her space previous mission.

Arjun said to Krishn in the Bhagwad Gita, 'I see you endowed with numerous arms, bellies, mouths and eyes, and having innumerable forms extended on all sides. I see neither your beginning nor middle nor even your end, manifested as you are in the form of the universe.' An expedition into space is akin to the journey of a sadhak, spiritual practitioner, undertakes when she dives deep within to realise her true Self.

Being in outer space allows one to witness the delicate dance of the Earth suspended in blackness, a fragile oasis of life. It fosters a profound appreciation for the universe's interconnectedness. The ever-changing light show of sunrise and sunset across the Earth's horizon can be a form of moving meditation.

Humanity's foray into space is a testament to its ability to find solace and wonder in the cosmos. It's a journey that transcends the boundaries of beliefs. Space missions can provide spiritual insights resonating with Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's observation, 'When we look deeply at the Earth, at the miracle of life, we can't help but see that we are all interconnected.'



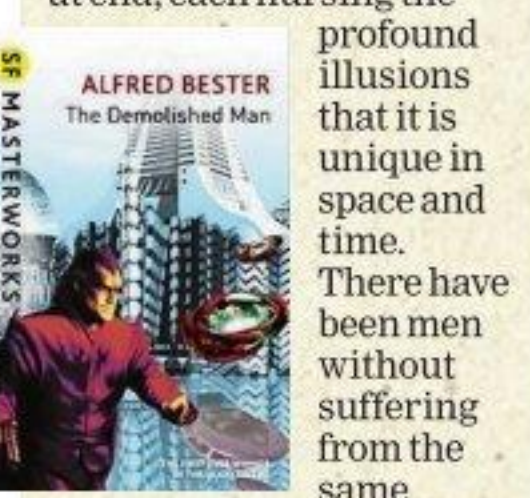
Paraphrases From Fiction

The Demolished Man

Alfred Bester

In an endless universe, there is nothing new, nothing different. What may appear exceptional to the minute mind of man may be invisible to the infinite Hand of God. This strange second in a life, that unusual event, those remarkable coincidences of environment, opportunity and encounter... all may be reproduced over and over on the planet of a sun whose galaxy revolves once in two hundred million years and had evolved nine times already.

There are, and have been, worlds and cultures without end, each nursing the



profound illusions that it is unique in space and time. There have been men without suffering from the same megalomania, men who have imagined themselves unique....

... This is the story of such a time of such a time and such a man... The Demolished Man.


And this time his scream had sound. Ben Rich awoke. He lay quietly in the hypodermic bed while his heat shuddered and his eyes focused at random on objects in the room, simulating a calm he could not feel.

Chat Room

Homing In on Vacant Homes

Appropos 'Policy in the Works on Fin, Health Support for Elders' by Yogima Seth Sharma (Jun 24), proposals such as improved healthcare and better networking of support services for senior citizens, as well as elder-friendly public infrastructure and transport system are welcome moves. Post-retirement rehabilitation of employees in the organised sector is a similar area of concern. The residential accommodation provided to staff in government services, PSUs and private sector is falling vacant in various cities, probably due to the number of employees coming down. Govt should consider converting some of these premises into residential colonies for the retired employees of these respective organisations on a cost-sharing basis. This will help utilise the unoccupied houses and provide instant accommodation to the retired personnel.

MG WARRIER
Mumbai



A thought for today

Politicians will be politicians, they will have a weakness at times for not seeing beyond their nose

ARUN JAITLEY

It's People's House

Challenge before new LS is to deliver quality debate in a civil manner. That's the message voters sent

As MPs took oath on Day One of the 18th Lok Sabha, three incidents stood out as an indication to what can be expected in the days ahead. Opposition's protest against temporary speaker and Congress's missive to NDA govt on key issues for first 15 days showed INDIA in attack mode. Modi's comments about opposition, that "people want substance not slogans", showed PM is in no mood to relent. And third, soft-spoken Naveen Patnaik's stark message to BJD's Rajya Sabha members to be in opposition hints at rows in RS.

On fire | Opposition MPs refused to be part of the panel to assist the temporary speaker during the oath ceremony. Though negotiations for a consensus speaker continue, it's likely India may witness its first election to the speaker's post since Independence. The 18th LS will have made history from the first day House meets for business. INDIA bloc also hit the deck running to try and continue to set the agenda as it did through the election campaign. Rahul Gandhi



listed out "NDA's first 15-day agenda", including train accidents, quality of train travel, NEET-NTA scandals, high prices, forest fires and heatwave deaths. Expect fireworks.

Firing back | Modi recognises the challenges of a hawkish opposition. His address captured it – that people want from opposition "debate and diligence", not "drama and disturbance". Govt will need to bring its best game – of listening – to ensure its first session is not lost in the din of hostile exchanges, or that opposition voices aren't drowned out. So far, most interruptions in Parliament occurred during the 15th LS (2009-2014). And dubious history was made in the 17th LS too. A hundred LS MPs and 46 Rajya Sabha members were suspended during Parliament's winter session last year – the highest number of MPs suspended in a single session in Parliament's history.

Stoking some | It was also no coincidence that Naveen Patnaik should have chosen Day One to send a message to his party's nine Rajya Sabha members – BJD has zero LS MPs for the first time ever. Patnaik asked the RS members to emerge as a "vibrant and strong" opposition. In BJD's wipeout in Odisha assembly and LS, Modi seems to have lost an all-weather ally in Patnaik. Expect a more combative RS session too.

Day One may have been far from routine. But it is still not too much to expect civility and conviviality in the House – electoral results suggested an aggressive govt and forceful opposition work side by side. Will parties comply with the people's verdict?

Lithium & More

Syncing mining and battery tech R&D crucial to India's Atmanirbhar goals

In mixed progress for India's battery tech ecosystem, Chhattisgarh's Korba district has seen one block of lithium move to the auctions stage and another block showing promising deposits of the mineral. This comes after setbacks such as the cancellation of auctions for the lithium block in J&K's Reasi district due to insufficient investor interest, and shelving of exploration plans in Manipur's Kamjong district due to local resistance. But if India is to emerge as a top player in sunrise manufacturing sectors such as electric vehicles (EVs) and consumer goods, it has to get ahead in the battery game, lithium-ion and others.

Lithium-ion challenge | In 2022, China accounted for as much as 77% of global lithium-ion battery production capacity. Beijing is projected to retain this dominance even in 2027. It's on the strength of this lithium-ion battery manufacturing capacity that the Chinese are looking to dominate the global EV market. India is way behind here. If it's not to remain dependent on Chinese suppliers, it must ramp up its own lithium-ion battery production base or look for alternatives.

Poor technical depth | India also faces handicaps such as under-developed mineral reporting standards. This leads to figures for mineral reserves for several blocks being inconclusive, hindering investments. Plus, most of the lithium found in India is in the form of hard rock granites and pegmatites, making it difficult to extract the mineral.

Alternatives on anvil | There are other battery options too, but they need significant R&D. Metal-air batteries use atmospheric oxygen and metals such as aluminium, zinc and iron. They can be a lightweight, budget-friendly, and recyclable but non-rechargeable, option. Then, China is heavily investing in cheaper sodium batteries. For India to follow suit, it has to heavily invest in battery research and line up appropriate mining industry tech and processes. That's the only way India can emerge as an alternative battery hub to China.

Exes with benefits

Putting children first is the love story after divorce

Shinie Antony

A new and tender love story is doing the rounds. This one is made up of exes. Once a marriage heads for divorce courts, a husband and wife are simply called Tom and Jerry. While wedding anniversaries are all about roses and candlelit dinners, divorce anniversaries don't come with mushy cards and teddy bears. But couples who part ways may still be bound together eternally – as parents. Romance flies out of the window, children don't.

Parents have always had a choice: stay together and mess up the kids or split up and mess up the kids. In US, about 50% children have separated parents. India, with its non-stop worrying about what others will say, artificially maintained the world's lowest divorce rates for a long time. Many a grim-faced Mr and Mrs would rather murder each other than part and bring bad name to family. Fidelity was optional for men, a terminal illness for women. In a traditional household when the 'divorce' word is uttered, everyone shrieks against a loud background score. Divorce was a public tragedy; even strangers demanded to know the gory details. 'At least he doesn't beat you' was the anti-divorce hymn.

Modern divorces are thought to be too pat. Young couples don't try hard enough, say old couples. We don't want to end up like them, shudder the young couples. Custody battles follow. The family becomes single-parent, blended or extended, and co-parenting is parallel, cooperative or conflicted. Couples move into different flats in the same building to make childcare easier; an ex is now a neighbour! Some women dump offspring with husband just so his new romance is punctuated with adolescent cries of 'I won't eat this!' and 'Give me your credit card'.

The initial strategy of running the other spouse down is replaced by the practicality of having someone to fall back on. An ex who will pick or drop a kid when you run late is always better than one who stands there making faces. Up against a child's decision to tattoo a life-size Zendaya or Timothée Chalamet on their back another type of togetherness beckons the former spouses. Now they actually listen to each other – the previous vacant look sported during the marriage is gone. They find themselves defending each other when kids complain instead of sighing with deep contentment. Such a relief to lay down weapons, which are also the children.

Neat Solution For NEET

Allow more local input in medical education, let states tailor admission to their govt colleges per their needs. But continue an all-India test for private colleges, which can't be trusted to hold their own exams

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NEET 2024 paper leak has brought the focus back on the demand to scrap a nationwide single entrance test. But when looking for possible solutions to the current mess, it is important to understand the circumstances under which NEET came into being and how it has fared on its basic mandates:

- To put an end to multiple entrance tests across India
 - To bring in merit-based admission
 - To tackle capitation fees.
- Before NEET, there were dozens of entrance exams all over the country. Students had to appear for at least five to six exams and worry about clash of exam dates and travel to distant places for counselling for seat allotment. Every year, numerous cases were filed in high courts and Supreme Court related to these issues.

Along with this, there were reports of frequent scams, especially in the entrance exams conducted by private medical colleges or their associations in each state. In Madhya Pradesh, even the state govt-conducted entrance exam for govt medical colleges was compromised. Crores being paid for admission into medical colleges were mostly unaccounted money, euphemistically called donation or capitation fee. There was a rising demand to put an end to all such practices and to ensure admission based on 'merit'.

With a final push from SC and dismissing objections from states, NEET was born. While NEET has made it possible to replace a plethora of exams with a single exam, it has failed to ensure 'merit'. There is no requirement to pass in each of the subjects students are tested on – physics, chemistry and biology. High scorers have to forego seats in expensive private colleges, which then accommodate poor scorers who have deep pockets. Thus, money continues to decide who gets admission to almost half the medical seats in the country. Moreover, instead of scams at state level in a few states, we have scams and leaks that affect students across the whole country.

Case for state-run admission policy | Despite govt-owned medical colleges remaining relatively free of scams in the pre-NEET era, courts repeatedly insisted

on judging govt and private colleges the same in the name of fairness. But with 85% of seats in most govt medical colleges being open only to students from the respective states, there was actually no reason why states should not have continued to use Class XII marks of students for admission – as most of them would be from the state educational board.

This would have given states greater flexibility in designing admission policies that suited their needs – as Tamil Nadu did in reserving seats for students from govt schools, thus improving the odds of underprivileged students getting a chance to become doctors. It would also have helped save poorer students from having to spend on coaching for entrance exams, as they could opt out of trying to crack the all-India quota and only concentrate on scoring well in school to get into a college within their state.



Uday Deb

For many states, it might make a lot of sense to revert to Class XII board exam results as the basis for admission into state govt medical colleges. Meanwhile, states whose school systems are too uneven in quality, could conduct entrance exams for seats in state medical colleges.

Either way, since it has become clear that a centrally administered exam is as vulnerable as a state-level

exam, exam systems need to be strengthened in general. Govt should reduce outsourcing of sensitive functions like setting and printing of question papers, invigilation and correction. This will help ensure that responsibility is easily traced and fixed. It should also treat whistleblowers as people aiding govt in keeping the system honest, instead of proceeding against them as enemies of state.

Fix admission to private medical colleges | Private colleges, whether deemed universities or otherwise, can hardly be left to conduct their own admission tests. They have strong incentives to game the system and state govts have proved totally ineffective in regulating them. Moreover, since their intake is from all over India, there is every reason to club them with the all-India quota and subject them to a centralised entrance test.

In many states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu, 50% of seats in private medical colleges are for state govts to fill. Those seats can be filled the same way the state govt fills seats in its own medical colleges. Thus, the case for an all-India exam for about 40%-50% (15% all-India quota + management/NRI quota in private colleges) of MBBS seats remains strong.

There is an urgent need to undo the centralisation of everything, especially in health and education, which are the domain of states. Medical education involves both health and education, but it is a concurrent subject as doctors in any state are allowed to practise anywhere in the country once they clear the final MBBS exam. However, medical education must allow for more local input, with states being allowed to tailor admission policies according to their needs.

If there are underserved areas/communities within a state, the state govt might want to take in more students from those areas/communities. If NMC can make peace with admitting students who score zero in a subject or have ranks below 10 lakh but can pay crores in the name of 'merit'-based admission, it can surely allow states to give preference to students from rural areas or to govt doctors who have done rural service.

The White & Wrong Of UK's Rishism

No British politician of a party seen to be losing has got it like Sunak. But this racism has worked subtly, through dog whistle or sneer. Britain may have moved forward on race question but it still matters

Rashmee Roshan Lall



Columnist based in London

As of now, all the funeral head-shaking is about Sunak leading "Torysaurs" – the shrunken dinosaur that is Conservative Party – through a political Jurassic Park, which is readying for an "extinction-level" event.

It keeps coming | Alternately cast by tabloid pundits as "gaffe machine" or "sleeping agent" of the main opposition Labour, Sunak is subject to daily verbal pummeling for failing to arrest the political decline of a party weary from 14 years in govt. To outward seeming, it's politics as usual and Sunak is just the unlucky captain of a vessel that started to go down long before he took command 21 months ago.

In actual fact, Sunak's predicament seems unlike that of any other politician of a major British party said to be headed for a major election defeat. Oddly for a British born-and-bred man, he is deemed an outsider and a rootless cosmopolitan, and is almost always predicted to be unlikely to stay on in Britain or its politics should his party lose. Faced with race-baiting commentary, he is either unable or unwilling to call it out because he is supposed to be the face of a rainbow nation with British characteristics.

He is not one of us | A case in point is the fallout from Sunak's ill-advised early exit from an inter-

national commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Normandy landings, one of the turning points of 20th century history and World War II. When Britain learnt that Sunak had skipped a June 6 event in France attended by Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz, in favour of a TV interview back home, it was as if he had been found butchering babies. The commentariat as well as radio and TV talk shows erupted in fury.

But it was left to Nigel Farage, champion of Donald Trump, Brexit firebrand and newly installed leader of the right-wing Eurosceptic Reform UK party, to say the unsayable. That Sunak "has no sense of our history, or feeling genuinely for the culture", that he wasn't "patriotic" and that his "instinct" is not the same as the British people's because he's "utterly disconnected in every way".

Other than some half-hearted protests about dog whistles from a few politicians, Farage's commentary on Sunak's moment of shame was allowed to stand.

The racist overtones in that judgment seemed to be on a par with an earlier incident revolving around roots and reflexive instincts, when a quite different English politician delivered a damning verdict on another non-White politician, though from across the Atlantic. Back in 2016, Boris Johnson wrote a newspaper column saying Barack Obama's removal of a bust of Churchill from the Oval Office was driven by the US president's "part-Kenyan" ancestry. He added that this act was seen by some as a sign of an "ancestral dislike of the British

Empire". Though, like Farage, Johnson wasn't UK prime minister at the time, he was hardly a political nobody. As for Obama, like Sunak, he too seemed to symbolise a new post-racial politics. Except that it isn't.

There and not there | Britain has moved quite some way towards an inclusive politics from the charged immigration debates of the late 1960s and the infamous "rivers of blood" speech of Enoch Powell, but Sunak's rise to Downing Street was no post-racial moment. There is euphemistic racism, just as attended Sunak's election to parliament nine years ago from an ultra-safe Conservative seat in Yorkshire. At the time, his prospective constituents offered comments that went heavy on the curry theme: "Just tell him ya' don't like curry". "That MP he'll be doing curry night every night". What they were saying, of course, had nothing to do with food but perception of belonging.

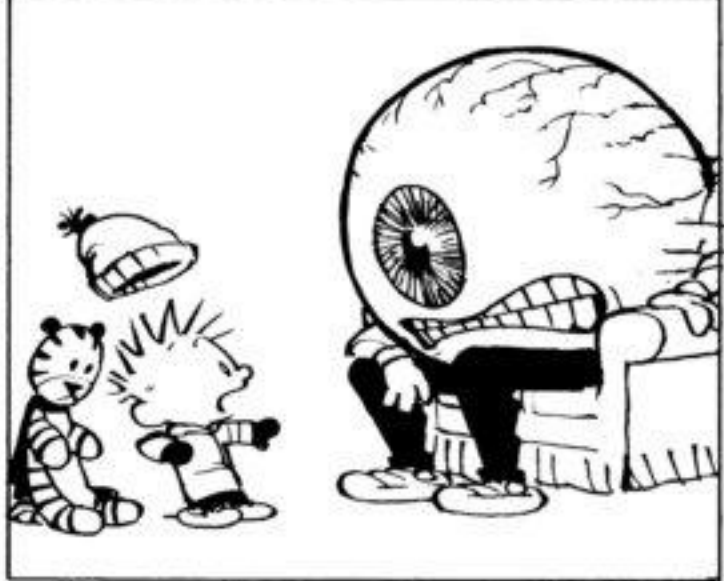
Sunak hasn't helped matters | Interestingly, in his scant decade in frontline British politics, Sunak himself has contributed nothing meaningful to the debate about racism other than to declare it "unacceptable". Before the election was called, he acknowledged the racism he experienced as a child, his mother's determination that he and his siblings "didn't speak with accents (but) properly", his parents' determination their Indian heritage not be "a barrier...in any way, shape or form" and that their children should "fit in".

That, he has done, in quintessentially understated British fashion. And he was fortunate to find political prominence at a time when British politics either ignored or minimised race, thereby relegating it to a hidden transcript.

Like Schrödinger's cat, the nearly century-old thought experiment in which the hypothetical feline in its sealed box could be considered simultaneously alive and dead, Sunak's situation may suggest that racist and post-racist realities both flourish at the same time.

Lall writes on international affairs

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Life is life – whether in a cat, or dog or man. There is no difference there between a cat or a man. The idea of difference is a human conception for man's own advantage.

Sri Aurobindo

Navigating Uncertain Times With Ontological Leadership

Yogi Balkrishna

Amid today's tumultuous and rapidly changing world, the idea and spirit of leadership need a profound transformation. Conventional leadership models, once effective, are now proving inadequate in the face of complexity and uncertainty. In this era of chaos and disruption, a compelling need emerges for a new leadership paradigm: ontological leadership, rooted in timeless Indic wisdom, offering a path towards deeper understanding and harmony that resonates with today's challenges.

It transcends prosaic managerial techniques or strategic frameworks. Ontological leadership delves into the essence of Being and consciousness, drawing inspiration from profound insights in the Indic philosophies of Yog and Vedanta. At its core, ontological leadership is about leading with the

light of unbound inner wisdom emanating from unattached, unswayed and all-inclusive consciousness, including virtues such as integrity, authenticity, creativity, courage, and compassion.

Yog, as expounded in the Yog Sutras of Maharshi Patanjali, offers a holistic framework for Self-realisation and transformation. The union of Vashti, individual consciousness, with Yamashita, universal consciousness, is central to the yogic vision. In the context of leadership, this union implies a deep recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the entire ecosystem – be it an organisation, community, nation, or planet. Vedanta deepens this idea further, revealing the essential oneness of all beings. From the leadership standpoint, ontological leadership recognises the inherent

oneness of all existence and leads from a place of profound interconnectedness and compassion. Its key tenets are:

Self-awareness | The ability to introspect and understand one's strengths and weaknesses and operate from a place of authenticity. Strengthening one's strengths and weakening one's weaknesses, an ontological leader constantly evolves into a finer version of oneself. Drawing from the practice of atma vichar of Vedanta supported by yogic disciplines, leaders need to cultivate a deep understanding of themselves, enabling them to lead with clarity and purpose.

Presence | A state of being fully engaged in the present moment, free from distractions, preconceptions and preoccupations. Being mindful, leaders develop the capacity to remain grounded amidst chaos.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Compassion | Driven by the principle of ahimsa, practising empathy and compassion in all interactions, ontological leaders don't just recognise the inherent dignity and worth of every individual; they actively seek to create an environment, culture, and institutions that nurture growth, fostering a sense of connection and empathy among all.

Resilience | Ontological leaders embrace change as a natural part of life. They cultivate resilience and adaptability, recognising that challenges and setbacks are opportunities for growth and learning.

Servant leadership | In accordance with the spirit of Karma Yog, ontological leaders adopt a servant leadership approach, placing the needs of others above their ego-driven desires. Without hankering for power, they empower and inspire those around them, nurturing a culture of trust, accountability, and collective purpose.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Attack on Crimea

US role under scrutiny as hostilities worsen

A Ukrainian attack on Crimea with US-supplied missiles has triggered a sharp response from Russia. Calling the strike ‘absolutely barbaric’, Moscow has blamed it on the US and warned that retaliation would follow. The Russian foreign ministry has claimed that the missiles were programmed by American specialists on the basis of intelligence data from US satellites and a nearby US reconnaissance drone. Four persons, including two children, were killed and over 150 were injured in the attack on the Crimean city of Sevastopol, where locals were enjoying a holiday.

The incident has triggered a fresh escalation of hostilities in the Russia-Ukraine war, which has entered its 29th month. The civilian casualties have put Ukraine and the US on a sticky wicket, even as the Russian President has been accusing Washington of using Kyiv to undermine Moscow’s security and sovereignty. The spectre of a direct confrontation between Russia and the US-led NATO alliance is looming large, a worrisome throwback to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. This is bad news not only for eastern Europe but for the entire world in both geopolitical and economic terms, considering the adverse impact of supply chain disruptions over the past two years. One grave provocation after another will only make the war drag on, with no end in sight.

A way out has to be found to bring both warring sides to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, the recent peace conference on Ukraine, held in Burgenstock, Switzerland, turned to be an exercise in futility. Some of the attendees, including India, did not sign the joint communique. Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis candidly admitted that most of the decisions taken at the conference could not be implemented without Russian participation. As suggested by New Delhi, there is a need for a ‘sincere and practical engagement’ between Moscow and Kyiv for a peaceful resolution to the protracted conflict.

New House meets

How Oppn makes its presence felt is the key

THE BJP’s numbers in the Lok Sabha may have come down, but a buoyant Opposition’s expectations of any new rules of engagement have got an early reality check. The appointment of seven-time MP Bhartruhari Mahtab as the pro tem Speaker, overlooking the seniority of eight-time member K Suresh of the Congress, has already generated a tiff. In his remarks ahead of the start of the first Parliament session in his third term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveyed no hints of any concession despite the changed dynamics in the Lower House. June 25, he said, would mark five decades of the Emergency and ‘the new generation will not forget how the Constitution was scrapped by the Indira Gandhi government’. As he walked up to take oath as an MP, Opposition leaders held copies of the Constitution. Rahul Gandhi said it was done to show that the attack by PM Modi on the Constitution was not acceptable. The daggers are firmly drawn.

His government, the Prime Minister said, will work three times harder in its third term and deliver three-fold results. To the Opposition, his message was that people wanted substance and not slogans, debate and not drama or disturbance. Given its numerical strength, the INDIA bloc missing out on the opportunity to make its presence felt would be a huge disappointment. An effective and impactful line of questioning demands that the MPs are well prepared and a lot of research has gone into their pointed queries. Substance is the key.

Taking a jibe, the Prime Minister said he hoped the Opposition would live up to the people’s expectations. It’s a fair observation. The eyes of the nation are fixed as much on the Opposition as on the government. It’s a test for both sides.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 25, 1924

Solidarity of Asia

THUS wrote the *Statesman* of Calcutta in a leading article:—“Rabindranath Tagore has lately given expression to a growing sense of solidarity in Asia, and as might be expected, he puts before Asiatics a very lofty ideal, expressing his own firm conviction that Asia’s mission to the West is a humanising and pacific one. If only there were enough Tagores, there is no doubt that the conflict between West and East could be resolved without resort to arms. And if Britain and India can win through to an amicable end of the present difficult phase their common history, and India can develop with British help an industrialism of her own, then, a British Commonwealth of Nations which included an Indian Dominion would be in an effective position to mediate in a struggle which might otherwise rage from the Pacific across the world, drawing all the resources of Europe into a whirlpool of destruction. The more reason, therefore, for Englishmen and Indians on all occasions to think twice before they pander to the forces of hatred.” The poet is by no means the first Indian who has given expression to the “growing sense of solidarity in Asia”. Nor is he by any means the first to put before Asiatics the lofty ideal of being a humanising and pacific force in the world conflicts of the future. Indeed, it is the literal truth to say that a time when the poet himself was supplying the arsenal of nationalism with some of its most powerful weapons, there were men in his own Province who raised their less powerful voice on behalf of this essentially pacific mission of Asia and particularly of India.

Tibet won’t ease Modi’s China challenge

US Congressional visit gave PM an opportunity to be seen sending a signal to Beijing, but Parliament waits



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
SENIOR JOURNALIST

IN March 2018, the Narendra Modi government, then in its first term, shocked the Tibetan community in India with an unusual directive to senior political and official functionaries across all ministries: stay away from events organised by the Tibetan leadership in India to mark 60 years of the Dalai Lama’s exile. Reason: The note, from the then Cabinet Secretary, said it was a “sensitive time” for India-China relations. Two months later, Modi would travel to Wuhan in China for an “informal dialogue” with Chinese President Xi Jinping, thus turning the page on the Doklam crisis.

Six years on, the signalling from Delhi to Beijing on the Tibet issue last week shows how Prime Minister Modi, now in his third term but politically weaker, might be preparing to approach ties with Beijing, in tatters since the Chinese ingress into eastern Ladakh in 2020.

The June 19 meeting at Dharamsala between the Dalai Lama and a bipartisan Congressional delegation from the US was not the first time a high-level US team visited the Tibetan leader at his Himalachal abode. The Special Coordinator for Tibetan Affairs in nearly every US administration since 2000 has made the trip, with Delhi facilitating the visit each time.

But while the earlier visits were low-key and barely noticed, the composition of the latest all-political delegation, including former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and the chairman of the House Committee of Foreign Affairs, Michael McCaul, ensured a high-decibel event.

The timing, within days of PM Modi being sworn in, could not



OUTREACH: The Dalai Lama with former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Dharamsala on June 19, REUTERS

have been a coincidence. In the US, barely a week earlier, on June 12, a bipartisan legislation which aims “to promote a resolution of the China-Tibet conflict” was passed by the House of Representatives, completing its journey through Congress. Ever since the Resolve Tibet Act was introduced in 2022, China has come down heavily on it as a threat to its sovereignty. The legislation, now awaiting presidential assent, was the centrepiece of the delegation’s meeting with the Dalai Lama.

China’s predictable criticism of the US team’s visit carefully avoided any mention of Delhi. Still, Prime Minister Modi’s interaction with them after their return from Dharamsala is being seen as both defiance of and a message to Beijing. From official statements and reports, both sides discussed India-US relations, and if there was any discussion on China, it was not publicly stated. Group photos of the event showed Modi flanked by Pelosi and, from Delhi’s point of view for its relations with the US, the far more powerful and consequential McCaul.

The Ministry of External Affairs’ statement on this event of India’s “clear and consistent” policy that the Dalai Lama is a “revered religious leader” who is

Though Tibet is an issue in India-China relations, Beijing has grudgingly accepted this arrangement.

“accorded due courtesies and freedom to conduct his religious and spiritual activities” was a reiteration of a long-held policy.

Delhi does not describe the Dalai Lama as a political leader of the Tibetan people, always referring to him as His Holiness, nor the Tibetan political set-up as a ‘government-in-exile’, preferring instead the appellation Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), with which it liaises for coordinating routine matters relating to the Tibetan community in India. Though Tibet is an issue in India-China relations, Beijing has grudgingly accepted this arrangement, particularly after India’s 2003 reaffirmation that the Tibet Autonomous Region is a part of China during then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s China visit. So, nothing has actually

changed. Yet something has, and experts will say therein lies the difference between policy and messaging, the latter providing opportunities for flexibility. From 2003, when the Vajpayee visit joint statement declared that India “does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities” on its soil, to facilitating a high-profile US delegation’s visit to Dharamsala that poked Beijing in the eye, Delhi has altered the message this way and that.

From 2009, India stopped reiterating the One China policy in official statements, dropping a reference to Tibet in this context in a joint statement during then Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit in 2010. Delhi’s point then was that Chinese presence and activity in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, stapled visas to Kashmiris and its posturing on Arunachal Pradesh were of equal concern to India. This was also conveyed by Sushma Swaraj in 2014, days after she took charge as the newly elected Modi government’s External Affairs Minister. The Taiwan representative in Delhi and the CTA president were both present at Modi’s first swearing-in.

Within a year, and through the Doklam crisis, Modi 1.0’s focus on improving relations with China would see it disengage from

the Dalai Lama. One year into the LAC crisis, Modi changed tack again. In his first public acknowledgement of the Tibetan leader since 2015, he called the Dalai Lama to wish him on his birthday in 2021, also tweeting about it for good measure. Since then, the two leaders have exchanged birthday greetings every year.

What is different in 2024 is Modi’s new political reality, which is not just an NDA-dependent BJP but also an Opposition out in strength in Parliament. Over the past four years, the government had brushed aside Congress demands for a white paper and a discussion on the situation at the LAC in eastern Ladakh. Ducking out is not an option anymore. Whether or not India was strong-armed into the US Congressional visit, it gave Modi an early opportunity to be seen sending a signal to China, days after Beijing rapped him on the knuckles with a reminder about One China after he accepted the Taiwan President’s felicitations. Beijing took its time sending its message of congratulations, and that too not from President Xi, but from Premier Li Qiang, a grade below. But is there a plan beyond the signalling?

China specialist Jabin Thomas Jacob, who teaches at Shiv Nadar University, is of the view that as India has borne far too long the cost from China of hosting the Dalai Lama without seeing benefits, the time has come for the government to ask what its policy on Tibet is exactly, including its position on the Dalai Lama’s succession. This is particularly because the continuing tensions on the LAC and the unresolved boundary dispute have everything to do with Tibet.

So far, Modi has found it difficult to even meet the Dalai Lama. The last time they met publicly was before he became PM. The government kept a 2015 meeting between the two leaders under wraps, refusing to acknowledge it publicly. It left the Tibetan leadership angry and bitter: China is Modi 3.0’s biggest foreign policy challenge. The Tibet card will not make it easier.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In saving Tibet, you save the possibility that we are all brothers, sisters. —Richard Gere

A bird’s plea to humankind

PADAM PARKASH BHOJWAD

I was sipping coffee when a persistent tapping caught my attention. Opening the door, I found no one. Following the sound, I spotted a colourful bird at my window, etching intricate patterns with its beak. I asked, ‘What’s troubling you, little friend?’ The bird replied, ‘Is there a tree for rent where I can build a nest? I can survive anywhere alone, but my chicks need a home.’

The bird added, ‘Your species has obliterated forests and converted orchards into townships, leaving us without shelter. Homeless and hungry, we scrape by on the meagre offerings people leave on rooftops, yet they forget that we need more than just food — we need an abode too.’

‘Hunger drives us to desperation,’ it lamented. ‘The constant fear of starvation looms large as landscapes are devoid of neem, siris, peepal, banyan and mango trees, which provided us stout branches to build our nests. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, I consider ending my life.’

I was struck by the gravity of our actions. We have decimated the habitats of these creatures. With a heavy heart, I apologised on behalf of humanity: ‘Please abandon such thoughts. For now, build your one-room home on this potted bonsai of peepal in my balcony. It’s not ideal, but it’s a temporary refuge.’ The bird hesitated, ‘How will I pay the rent?’ I smiled and said, ‘Your melodious chirping three times a day is all I ask for.’

The bird responded, ‘You have helped me, but what about my kin? They need homes too.’ I reassured the little one, ‘People are awakening to the consequences of their actions. The Covid pandemic has been a harsh teacher. Many are planting banyan, peepal, neem and fig trees. Hope is sprouting again.’ With renewed spirits, the bird flew off to gather material for its nest.

As we march towards what some call ‘progress’, the earth beneath us is crying for mercy. Our relentless greed has paved over paradise, transforming verdant forests into barren wastelands. The tropical forests, once a lush haven for countless species, are being ravaged by deforestation, resulting in the loss of biodiversity at an alarming rate. Carbon emissions, rising sea levels and dwindling biodiversity are sounding the death knell for our shared home.

We humans must heed the warnings in the rustle of leaves and the song of the wind. Scientific studies show that reforestation and afforestation can significantly mitigate climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, while also providing habitats for wildlife.

This Van Mahotsav, let’s pledge to plant trees and take care of them. Let’s replace the cacophony of construction with the symphony of nature. Plant a tree today, and let it be the seed of a brighter, more sustainable tomorrow. Together, we can ensure that our feathered friends and other creatures have a home in the canopy. Will you plant a tree — for yourself or for others? In a public space, your backyard or perhaps in someone’s heart?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Clean up the NEET mess

The NEET exam, designed to streamline medical admissions, has hit yet another hurdle. The raging controversy surrounding its conduct highlights systemic flaws that demand immediate rectification. From a retest of NEET-UG to the postponement of NEET-PG, students have been left in limbo. This turmoil, which jeopardises their academic aspirations, underscores the urgent need to overhaul the whole process. NEET is meant to ensure a fair and merit-based selection into medical colleges across India. However, recurring issues like last-minute changes in exam centres and technical glitches erode public confidence in the system. Students, already under immense pressure, endure unnecessary stress because of such avoidable disruptions. To restore credibility, a comprehensive review of NEET’s logistics and technology infrastructure is imperative. Transparent communication, an early announcement of exam dates and a robust backup plan for unforeseen circumstances are non-negotiable steps towards a smoother process. Moreover, taking feedback from students and other stakeholders can provide invaluable insights to improve the process.

DEVANJANA, BY MAIL

Transparency is the key

The upheaval surrounding the NEET-UG and NEET-PG examinations has exposed deep-rooted flaws in our testing system. The last-minute cancellations, insensitive decisions and the mental trauma that students have suffered from demand immediate attention. While the Centre’s response is commendable, it must go beyond mere cosmetic changes. A comprehensive overhaul is essential. Recommendations should prioritise integrity, leaving no room for error. Transparency is the key; the NTA mess affects not just candidates but the entire student community. With 24 lakh students vying for a mere one lakh seats, aspirations remain unmet. Education and unemployment are intertwined challenges. It is time for politicians to rise above rhetoric and collaborate to find real solutions.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

India-Bangladesh ties enduring

Refer to the editorial ‘Delhi-Dhaka rapport’: despite the anti-India sentiment prevalent during the military rule in the mid-1970s,

Bangladesh holds India in high esteem because of the vital role played by it during the 1971 Liberation War, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared Bangladesh’s independence. While some issues like river water management are yet to be sorted out, the shared vision for the future articulated by Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina and PM Narendra Modi has raised hopes for realising the full potential of the bilateral relationship. The Modi-Hasina bonhomie has the potential to further cement India-Bangladesh relations, navigate various challenges and leverage their shared vision for mutual prosperity. However, Hasina’s friendliness with India will be put to the test next month, when she is expected to visit China.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

The Tibet factor in India-China ties

Refer to ‘Why Delhi is shaken and stirred’ (*The Great Game*): the Dalai Lama factor cannot be overlooked when it comes to the shaky India-China relations. A revered leader, the Dalai Lama has enjoyed full freedom to organise spiritual events in Dharamsala. However, there must be some restrictions on political activities. The Tibetan government-in-exile has been operating with the support of India, much to China’s chagrin. Incursions over the LAC and Arunachal Pradesh are mere pinpricks. The real bone of contention is Tibet. India must address this issue amicably, keeping in mind its ties with China.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Down with farmers’ protests

Refer to ‘Shambhu locals, shopkeepers protest blocking of highway by farmer unions’: it is the common man that has borne the brunt of the agitations held by growers in recent years. So, it is natural for people to express their opposition to the stir. Farmer unions must be mindful of the grave inconvenience that they have been causing to the public and find alternative ways to express their dissatisfaction with the government over their pending demands. If tillers continue to disrupt the everyday lives of the masses, they will soon lose public support.

VITULL K GUPTA, BY MAIL

Punjab needs a vision for all-round development



GURBACHAN JAGAT
FORMER GOVERNOR, MANIPUR

THE other day, I went to a bookstore to see if there were fresh arrivals. I picked up a few books and was about to leave when a young lady said she wished to have a word with me. I knew her and her family in Delhi very well. She was quite agitated and straightaway asked me what the election of Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa to the Lok Sabha signified for the future of Punjab. I tried to allay her fears, but did not succeed fully. The confrontation in the placid confines of the bookshop shook me up and I tried to push back the thought process just initiated. I came home and received a call from an older cousin, who had retired from the Army at a senior position and was now settled in Punjab. He enquired what was happening in Punjab. I again tried to smooth-talk him out of his anxiety and suggested that he and his wife go for a short holiday. In the course of the next few days, I received a number of calls from relatives, friends and acquaintances from Punjab, asking the same question, half-seri-

ously, half in jest. There were ripples of anxiety below the surface in Punjab which had seen a tsunami of violence for a decade. Was the past going to become the present and future?

That saga of violence had taken years to build and I for one had seen it unfold from the beginning to the end. It had taken years to grow into the spectre it finally became, and contrary to popular perception, the dramatis personae in that evil drama were well-known. The political and social forces moving the pieces on the chessboard were well-known, but like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, we could foresee the future but not intervene, and the tragedy would wind its way to its gory end. That was not too long ago and people have a short memory... are we on course for a 'Second Coming'? I would not like to say so, but then why is the government quiet? Why are political parties quiet? Why is the media quiet and why is civil society quiet? Where did these two men come from and how did they get to be elected members of Parliament? It is high time to ask these questions and it is high time for the government and political parties to give answers. Political parties today seem to have only one goal — to fight and win elections to Parliament, Assemblies, municipal corporations and panchayats. They only wish to have power at all levels, with no accountability. The government should by now know that people are



SHIFT: Mainstream parties are losing their votes to the likes of Amritpal Singh. FILE PHOTO

worried; they should go into the root cause of what has happened to Punjab to explain these election results and even the slap in the face of Kangana Ranaut.

Governments have come and gone in the past over two decades, but not one of them has gone into the causes of what happened in the 1980s and 1990s, and no lessons have been drawn. No government has come up with a comprehensive plan for the education of the youth, their employment, development of infrastructure and industry. This is not to say that no development has taken place in Punjab. The Green Revolution and its aftermath produced the glory days of Punjab and made India self-sufficient in food grains. An IIT, an IIM, premier medical institutes and road infrastructure have come up, but it's a

With the extreme right blowing on the old embers, the security and peace of Punjab and India will be threatened.

case of too little with much of the hinterland remaining trapped in an outdated agricultural economy and diminishing landholdings, leading to a severe cycle of debt and farmers' suicide. Other sources of employment, such as the armed forces, have shrunk, leading to mass migration to foreign countries. This has led to simmering resentment among the young and the old which can be exploited by extremist elements. The tendency of politicians to offer false promises, freebies and falsified data is counterproductive — whom are you trying to fool? Drug proliferation is the order of the day throughout the country, and the countrywide response has been to carry out raids and catch the small fry. No major drug lord has been arrested nor any financier.

Mainstream political parties

continue to cede space to the extreme right. In the recent Lok Sabha elections, the vote share of the SAD (Shiromani Akali Dal) was 13.4 per cent. The BJP did not fare much better with an 18.5 per cent vote share. The SAD has dropped even below the 18.3 per cent it got in the 2022 Assembly elections. I mention the SAD as it was the party that launched the Punjabi Suba Morcha and is the second oldest political party in India after the Congress. The late Parkash Singh Badal was a five-time CM, a towering personality who was jailed multiple times for his stand on political issues ranging from the Emergency to the SYL canal. However, during the militancy-dominated era of the 1980s and 1990s, he and his party, along with other mainstream parties, chose to remain mute spectators, thereby leaving the field open for the extremists. Furthermore, under pressure from the dik-tat given by the militants, his party had boycotted the state elections in 1992.

The state Congress and its leadership were absent from the biggest farm protests in recent memory, launched by Punjabi farmers against the policies being framed in Delhi. Through its absence during this agitation in an agrarian state like Punjab, the party committed hara-kiri. This was later validated in the resounding defeat of the Congress in the Assembly elections (subsequently, most of the state leaders migrated to the BJP). Punjabis rejected the established political parties and families

and gave a chance to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The AAP has obviously not made an impact, as can be seen in the paltry number of seats (three out of 13) won in the Lok Sabha elections and the drop in its vote share from 42 per cent (2022 polls) to 26 per cent. The point is that the mainstream parties are losing their votes to the likes of Amritpal, thereby making the political debate shrill and extreme. It's harking back to the time when the mainstream parties had to boycott the elections and adhere to extremist diktats. This does not bode well for the state and its people.

With the extreme right blowing on the old embers, the security and peace of Punjab and India will be threatened. Conspiracy theories will abound and the peace which has taken decades to establish will flounder, unless the rot is checked. The 'rot' stems from the fact that the real issues — unemployment, education, health, security — are avoided. Punjab has long lost its lead position on the development index and now languishes in the bottom half of Indian states on almost all parameters of growth and development. Politicians can play with fire, but at what cost? It is time that the mainstream ups its game and regains lost ground by mobilising people. You can mobilise people if you have a vision for the state as a whole, a vision that encompasses planned development on all fronts for all its citizens.

The author is a member of the Tribune Trust

Standardised tests and the pathology of the education industry



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

ENOUGH has already been said and written about the scams related to standardised tests like NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test) and NET (National Eligibility Test) that shape the life trajectory of the young. The anguish of students and their parents and the political protest against the functioning of the National Testing Agency (NTA) indicate the way these tests have occupied central space in the educational landscape of the country. Yet, amid the uproar, what seems to be missing is the courage to question the very rationale of such tests and reflect on the damage that the simultaneous growth of the coaching industry has caused to the mental/aesthetic/cultural development of the young mind. Never forget that this gigantic money-making enterprise continues to tempt the anxiety-ridden parents through its promise of transforming their children into one-dimensional

'exam warriors' gifted with the appropriate 'strategy' needed for 'cracking' these tests and eventually achieving what this neurotically competitive society regards as 'success' — a doctor/engineer with a lucrative 'package'.

It is high time we accepted the fact that the multiple-choice question (MCQ)-centric standardised tests cannot evaluate a student's academic depth, critical thinking and creative imagination. Any sensible academic who has engaged with teaching and research would agree that there need not necessarily be any correlation between one's academic interest and one's ability to identify the 'correct answer' from a set of four/five options and tick it quickly on the OMR sheet. While academic knowledge or creatively nuanced critical thinking requires the time to reflect and go deeper into an issue or entertain ambiguities and pose new questions, MCQ-centric standardised tests demand rote learning or internalisation of some sort of strategy to instantly identify the 'correct answer' without much thought. In fact, it needs endless drilling or a highly mechanised routine of solving an endless series of MCQs through all sorts of mock tests. While academic knowledge or creative thinking demands the company of



UPROAR: The students' anguish and the political protest against the functioning of the NTA indicate that premier tests have occupied central space in India's educational landscape. PTI

great teachers and pedagogues, standardised tests require coaching strategists. Think of, for instance, an exam like NEET. Can it really evaluate whether a young aspirant has the aptitude or inclination to pursue a career in medical sciences and become a doctor? Possibly, a doctor needs the following faculties: the intense power of observation, the delicate art of relating to the patient — not just his/her bodily symptoms, but psychic and existential states of being — and above all, the patience to explore new frontiers of knowledge in medical sciences. But then, a standardised test like NEET — a set of 180 questions in physics,

Alternatives to exams like NEET and NET can evolve only if we are honest and bold enough to realise that what prevails is wrong, academically as well as ethically.

chemistry and biology to be answered in 200 minutes — has nothing to do with the qualities that a potential doctor needs. In a way, it is like a lottery — a device to eliminate lakhs of young aspirants instantly rather than a serious attempt to choose those who are really inclined to the call of the medical vocation.

Likewise, an exam like NET is utterly shallow and by no means capable of evaluating one's research interests in foundational knowledge systems like natural sciences and humanities or teaching abilities/pedagogic visions. To take a simple illustration, if because of the very nature of MCQs, you are required to

memorise a specific definition, the date of a particular historical event, or, for that matter, the year of publication of sociologist Max Weber's book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it does by no means indicate that you have engaged with serious social science texts, understood the nuanced philosophic debates or acquired the ability to bring new research findings in your teaching practices. The irony is that a 'machine' like the NTA has no creative surplus; it can only manufacture all sorts of 'fact-centric/objective questions' with one and only one 'correct answer' in order to device the quick process of elimination.

Moreover, with the normalisation and sanctification of such standardised tests, we are creating a restless, anxiety-ridden and unhappy generation. For them, there is no joy in learning and no creative experimentation. Instead, as a significant part of their formative years is spent in shopping around coaching centres and learning the war strategy for cracking these tests, everything loses its academic/philosophic depth. Physics is what the Kota factory regards as 'worth learning'; or, for that matter, history is what the fancy IAS coaching centre regards as

valuable. It is doubtful whether this sort of orientation to education can really produce good doctors, brilliant engineers or great teachers/researchers. Yes, these tests manufacture tales of failure. But then, the 'success stories' are by no means promising. In a way, corruption and malpractices are deeply ingrained in the coaching industry, which is worth Rs 1 lakh crore.

Quite often, a question is asked: Is there any alternative, particularly when lakhs of students want to become doctors/engineers/IAS officers/university teachers? Or, is there any other way of eliminating people? Alternatives to exams like NEET and NET can evolve only if we are honest and bold enough to realise that what prevails is wrong, academically as well as ethically. Only then can we acquire the courage to question the idea of 'one nation, one exam' and think of a largely decentralised process of selection or giving relative autonomy to colleges/universities/academic institutions to evolve their own ways of designing thoughtful/imaginative/research-oriented exams or entrance tests. And this alone can make coaching centres irrelevant and bring some sanity to the culture of learning.

Are the techno-managers of the NTA capable of understanding this basic truth?

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ACROSS

1 Certificate of qualification (7)

4 Striking outfit (3-2)

7 Shallow river crossing (4)

8 Extraordinary (8)

10 A diversionary tactic (3,7)

12 Firearm (6)

13 Easily influenced (6)

15 Disreputable member of group (5,5)

18 Obsolete (8)

19 Area for skating (4)

20 Without (5)

21 Smash to pieces (7)

DOWN

1 Postpone (5)

2 State of bliss (8)

3 Reddish-brown hair colour (6)

4 Unfounded (10)

5 Large heavy book (4)

6 Withdraw from undertaking (4,3)

9 US city famed for jazz (3,7)

11 Superficial renovation (8)

12 Carry out (7)

14 Admittance (6)

16 Card game for gamblers (5)

17 Knock senseless (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Blue-blooded, 9 Ill-used, 10 Coach, 11 Kick, 12 Despot, 14 Exceed, 16 Pencil, 18 Panorama, 19 Spat, 22 Noose, 23 Ascribe, 24 Greenkeeper.

Down: 2 Lilac, 3 Else, 4 Ledger, 5 Occupied, 6 Elastic, 7 Tickled pink, 8 Chocolatier, 13 Retrieve, 15 Candour, 17 Embark, 20 Poise, 21 Acme.

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MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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CALENDAR

JUNE 25, 2024, TUESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Aashadh Shaka 4

■ Aashadh Parvishle 12

■ Hijari 1445

■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 11.12 pm

■ Vaidhriti Yoga up to 9.06 am

■ Shravan Nakshatra up to 2.33 pm

■ Moon enters Aquarius sign 1.49 am

■ Panchak start 1.49 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:28 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:23 HRS

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	41	32
New Delhi	40	31
Amritsar	43	30
Bathinda	44	33
Jalandhar	42	30
Ludhiana	43	31
Bhiwani	42	31
Hisar	42	31
Sirsa	44	34
Dharamsala	33	24
Manali	28	15
Shimla	27	18
Srinagar	31	16
Jammu	43	29
Kargil	28	14
Leh	20	09
Dehradun	35	25
Mussoorie	24	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Hajj tragedy

The tragic loss of pilgrims’ lives demands better preparation from pilgrims and a more effective response from the Saudi Govt

This year marks one of the most tragic incidents for Hajj pilgrims, with 98 Indians confirmed dead. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has verified that these deaths occurred due to an unprecedented heatwave in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. This calamity unfolded amidst one of the most severe heat conditions in recent years, which saw temperatures rising above 45 degrees Celsius, leading to the deaths of over 1,000 pilgrims from various countries. High temperatures combined with intense humidity resulted in a multitude of heat-related illnesses among pilgrims, particularly affecting the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions. Medical facilities were overwhelmed with cases of heatstroke and dehydration, leading to a staggering number of fatalities. The victims included significant numbers from Egypt, Indonesia, and Jordan, underscoring the global reach of the tragedy and the dire need for improved safety measures during the pilgrimage. The Hajj pilgrimage annually draws millions of Muslims to Mecca. Despite Saudi Arabia's extensive efforts to safeguard pilgrims, there have been many tragic incidents. Health issues have also been a major factor in pilgrim fatalities, with heat-related illnesses being particularly common. The extreme heat and physical exertion can cause dehydration, heatstroke, and other complications. In 2018, dozens of pilgrims succumbed to heat exhaustion due to the severe temperatures typical of Saudi Arabia during the summer.



The devastating impact of this heatwave can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the effects of climate change are increasingly evident, with rising global temperatures leading to more frequent and intense heat waves. This has particularly exacerbated the harsh climatic conditions in the Middle East, making such events more severe and life-threatening. Secondly, despite significant investments in infrastructure to accommodate the vast number of pilgrims, the extreme weather overwhelmed the existing facilities, hampering efforts to provide adequate medical care and cooling solutions. Lastly, there was a general lack of preparedness among many pilgrims for the severe heat conditions. Many were not adequately informed or equipped to handle such extreme weather, lacking sufficient hydration and protective measures, which significantly contributed to the high mortality rate. To prevent such tragedies in the future, several measures need to be implemented. Enhanced weather monitoring and real-time heat alerts could significantly improve preparedness among both pilgrims and authorities. By introducing a robust system for heatwave warnings and disseminating crucial information about necessary precautions, future risks can be mitigated. Additionally, improving the infrastructure to provide more shaded areas, cooling centres, and hydration stations along the pilgrimage routes is essential to prevent heat-related health issues.

temperatures leading to more frequent and intense heat waves. This has particularly exacerbated the harsh climatic conditions in the Middle East, making such events more severe and life-threatening. Secondly, despite significant investments in infrastructure to accommodate the vast number of pilgrims, the extreme weather overwhelmed the existing facilities, hampering efforts to provide adequate medical care and cooling solutions. Lastly, there was a general lack of preparedness among many pilgrims for the severe heat conditions. Many were not adequately informed or equipped to handle such extreme weather, lacking sufficient hydration and protective measures, which significantly contributed to the high mortality rate. To prevent such tragedies in the future, several measures need to be implemented. Enhanced weather monitoring and real-time heat alerts could significantly improve preparedness among both pilgrims and authorities. By introducing a robust system for heatwave warnings and disseminating crucial information about necessary precautions, future risks can be mitigated. Additionally, improving the infrastructure to provide more shaded areas, cooling centres, and hydration stations along the pilgrimage routes is essential to prevent heat-related health issues.

PICTALK



Members of the Tibetan community and others during the arrival of Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, in New York

Development amid tolerance for corruption

Despite global scrutiny, the systemic corruption persists, raising questions about the future of India’s democracy and its socio-political landscape

A few days ago, an old American acquaintance happened to be passing through Delhi en route to Calcutta. He was all praise for the noticeable progress India has made in the last ten years, which was admirable by any standards, he admitted. But he was non-plussed at how the same Indians tolerate so much corruption, so widely advertised and widespread. He had learnt that some chief ministers were currently in jail. What amazes people in the US, he told me, is how good Indian folks are willing to tolerate this scale of misconduct that draws much negative publicity the world over.

Some years ago, Japan had a prime minister who had to go to jail. But the Japanese were highly embarrassed and there has been no repetition of it, as far as we know. What my American acquaintance was laying stress upon is that there appears to be no shame or embarrassment due to the continual coverage of this phenomenon.

It isn't as if there is no corruption elsewhere in the world. Former US President and again the challenger for the Presidency in 2024, Donald Trump has been convicted of felony by a New York court. This is a crime more serious than misdemeanour. A couple of days ago, Hunter Biden, son of the incumbent President Joe Biden has been found guilty of concealing facts about his use of drugs. India's record in not only tolerating, but also rewarding tainted chief ministers and politicians is highly 'illustrious'. Lalu Prasad Yadav, former chief minister of Bihar, was convicted and jailed for defalcation of Rs.600 crores from the state budget meant for cattle fodder, in a country whose people worship the cow. The late Jayalalitha, former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, once a shining star of the silver screen, too had to go to jail owing to corruption. Lately, chief ministers like Shibu Soren of Jharkhand and Arvind Kejriwal of Delhi are behind bars for their involvement in corruption scams running into thousands of crores of rupees. Did they need the money for their survival, running



their regimes or for fighting elections? Certainly not. They were obviously driven by greed. What is amazing is all these individuals are so blasé as they have done nothing wrong at all. I have, over the years, had the opportunity to meet punished thieves and criminals. Some protested to me that they had been 'over-punished', but did not in the least look embarrassed, nor said they wished they hadn't done what they did. Such people also boldly contest elections again and again, campaign enthusiastically, and often win with thumping majority. The message is that they voters did not disapprove in the least. What do sociologists have to say about this phenomenon? Most voters are people who are likely to be honest, or at least expect honesty from others in their own lives, but happily tolerate their leaders pocketing public money on a large scale. Doesn't it occur to them that some of that money is their own hard-earned wealth? The late Indira Gandhi had justified corruption by declaring it to be a "global phenomenon" and asking, "Which country is free of corruption?" Many a politician of her time



FOR THE LAST TEN YEARS, INDIA HAS BEEN FORTUNATE TO BE RULED BY A PRIME MINISTER WHO HAS BEEN UNRELENTING AND UNCOMPROMISING IN HIS CRUSADE AGAINST CORRUPTION, MOST ARTICULATED BY HIS OWN MAXIM, 'NA KHAOONGA NA KHANE DOONGA'

took this to be a signal of approval for gorging on public money unhindered. Her elder son, when he was Prime Minister, was involved in a major corruption scandal over the purchase of Bofors artillery gun. Dr. Manmohan's Singh's regime was littered with mega scams of corruption throughout its ten years in office. Corruption and endless appeasement of a particular religious minority. If any of his ministers were convicted or had to go to jail, Singh's defence was that they were coalition partners and not of his party. What could he therefore do? That apart, he had no qualms in publicly declaring that Muslims must have first claim on the country's resources and that 15 per cent of resources would be allotted to them by default. While this may not fall in the category of corruption, it does amount to moral turpitude. What does this portend for the future of democracy, especially in India? For the last ten years, India has been fortunate to be ruled by a Prime Minister who has been unrelenting and uncompromising in his crusade against corruption, most articulately defined by his own

maxim, "Na Khaonga Na Khane Doonga" (I won't steal nor allow others to). His measures and steps, beginning from demonetization, exposing and extinguishing fake shell companies, non-existent NGOs, streamlining of the country's tax system through GST, harshness against corrupt politicians and officials including sending them to jail have made him an admired global leader. It is no coincidence that India has become the world's fifth largest economy and is poised to become the third largest; this is directly related to Modi's unrelenting and uncompromising war on corruption. But it is also true that a segment of the people, used to the entrenched, corrupt ways of earlier regimes, making money without effort, and enjoying office or power without any accountability or fear of punishment, and suddenly forced to confront a world they don't like, might have suffered and felt aggrieved. The BJP losing seats in this election is a reflection of that as well. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IN BENGAL

Madam Editor— Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent discussions with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi underscore both nations' commitment to strengthening their bilateral ties. This marks the first state visit by a foreign leader since the new BJP-led NDA government took office. The agreements signed between New Delhi and Dhaka cover a broad range of areas including maritime cooperation, blue economy, railway connectivity, space sector, digital partnerships, healthcare, and defense production. Hasina acknowledged the support of India and the Congress-led government, under former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in Bangladesh's liberation in 1971. Last November, under pressure from both the Bangladeshi opposition and the US, Prime Minister Modi's participation in the virtual inauguration of three infrastructure projects gave a significant boost to Hasina's election campaign.

A key outcome from their recent interaction is India's decision to send a technical team to Bangladesh for a major project to conserve the Teesta River, a project that China has shown interest in. As Hasina prepares for her upcoming visit to China, her rapport with India will be tested. Meanwhile, India, asserting its independent foreign policy, continues to strengthen ties with Dhaka despite US criticisms of the Awami League government's human rights record and electoral conduct.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

PARLIAMENTARY DISRUPTIONS

Madam Editor — Regarding 'LS Session to See Fireworks' (June 24), the opposition is poised to create a tumultuous parliamentary session with a plethora of issues, including the BJP's lack of a majority, the Bengal railway accident, irregularities in the NEET examination, disputes over the Speaker's election, fire accidents, penal laws, inflation, and

Liquor tragedy calls for stern action



The recent Kallakurichi liquor tragedy, which resulted in the deaths of many people, is being used more as a political weapon to seek revenge against the ruling

party than as an impetus to find a lasting solution to the pervasive social evil of illicit liquor trade, facilitated by predatory elements in society. The BJP's vociferous criticism overlooks its own silence during a similar incident in Gujarat in 2022, where 27 people died. It's clear that such illegal activities cannot thrive without the complicity of political figures across party lines and the overt support of officials who have been compromised. Therefore, politicians found involved in such activities should face a 15-year ban from contesting any elections. Officials implicated in supporting these operations should be dismissed from their positions. Compensation for victims should be funded by assets seized from these political leaders and officials, not from public funds.

AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

unemployment. The opposition's increased numbers in the current Lok Sabha will likely lead to significant obstruction of the ruling party's agenda.

The NDA must acknowledge this reality and accommodate the opposition's demands to ensure smooth and effective parliamentary proceedings. If the pattern of frequent disruptions continues, leading to repeated adjournments, it might be more prudent to adjourn the session sine die to conserve public funds and maintain the country's reputation.

O. Prasada Rao | Hyderabad

IMPACT OF TRAIN CANCELLATIONS

Madam Editor— For the past year, numerous key trains have been canceled in the Waltair Railway Division under the East Coast Railway, impacting thousands of regular travelers. The Railway Department has focused on operating Vande Bharat trains, which generate significant revenue, while frequently canceling popular passenger trains on the pretext of ongoing development work

and safety inspections in the Vijayawada division of the South Central Railway. Trains like the Ratnachal, Simhadri, Janmabhoomi Express, Uday Express, and others have been repeatedly canceled. Recently, another Vande Bharat Express was launched on the Secunderabad route and to Bhubaneswar, leading to further cancellations of regular trains.

From June 24th to August 10th, eight pairs of daily trains from Visakhapatnam to Rajahmundry, Vijayawada, Guntur, and Secunderabad have been canceled by the Waltair Division. Under the guise of modernising the railways, the department is increasing the number of high-revenue Vande Bharat trains while reducing the number of passenger trains relied upon by common travelers. The Govt must intervene to ensure that train services for regular passengers are maintained and expanded to meet their needs.

Gonapa Appanna | Visakhapatnam

The impact of competitive exam paper leaks on students

The paper leaks have profound emotional effects on students. To mitigate the ill effects of such incidents, it is crucial for the Govt to act swiftly and transparently

One Nation One Examination is a novel venture initiated to provide equal opportunities to all students nationwide. This eliminates discrepancies in the difficulty and content of regional or state-level exams, providing a level playing field for all students. Such standardization can help in objectively identifying academic strengths and weaknesses, fostering a more meritocratic education system. With a single set of scores, universities and colleges can more easily compare applicants from different regions. This can reduce the complexity and confusion associated with multiple entrance exams, making the process more transparent and straightforward for students and institutions alike. The integrity of competitive exams is fundamental to ensuring a meritocratic education system. When a competitive exam is cancelled due to question paper leakage, it undermines the trust and hard work of students, creating a cascade of irreparable negative impacts. These repercussions are immediate, practical, deeply psycho-



logical, and long-lasting.

At the core of any competitive exam lies the promise of fairness and equal opportunity. When a question paper is leaked, this promise is shattered. Students who have spent months or even years preparing for the exam feel betrayed by the system that was supposed to impartially evaluate their hard work. This breach of trust can lead to a pervasive sense of cynicism and disillusionment among students.

The emotional and psychological impact of such cancellations is profound. Students invest significant emotional energy in preparing for these exams. The cancellation, especially under such scandalous circumstances, can lead to intense feelings of frustration, anger, and helplessness. The resulting anxiety and stress can have severe mental health implications, with students

experiencing symptoms of depression and burnout. The sudden cancellation of these exams can throw students' academic timelines into disarray. Admissions processes get delayed, and students are left in limbo, unsure about the next steps. This is particularly challenging for students at critical transition points, such as those finishing high school or undergraduate studies or people waiting to get college jobs. The uncertainty about rescheduled exams or alternative assessment methods adds another layer of stress.

The financial impact of such cancellations is significant. Students often have to travel long distances to the examination centres. The cancellation of exams can severely dent students' motivation and morale. The idea that unethical behaviour can disrupt and devalue their honest efforts is deeply demoralizing. This can lead to a decline in academic engagement and enthusiasm. Students may question the value of hard work and integrity when such incidents occur, potentially leading to a loss of interest in their studies or future exams.

The tendency to move to foreign countries for education may even increase because of this.

The cancellation of competitive exams due to question paper leakage has far-reaching and profound effects on students. The immediate breach of trust and fairness and emotional, academic, and financial repercussions create a challenging landscape for affected students. Providing mental health support to affected students and offering financial assistance to those incurring additional expenses can help alleviate some of the burdens. Implementing more robust security measures using AI technologies and providing severe punishment to those who are involved in malpractices can bring back the confidence of society in the 'One Nation One Exam' system. By learning from these incidents and making necessary reforms, the education system can emerge stronger and more resilient.

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



BIJU DHARAMAPLAN


FIRST COLUMN

THE POWER OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

These practices provide a pathway to inner strength and a connection with the Divine



We wonder or should if we can experience the effects of spiritual activities, if we do them. There are many such activities. I have chosen ten most prominent ones to detail what they do for us. Additionally, I will try to indicate what they do in totality even if we choose only some of them, depending upon their suitability to us. Our natures are determining factors in both choosing them and our ability to do them over a long period of time. After all, their effect is not gross like eating a sweet and enjoying its taste. All spiritual activities leave subtle effect on us, but can be experienced. The only condition is to be open-minded. A negative or critical attitude will prevent realizing their effects. Beginning with praying, this is most natural to do; even children pray when troubled or are in need of something. Does God respond? He surely does but not necessarily in ways we desire, because we must deserve what we seek. Our effort will not go to waste. The next is remembering; we all do. It is so natural; God is very much part of our lives at least for us Indians – the blessed lot. Why? Because spirituality is never far from us from childhood itself; it is in our blood. Reward will be similar to praying. The third is having ‘darshan’ (seeing) of a Deity in a temple. A good percentage of us have a pooja ghar in our homes, where we can have darshan easily. Rest of us, at least most of us, have calendars with photos of God’s ‘avatars’ (incarnations). The immediate benefit is that we feel good and hopeful. Seeing God is that wonderful. The fourth most common spiritual activity is to chant God’s names or just Ohm. This has such an effect that once started, one will continue repeating names like Rama. We, Indians, almost always do ‘naman’ (namaskar), especially, when we are in front of a Deity. What does it do? The most wonderful thing, which it does is to inculcate humility in us, thus keeping our egos in check. Many of us thank God if something good happens in our lives. What it does is to make us deserving of more good times, and they surely come. Reading scriptures is not that common, but is not that rare also. Hanuman Chalisa is very popular; I started my spiritual journey in this life by memorizing Hanuman Chalisa.



Another popular spiritual activity is hearing (sermons) in temples or other places. They make us wiser. The last one is doing ‘dhyana’ (meditation). Its benefits are widely known and do not require repetition. Now turning to overall benefits of doing spiritual activities. When we do them, we gain the company of God. Aren’t we connecting with Him? Spiritual energy will flow into us. This is very special, because it increases our ‘atmabala’ (inner strength). Additionally, God takes notice of us, just as a principal notices a bright or a talented student. We remain in His watch, if we are sincere in progressing on this path. Lord begins to promote us, as He did in my case. The concept of big picture was taking root. Faith in God began increasing, as did faith in the ‘Karmaphala Principle’. I began to understand what fate was, i.e. accumulated karmaphala over past lives, which had yet to come to fruition. I also realized that God does not interfere in their coming, but can help us to successfully deal with them. Maya’s influence began to lessen, and the ‘dhundha’ (ignorance) was not so overpowering. I became encouraged to seek guidance from God about what I should be doing, rather than whimsically deciding my actions. Dharma began to come naturally to me, as did praying earnestly for help. I knew in my heart that I was very small, helpless, ignorant and unsafe. Only God can help, and He began taking care of me. Not only that, He began using me as His ‘nimitta’ (instrument). I was encouraged to write spiritual texts, about which my Lord began to guide.

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

Beauty-wellness sector is propelling employability

By strategically nurturing this sector, India can leverage its demographic advantage to create a robust workforce ready to excel both domestically and globally



Let us not get too carried away with everything we do. It’s important to regularly reflect on our strategies and thoroughly evaluate the results. An unbiased assessment makes things much simpler for us. In the realm of skill development, taking action, maintaining consistency, and adhering to a routine are crucial. Leveraging the demographic advantage requires serious planning rather than being just a game. It involves building capacity, creating infrastructure, and grooming manpower to impart skills to our young population, making them capable of finding employment both domestically and internationally. The India Skills Report indicates a 52.8% increase in employability for women and 47.2% for men. Women have surpassed men in terms of employability, particularly in areas such as nursing, beauty and wellness, and other soft skills, which have shown the highest employability rates among women in the post-COVID era. The beauty and wellness sector not only holds vast potential for women but also for men in both domestic and global markets. The sector’s unprecedented growth has resulted in a significant demand for semi-skilled and skilled professionals in the country. Currently, the beauty and wellness sector employs approximately 12.3 million people, with 66% of them being women and a considerable portion not only from lower socio-economic backgrounds but a lot of aspirants urging from decent educated families. It is projected that by 2027, the Indian Beauty and Wellness sector will offer employment opportunities to around 20.3 million people. Interestingly, about 44% of the workforce in the beauty and wellness sector possess educational qualifications equivalent to or less than secondary education with limited access to technical training. There are opportunities for greater adoption of vocational education, particularly



THE BEAUTY AND WELLNESS INDUSTRY IN THE COUNTRY IS EXPERIENCING EXPONENTIAL GROWTH, AT A PACE TWICE AS FAST AS THE MARKETS IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

ly in segments such as salon services, beauty, fitness, nutrition, and yoga, which are showing increased acceptance of vocational education. Furthermore, the growing demand for services like nutrition consulting, fitness coaching, and nutraceuticals has resulted in new and diverse career opportunities that can be pursued by young individuals, who require skill enhancement and vocational education in Beauty and Wellness. The Beauty and Wellness industry in the country is experiencing exponential growth, at a pace twice as fast as the markets in the United States and Europe. Heightened consumer awareness and aspirations regarding the industry have led to increased spending on beauty and wellness products and services. According to the Indian Beauty & Hygiene Association (IBHA), per capita spending on beauty and personal care has risen from around Rs 450 per annum in 2017 to Rs 684 in 2022 and Rs 772 in 2025. While the global beauty and wellness sector grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17.60% between 2018 and 2023, the Indian sector experienced an even higher growth rate of 18.40% during the same period, driven by a growing affluent and middle-class population and increased organized retail presence in the country. The sector is expected to reach around Rs 2,77,000 crores by 2025, showcasing a 23% growth from Rs 92,000 crores in 2018. **Promote Female Entrepreneurship:** It is essential to promote female entrepreneurship in India, as the

current level is very low, with hardly one in every five entrepreneurs being female. The beauty and wellness sector presents unmatched opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship for women. Therefore, there is an urgent need to actively foster entrepreneurship and self-employment for females in this sector through specially designed entrepreneurship education, training initiatives, and fiscal support, enabling them to elevate their businesses. To support female entrepreneurs, it is imperative to create a special fund in collaboration with the NSDC, industries, and angel investors for developing innovative start-up activities in the sector. Additionally, the establishment of regional incubation centres is crucial to ignite the entrepreneurial spirit of promising women in the sector. Under this initiative, young female entrepreneurs in the beauty and wellness industry must be equipped with new and improved business management skills to successfully run their enterprises. This focused effort should enable female entrepreneurs to develop concrete business ideas, create a bankable and investable business plan, and formulate a robust business growth strategy. **Traditional Skills to be Equipped with New-age Technologies:** The beauty and wellness sector is experiencing digital disruption as technology-led startups and 5G network access in rural areas become more prevalent. As a result, traditional skills in this sector need to be updated with expertise in new-age technologies

such as app setup, virtual try-on services, and data analytics. In addition, providing better customer engagement offerings will be essential. Furthermore, Artificial intelligence (AI) is also making significant strides in the beauty and wellness industry. AI applications are rapidly changing the sector with innovations like augmented reality. For instance, skin consult AI has been developed to analyze skin ageing, detect major signs of ageing, and provide personalized skincare recommendations. This technology combines thousands of images with dermatological expertise spanning 15-20 years. **Personalized Services:** Personalized services have become increasingly vital due to shifts in customer preferences, lifestyles, body types, and even genetics. The one-size-fits-all approach is outdated, with customers now seeking unique and tailored experiences. The demand for on-demand-at-home services has surged, particularly among busy professionals. This has underscored the necessity for transferable skills among workers in the sector. Furthermore, new ideas and processes are galvanizing young students to pursue technical and technological careers, aiming to shape a better future. *(The writer is a Co-Founder and MD, of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation(NSDC), Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI. Views expressed are personal)*

Empowering India’s electronic vehicle sector

To reach a target of 30 per cent electric vehicle penetration by 2030, radical and coordinated action is needed among all stakeholders

The uptake of electric vehicles (EVs) is still in its infancy in India. According to research from S&P Global Ratings, the EV penetration rate in India in calendar year 2022 was only 1.1 per cent, as compared to the Asian average of 17.3 per cent. Governments play an essential role in supporting the mainstreaming of EV technology in the motor vehicle sector. The competitiveness of newer technologies in comparison to incumbent ones grows over time due to established supply chains, scale economies of production, consumer preference, and improved performance and maturity. However, relying only on market forces to achieve the transition to EVs from an entrenched internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicle market is unrealistic. The



EV ecosystem will require additional support in its nascency, and the government has a significant role to play. The case for accelerating EV adoption is strong – transport emissions in Indian cities are growing rapidly, with road transport contributing about 87% of the total. In combination with the aggressive movement towards renewable power generation, EVs can significantly cut down the share

of transport and pollution emissions at the local and national levels. Further, transportation is the third-largest energy consumer and the largest consumer of oil fuels, responsible for 70% of diesel and 99.6% of petrol consumption. With India importing about 80% of its oil demand, and the price of crude oil being highly vulnerable due to global geopolitics, transport decarbonization reduces the risk to the country’s energy security. Simultaneously, electrification presents India an opportunity to strengthen its role and move upstream in the global automotive value chain. Through a two-pronged strategy of localizing production for domestic EV consumption and developing low-cost solu-

tions in niche areas for outsourcing, the country can capitalize on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity through strategic industrial development of the EV sector. The government of India has backed an extensive program for transport electrification through the implementation of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid & Electric Vehicles (FAME) schemes (I and II), the reduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on EVs to 5 per cent, and an income tax exemption of up to INR 150,000 on interest payments for EV loans. Additionally, the government has announced a new scheme called Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme 2024, with an outlay of Rs 500 crore, pro-

viding subsidies for the adoption and manufacturing of e-2-wheelers and e-3-wheelers. Furthermore, a range of other guidelines and notifications on EV charging standards, delineating of EV charging services, capping of EV tariff for charging infrastructure, model Development Control Regulations (DCR) and building codes for EV charging, and green license plates for EVs further support the ecosystem. However, the early success of e-mobility in India can largely be attributed to a supportive policy landscape at the national and state level. Of the 36 states and Union Territories in the country, 26 have released EV policies over the last 5 years, with 16 of them being released between 2020 and 2022. Here are 7 policy recom-

mendations and subsidies needed in the EV MSME sector: 1. Reduced Taxation & Duties: To make EV manufacturing more competitive it’s important to implement tax breaks or reduced import duties on raw materials, components, and EV-specific parts imported by MSMEs 2-Infrastructure Development Support: Provide subsidies or tax incentives to MSMEs involved in setting up EV charging infrastructure. This could encourage more players to invest in charging stations, particularly in remote or underserved areas. 3. Production-Linked Incentives: For EV MSMEs we should introduce production-linked incentives (PLI). These incentives could be based on

achieving certain production milestones, thereby encouraging scale and efficiency. 4-Promote Research and Development: Encourage MSMEs in the EV sector to engage in research and development by providing grants, subsidies, or tax incentives for innovative projects and technologies aimed at improving EV components, systems, and manufacturing processes. 5-Facilitate Access to Finance: Establish dedicated funds or financial institutions to provide low-interest loans, venture capital, or grants specifically tailored for EV MSMEs to invest in infrastructure, technology adoption, and capacity expansion. 6-Export Promotion: Offer incentives and support programs to enable EV MSMEs to

tap into international markets, including assistance with export promotion, market research, participation in trade fairs, and overcoming trade barriers. 7-Collaborative Initiatives with OEMs: Encourage partnerships and collaborations between EV MSMEs and established Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). Provide incentives for OEMs to source components from MSMEs. Decisive and urgent action will be needed to achieve the target of 30 per cent electric vehicles by 2030 in India. At the end of the day, the formulation and notification of an EV policy is only one piece of a large puzzle. *(The Writer is , CEO, Lohia, views are personal)*