

A fresh start

The GST Council must not lose sight of broader reforms

he Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council was convened last week for the first time in nearly nine months. With 11 new State Ministers on board and a recalibrated NDA government at the Centre, the Council began afresh with a loaded agenda of clarifications, tweaks, forbearances, and other procedural changes, based on industry feedback and vetted by officials, that awaited its nod. Acknowledging that it could not conclude deliberations on all that had accumulated on its plate, the Council has resolved to meet again in August to take up the rest of the items. Yet, it is quite creditable that the Council could, over an afternoon preceded by Union Budget consultations with States, arrive at a consensus on a flurry of issues aimed at easing the lot of taxpayers, reducing litigation, and even providing tax relief on some items. To help students, hostel accommodation costing up to ₹20,000 a month has been exempted from GST altogether, along with railway services availed by passengers. A uniform 12% rate has been approved for packing cartons, milk cans, and solar cookers, doing away with confusing classification differences based on material or technologies.

Apart from several industry-specific measures, a few of which will kick in with retrospective effect, the Council also opted to waive interest and penalty on tax dues for the first three years of GST, provided they are paid by March 2025. Moreover, it lowered the stipulated pre-deposits for filing appeals, including those that will be filed with the upcoming GST Appellate Tribunals, and approved a new form for taxpayers to correct errors or oversights in previous returns. Beyond nitty-gritties, the Council also signed off on ending the anti-profiteering clause that required firms to pass on any tax cut gains to customers, and mandating biometric-based Aadhaar authentication for all GST registrations in a phased manner across India. The former will quell a difficultto-implement industry irritant, and one hopes the latter will effectively ease the registration process that some say has become cumbersome in recent times, while curbing fraud perpetrated through fake invoicing. The ground-level impact of these moves may depend on the fine print that may follow, but the intent to simplify and declutter the seven-year old indirect tax regime is clear. It is refreshing that the Council also plans to take stock of the 2021 plan to rationalise the multiplerate GST structure, that has been in cold storage for a while, when it meets next. The apex GST body must not only revive and expedite GST rate reforms but also incorporate a road map to bring excluded items such as petroleum and electricity into the GST net while rejigging tax rates.

Debt trap

Kenya must find ways to service its debt without punishing its people

he Kenyan President's decision to rush through Parliament an IMF-backed finance Bill that sought to increase taxes on everything from imported sanitary pads and tyres to bread and fuel backfired, with protesters storming a section of the Parliament on Tuesday. After the protests, which rights groups said had left at least 23 people killed and 200 injured, President William Ruto announced that he would not sign the Bill. The Kenyan government could have avoided this bloody confrontation had it paid more attention to the public mood. The government's plan was to raise an extra 200 billion Kenyan shilling (some \$1.55 billion) in taxes. Earlier this year, the country had reached a deal with the IMF to secure \$941 million in additional lending. In subsequent talks in Nairobi, they agreed to reforms, including tax increases, to stabilise the country's debt-battered financial situation. The IMF deal triggered street protests. But the government still went ahead with the plan to impose additional taxes on the country of 54 million people, a third of whom still live in poverty.

The government argues that its hands were tied as the country struggles to repay its huge debt burden - domestic and foreign debt was a staggering \$80 billion last year, accounting for nearly three-fourths of its GDP. The government spent more than half of its revenue servicing debts last year. The crisis is an indictment of the development model Kenya and several other countries in the continent follow. Kenya, one of the fastest growing countries in Africa, has borrowed heavily from multinational lenders such as the World Bank and the IMF as well as bilateral partners such as China, to finance its infrastructure projects. But growth tanked and expenses rocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic years. The Ukraine war has led to a spike in global food and energy prices, hitting African economies. When the advanced countries increased interest rates to fight inflation, the payment burden of debt-ridden countries ballooned. In Africa, Zambia and Ghana defaulted on their payments, and then reached agreements with their creditors to restructure debt. Mr. Ruto, who came to power in 2022, has promised to address the debt problem. But he has been unimaginative and conventional, letting the unpopular IMF dictate one-sided policy measures. Now that the Bill has been withdrawn, he will have to tread carefully. He has yet to spell out his next measures, besides saying that austerity measures would be rolled out. He will have to strike a balance between his people's needs and Kenya's creditors. Multinational and bilateral lenders should help the debt-laden countries in Africa come out of this trap without punishing their poor populace.

Preaching consensus, provoking confrontation

n June 4, 2024, the verdict of our country's electorate was delivered clearly and resoundingly. It signalled a personal, political, and moral defeat for a Prime Minister who had awarded himself a divine status during the campaign. The verdict negated not only such pretensions, but it was also an unequivocal rejection of the politics of divisiveness, discord and hatred, a repudiation of both the substance and style of governance of Mr. Narendra Modi.

The fading of accommodation

Yet, the Prime Minister continues as if nothing has changed. He preaches the value of consensus but continues to value confrontation. There is not the slightest evidence that he has come to terms with the electoral outcome, or understood the verdict and has reflected on the message sent to him by millions of voters. The first few days of the 18th Lok Sabha have, sadly, been far from encouraging. Any hope that we might see a changed attitude has been dashed. Any hope that a new spirit of mutual respect and accommodation, let alone camaraderie would be fostered, has been belied.

I would like to remind readers what the INDIA bloc parties told the Prime Minister when his emissaries sought unanimity for the post of Speaker. The response was simple and straightforward: we said that we would support the government – but in keeping with convention and tradition, it was only fair and to be expected that the post of Deputy Speaker would be given to a member from the ranks of the Opposition. This perfectly reasonable request was found unacceptable by a regime that, it bears recall, had not filled the Constitutional position of Deputy Speaker in the 17th Lok Sabha.

And then, the Emergency was dredged up by the Prime Minister and his party – astonishingly, even by the Speaker whose position is incompatible with any public political stance other than one of strict impartiality. This attempt to divert attention away from the assault on the Constitution, on its foundational principles and values, on the institutions it has created and empowered, does not augur well for the smooth functioning of Parliament.

It is a fact of history that in March 1977 the people of our country gave a categorical verdict on the Emergency, which was accepted



Sonia Gandhi

Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), is Chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party



Issues that need extensive debate

We need to look ahead. The bizarre and unprecedented suspension of 146 Members of Parliament, who were legitimately demanding a discussion on a deplorable breach of Parliament's security, was clearly a way of ensuring that three far-reaching criminal justice laws could be passed without any discussion. Several legal experts and many others have expressed grave concerns about these laws. Should these laws not be kept in abeyance till they have undergone fuller Parliamentary scrutiny in keeping with accepted parliamentary practice and especially since the electoral verdict of 2024?

unhesitatingly and unequivocally. That less than

three years later the party that was humbled in

March 1977 was returned to power, with a

majority never achieved by Mr. Modi and his

party, is also very much part of that history.

Similarly, amendments to forest conservation and biological diversity protection forest laws were pushed through last year when there was uproar and chaos in Parliament. An ecological and humanitarian disaster is awaiting us as the Great Nicobar project is pushed through. Should they also not be revisited to give meaning to the Prime Minister's stated desire for consensus and for passage of laws after full debate and discussion?

On the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) scandal that has wreaked havoc on the lives of lakhs of our youth, the immediate response of the Education Minister was to deny the magnitude of what has happened. The Prime Minister who does his 'Pariksha pe Charcha' has been conspicuously silent on the leaks that have devastated so many families across the country. The inevitable 'high power committees' have been constituted, but the real issue is how the professionalism of educational institutions such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training, the University Grants Commission and universities themselves have been so deeply damaged in the last 10 years.

Meanwhile, the campaign of violence and intimidation against India's minorities has once again intensified. In Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled States, bulldozers are again demolishing the homes of minorities based on mere allegations, violating due process, and inflicting collective punishment. None of this is

surprising given the communal invective and blatant falsehoods that the Prime Minister inflicted on the people during the election campaign. He provocatively escalated the rhetoric out of fear that the election was slipping away from him, showing complete disregard for the dignity and maryada of his position.

In February 2022, the BJP and its allies got a convincing majority in the Assembly elections in Manipur. Yet, within 15 months, Manipur began to burn - or should it be said was allowed to begin to burn. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands dislocated. Social harmony in this most sensitive State has been shattered. Yet, the Prime Minister has not found either the time or the inclination to visit the State nor to meet with its political leaders.

It is no wonder that his party has lost both the Lok Sabha seats there, but this does not seem to have had any impact on his most insensitive handling of the crisis that has engulfed Manipur's variegated society.

The Prime Minister diminished himself by the campaign he ran for over 40 days. His words did untold damage to our social fabric and to the dignity of the office he is privileged to hold. It is for him to reflect and introspect and recognise that in rejecting his call for 400-plus parliamentary seats, crores of our people - to whom he promises sabka saath, sabka vikas sent a powerful message, that they had had enough.

The Opposition will reflect India's voice

The INDIA bloc parties have made it clear that they do not seek a confrontationist attitude. The Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, has offered cooperation. The leaders of the constituents of the alliance have made clear that they are looking to being productive in Parliament and to impartiality in the conduct of its proceedings. It is our hope that the Prime Minister and his government will respond positively. The initial evidence does not augur well, but we in the Opposition are committed to restoring balance and productivity in Parliament, to ensure that the voice of the millions who have sent us there as their representatives is heard and their concerns are raised and addressed. We live in hope that the Treasury benches will step forward so that we can fulfil our democratic

Tuning into the narratives in the American election

n this year of successive world-wide elections, the issues in the United States presidential election, to be held in November, have not yet aroused considerable scrutiny. Yet, 1892 was the last time an immediately former President was contesting with his successor incumbent. The election's main issues will cover immigration, democracy, foreign policy, abortion and Donald Trump's indictments. In the current deeply polarised setting, opinion polls show that supporters of the former Republican President, Donald Trump, will do so again; and the same applies to the current Democrat President, Joe Biden's followers.

The economy, the perception

The economy has become an important issue in the November presidential elections; normally, the economy should be decisive since history shows that a sitting President with a strong economy gets re-elected. But different economic indicators are travelling in different directions; some are positive, with low unemployment and a rising stock market, but negatives also appear in the high interest rate which affects everyone using credit. The rate of inflation has not come down, nor have prices even after the COVID-19 pandemic, though incomes have gone up.

The good aspects of the economy take time to impact the public, unlike the negatives. Mr. Biden is considered a better economic manager than Mr. Trump, and 65% of the electorate appears to think that the economy is in good or very good shape. But whether this will be a steady trend or only a momentary reaction cannot be anticipated, remembering that Mr. Trump's pre-pandemic economy was quite strong. Most voters are not focusing on the economy – at least

Polarisation in American society covers social issues as well as the urban versus rural/semi-urban divide. The latter since the 1990s are Republican, the former Democrat and



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<u>Krishnan</u> **Srinivasan**

a former Foreign Secretary

In the Biden

versus Trump

face-off, the core

issues to shape

the November

election exist

but have still to

stir up scrutiny

the two are sharply divided. De-industrialisation, deregulation since the 1990s, job losses, and agribusiness suffering have affected the rural areas deeply and magnified these differences. President Biden has tried to rectify this but has not received any credit for his initiatives because the rural and semi-urban areas remain feeling discriminated against. Mr. Biden knows very well that the rural vote needs more attention, but it will take decades for such a divide to be properly rectified.

In industry, employment levels are good but inequality is still grave. A great deal of current investment goes into hi-tech, high-skilled, high-salaried jobs, but many of these projects are long term in gestation. Republicans tend to avoid involvement in the economy, but, here too, Republican opinion seems to be changing. Mr. Trump has been talking of a 10% across-the-board tariff but this will add to inflation and increase each family's expenditure by \$1,500-\$2,500 every

The approaches to trade

In trade policy, there are clear differences between the Biden and Trump approaches. Mr. Trump is no believer in multilateralism, and during his tenure used tariffs to leverage better bilateral trade deals. Mr. Biden retained some of these tariffs but lowered others for Europeans, for example, to block Chinese steel and aluminium in order to limit the high carbon used to make these in China. The age of neo-liberal fundamentalist Democratic policies seems to be over, while on the Republican side, the debate continues; the libertarians are very powerful but there are nascent signs of rebellion against them.

Regarding the unions, in some regions blue-collar workers have become newly unionised at a time when the recent trend has seen the union movement decreasing. Unions have been helpful socially and assisted the Democrats, but with de-industrialisation, their place in society has been taken over by evangelical movements and gun lobbies, which attract strong support among rural communities. Support for unions appears still high among the American public, and Mr. Biden was the first U.S. President ever to join a picket line, but this factor is not likely to help his campaign for a second

Factors now present

Four danger signals seem key to the future of American democracy: extreme partisan polarisation; social questions of 'belonging', such as anti-immigration and racism; high economic inequality and executive aggrandisement, namely, when a leader expands his/her power beyond the customary checks and balances. Some experts feel that all four factors are now present in the United States.

Mr. Trump was unwelcoming to immigrants, and by the end of his term, public support for immigration had risen. Mr. Trump's policies on immigration will prove inflationary since he wishes to deport thousands of low-wage earners. Mr. Biden is more welcoming, but perhaps more so than the American public at large wanted, and he mismanaged border issues.

This is now a contentious issue even among Democrats and will be another factor going into the elections. Mr. Biden tried to outflank the Republicans with a bipartisan bill that the Democrats would not normally have agreed to, but Mr. Trump gave Mr. Biden a lifeline by opposing it; Mr. Biden will now lose fewer votes as a result.

Opinion polls suggest that Democrat support among minorities such as African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans is slipping. But all these polls have a small sample size and the shifts could be small, and more marked among men than women. Nevertheless, they give cause for the Democratic candidate in a few key States to be worried.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Talking about Emergency The President of India mentioning the Emergency that was imposed by the Congress-led government in 1975, in her first address to Parliament after the 2024 general election, was unusual (Page 1, June 28). There is no doubt that the Emergency episode was a nightmare but most people in India have forgotten about it. Though the speech had the line, "My Government is continuously working for lasting peace in the North-East", there has been no mention of the burning strife in Manipur. It is a pity that the ruling party and its government at the Centre talk about

history instead of debating contemporary issues. Kshirasagara Balaji Rao, Hyderabad

I am 85 years old and have worked in the central government. The attempt to harp on the Emergency is unwarranted. That Mrs Gandhi was re-elected after the Emergency must not be forgotten. The leader also expressed her regrets over the events. The people of the country understood what had happened and acted. I do wish the people of this nation now recognise the wolves and the power mongers of today, who, tactfully and with political ingenuity, are clandestinely

engaged in cutting the roots of democracy. Pulipaka Moorthy Kumar, Nazerpet, Tenali, Andhra Pradesh

It is not necessary for the BJP to illuminate the Congress's dark past. The party has faced the consequences of its actions. The ruling party seems to be unable to digest the changed composition of the Lok Sabha. The way parliamentary conduct has changed from day two is

P. Paramasivan. Chennai

evidence of this.

On the anniversary of the dark event in the evolution of democracy in India, there was certainly a need to keep India's memory alive to an event that highlights the downside to the temptations of power. That the Congress, the claimant to India's oldest political tradition, chose to go on the defensive, is a reminder that remorse is a rare emotion in politics. Jayanthy Subramaniam, Mumbai

NEET MDS, counselling I had appeared for the NEET MDS 2024 which was

conducted despite protests from aspirants of there being inadequate time between notification and examination. It was conducted in March, instead

of February, with the notification in late January. The authorities went ahead with the exam despite a court ruling that the exams of NEET MDS and NEET PG should be conducted around the same time as the counselling process. The recent developments of paper leaks, the NTA's deeds and indefinite postponement of NEET PG 2024 lead one to question the decision to declare that the counselling for NEET MDS will begin from July 1. Unlike NEET PG which is attempted by around two lakh people, the MDS exam has around 25,000 aspirants every year, in the backdrop of there being less than

1,000 government seats available across India. Our cause always goes unnoticed as we are not considered to be an important part of the medical fraternity. Gayathri, Thiruvananthapuram

Fourth bridge collapse Reports of bridges

collapsing in Bihar are proof of the extent of corruption. When loot is the norm, there is more in store for us (Inside pages, June 27).

V. Lakshmanan, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu inspects the Amaravati capital region. G.N. RAO

The promised land

The victory of Chandrababu Naidu has breathed life into Amaravati, his dream project that had turned to dust under the previous regime. However, it has also led to decreasing land prices in Visakhapatnam, which was touted by Jagan Mohan Reddy to be the administrative capital, and caused resentment in Kurnool, which was proposed as the judicial capital. V. Raghavendra reports on public sentiment in Andhra Pradesh

the police

cracking

down on

A. RAJANI

farmers who

spearheaded

the agitation.

n Thullur in Guntur district of coastal Andhra Pradesh (AP), people still wince when they remember the sound of armed police personnel marching through the narrow lanes of the village about four years ago.

Aluri Pavani, a farmer in her 50s, remembers the time vividly. In early 2015, she had given 2.75acres of land to the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government, headed by Chandrababu Naidu, which had announced its plan to build a new capital, Amaravati, for AP.

The previous year, the combined State of AP ad been bifurcated into two. AP and Telangana. and Hyderabad was stipulated to be the joint capital for 10 years. From 2024, according to the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, AP would have its own capital. Amaravati, an important centre of Hinduism and Buddhism in India, was Naidu's dream project. He said in 2015 that he envisioned a "smart, green, and sustainable city" that would be a "symbol of pride for the people of Andhra Pradesh and India".

The project went on smoothly until early 2019. However, in May that year, the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) assumed power and Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy proposed three capitals instead – Visakhapatnam as the executive capital, Amaravati as the administrative capital, and Kurnool as the judicial capital.

The 28,736 farmers who had parted with a combined 33,000 acres of land, as part of a Land Pooling Scheme in which they would be given a developed plot of land in return, for the capital of Amaravati were furious.

"Trying to stage protests on the streets became the 'new normal' for us," recalls Pavani. The police imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which prohibits the assembly of four or more people in an area. "They made our lives miserable," she continues. "We had to confront the police all the time. The situation was so bad that we had to show our Aadhaar cards to step out of our homes."

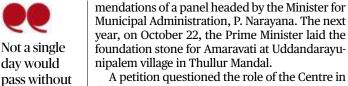
A. Rajani, a farmer from Thullur, says, "Not a single day would pass without the police cracking down on farmers who spearheaded the agitation that went on for more than 1,600 days.

The people of Thullur, one of the 29 villages that constitute the capital region of the State, are today hopeful because Naidu has come back to power, but the cases booked against some of them for violating the police curbs have not yet been closed, they say.

Naidu's dream capital

AP has been grappling with the question of a capital ever since bifurcation. In 2014, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs set up the Sivaramakrishnan Committee to study possibilities for a new capital for the State. The Committee said there was no need for a "single super capital city" and favoured decentralisation. It opposed a greenfield capital as it believed that the costs of building it were too high. However, the Committee added that if the government still wished to construct a greenfield capital, it should search for locations where large parcels of government land were available.

Notwithstanding the recommendations of the Committee, in September 2014, Naidu finalised Amaravati as the capital on the basis of recom-



A petition questioned the role of the Centre in the State's capital decision. The Supreme Court said the setting up of the capital city was within the State government's discretionary powers. Naidu was thrilled. He involved the Governments of Singapore and Japan and renowned architects such as Foster + Partners to lend their expertise in designing and building the capital city, which was to be spread over 217 sq km and span the erstwhile Guntur and Krishna districts.

"The TDP government had invited tenders worth ₹48,000 crore for Phase-I of the capital city project and even made payments amounting to nearly ₹9,000 crore for works that had been completed," recalls Narayana.

Several villas and high-rise buildings were constructed to house judges, bureaucrats, elected representatives of the State, and gazetted and non-gazetted officers in Amaravati. An interim government complex came up at Velagapudi, about 20 kilometres from Vijayawada.

A ghost city

However, in 2019, all this came to a grinding halt when the YSCRP government rode to power. Reddy believed in decentralisation. His government passed the Andhra Pradesh Capital Development Authority Repeal Act, 2020. Promptly, all the new buildings constructed by the previous TDP government were abandoned except the interim government complex. Amaravati turned into a ghost city overnight. Until June this year, pipes, cables, and other construction material could be seen everywhere, gathering dust. Roads were lined with weeds. Dense vegetation had grown around high-rise buildings.

Many people in the region say they lost a great deal due to the agony of the changing circumstances. P. Bharat, a farmer who gave 2.5 acres of land for the capital to the TDP government, alleges that his wife, a computer operator working on contract in the Thullur Mandal Revenue Office, lost her job because of the YSRCP. "Our child had dressed up as Lord Venkateswara during the protests against the capital shift. They fired her on finding that out," he says.

Hundreds of farmers describe January 10, 2020, as "an unforgettable day". This was when they embarked on a journey to the Kanaka Durga temple in Vijayawada on foot to pray that Amaravati be retained as the capital of Andhra Pradesh and were stopped by the police. "Several women were injured in the clashes," recalls Gottipati Lakshmi, a farmer who was part of the protest.

Besides affecting the people, the AP Capital Development Authority Repeal Act, 2020, and the AP Decentralisation and Inclusive Development of All Regions Act, 2020, which were intended to split the capital into three parts, sparked a major legal battle.

The Rajadhani Rythu Parirakshana Samithi, an association of aggrieved farmers from the capital villages, along with other entities challenged the YSRCP government's decision in court soon after Reddy proposed the idea of three capitals.

On March 3, 2022, the YSRCP government was forced to beat a hasty retreat after the High Court ruled that the government had no legislative competence to shift or even split the capital. The Court issued an order saying the government should develop Amaravati as the capital within

However, during its hearing of a Special Leave Petition filed by the YSRCP government against the High Court order dated March 3, 2022, the Supreme Court observed that the High Court was "not a town planner or engineer" to say that Amaravati should be developed in a particular time frame. The Special Leave Petition is pending final adjudication by the apex court.

All eyes on Visakhapatnam

Meanwhile, with Reddy announcing Visakhapatnam as the executive capital, hectic political activity and infrastructure development began in the coastal city in 2019. While TDP and Jana Sena Party (JSP) leaders from other parts of the State questioned his decision, local TDP and JSP leaders welcomed it given the public sentiment in Visakhapatnam.

There were several debates over where the executive capital should be located. After a series of inspections, the YSRCP zeroed in on the Bheemunipatnam region, located in south Visakhapatnam district, which is also considered the gateway to Visakhapatnam.

The decision led to an increase in land prices. Construction activity boomed in many parts of the city, especially Hanumanthuwaka, Arilova, Marikavalasa, Madhurawada, Kommadi, PM Pa-



We never imagined that Reddy would try and shift the capital. Regardless of who the Chief Minister is, they should ensure continuity of governance.

GADDE TIRUPATI RAO Managing trustee of Amaravati Parirakshana Samithi

lem, and Rushikonda.

"People wanted to purchase flats or sites when the capital announcement was made, assuming that the prices would see a drastic increase when the capital work began," says Koteswara Rao, a realtor from the city.

The government formed a committee to select suitable places for the offices of various departments, head offices, and the camp office of the Chief Minister. It recommended using existing structures as temporary offices. Some engineering colleges were also proposed to be used as government buildings.

The Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation and Visakhapatnam Metropolitan Region Development Authority developed roads in the wards of the Bheemunipatnam Assembly Constituency, which had been neglected for years.

Residents say there were regular inspections by government officials, YSRCP ministers, and MLAs in the region. "They used to check the development of roads and the feasibility of constructing some government blocks in the surrounding areas of Rushikonda and Bheemunipatnam," says one resident. The YSRCP government reportedly planned to make the existing IT Towers and Special Economic Zone region temporary office blocks.

"The present Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation office was to be used as a Municipal Administration and Urban Development Department office. In contrast, a new office for the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation was being allotted at the outskirts," says a senior roads and buildings department official.

Government officials and ministers began looking for apartments in Madhurawada and Yendada, which are located close to Bheemunipatnam. The YSRCP government organised several meetings, including an Investors Summit, to attract investments to Visakhapatnam.

In 2021, a major controversy erupted when the YSRCP government demolished the governmentowned Haritha Resorts on Rushikonda Hill in Bheemunipatnam Assembly Constituency, claiming that the space would be developed as a fivestar resort for tourism. The TDP, JSP, and BJP alleged that the YSRCP government was constructing the Chief Minister's residence by destroying a

Last October, a committee appointed by the YSRCP government said that the construction on Rushikonda would be suitable for the Chief Minister's camp office. When the YSRCP lost the elections in June this year, TDP and JSP leaders barged into the site and alleged that the YSRCP government was constructing the Chief Minister's residence-cum-camp office at a staggering ₹500 crore.

Optimism once again

Now, with the TDP back in power, Amaravati has come alive again. The sounds of more than 100 earth-movers clearing the jungles and doing civil repair work have broken the eerie calm that has prevailed for the last five years. Farmers have gone by foot to Tirumala to express gratitude to Lord Venkateswara for TDP's return to power.

Naidu says he intends to rebuild the capital as soon as possible on the basis of the old master plan. "At a high-level review meeting, the government will arrive at the estimated cost of reconstruction," says Narayana.

Gadde Tirupati Rao, managing trustee of Amaravati Parirakshana Samithi, a group of farmers affected by the proposed capital shift, points out that the lands were given not to Naidu, but to the government. "We never imagined that Reddy would try and shift the capital. Regardless of who the Chief Minister is, they should ensure continuity of governance," he says.

The fact that the original Capital Region Development Authority Act of 2014 was restored by the YSRCP government as a consequence of the High Court order has offered no solace to farmers as the dispute has still not been solved in the Supreme Court.

With the YSRCP reduced to just 11 MLAs in the 175-member Legislative Assembly, Naidu is likely to face little resistance to his ambitious plan. In the 2024 Assembly elections, the YSRCP was defeated in both the Mangalagiri and Tadikonda Assembly constituencies in which Amaravati falls. It also did not win a single seat in the three urban constituencies of Visakhapatnam, and Kurnool.

One major challenge Naidu faces is the financial crunch in the State. However, the Centre may come to his aid as it is obliged under the AP Reorganisation Act to extend financial support for capital development.

Resentment in Kurnool

While Amaravati has begun to spring back to life, there is disappointment in Kurnool, which will not become the judicial capital in the changed circumstances.

Lawyers say Naidu should fulfil his election promise of creating a High Court Bench in Kurnool, now that their hopes of having the principal seat of the High Court in Kurnool are dashed given the government's plan of establishing a single capital city, Amaravati. The Reddy government had established "quasi-judicial institutions" such as Lokayukta and Human Rights Commission in Kurnool as a prelude to its much-publicised slogan of making Kurnool the judicial capital. The lawyers hope that the two institutions will be allowed to continue in Kurnool. "This is all we ask now," they say.



A view of the Haritha Resorts on Rushikonda Hill in Bheemunipatnam Assembly constituency. V. RAJU

With inputs from Harish Gilai in Visakhapatnam and K. Uma Shankar in Kurnool

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Sense of the House

Govt, Opposition should forge consensus in Parliament

n the first address of his third term as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi talked about consensus and the Opposition pressed on about Constitutional values. But within the first week of the opening of the newly-elected Lok Sabha, it appears that neither side seems to have actually meant what they said. It is doubtful whether the government's stance will be more conciliatory in its new avatar.



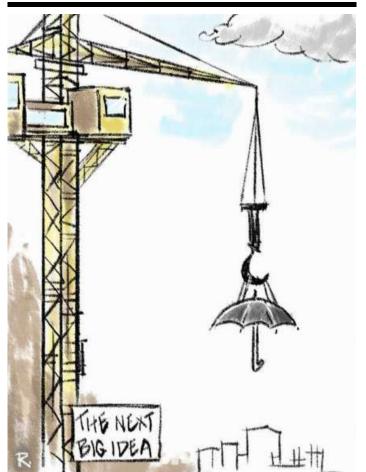
It has carried on as if it still commands a brute majority in the House as was reflected by the election of the pro-tem Speaker and the Speaker. The government overlooked the senior most MP, eight-term Member K Suresh, for appointment as pro-tem Speaker and appointed BJP MP from Cuttack, Bhartuhari Mahtab. It was clear that hostilities of the just-concluded Lok Sabha elections were being carried into the House. Then came the election of the Speaker. Indeed, of the last 17 Lok Sabhas, the post of the Speaker has been decided by election only three times. For the rest, the tradition has been to appoint a presiding officer based on consensus. But both the government and the Opposition forced an election by voice vote and that signals the end of mutual respect and understanding that the Prime Minister had so eloquently talked about. Apparently, there were efforts from the government side led by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to avoid an election. According to the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, the Opposition was amenable to the idea of having the Speaker elected unopposed provided the government let it choose the Deputy Speaker. But the government, he claimed, remained non-committal on the issue. The Opposition put up its own candidate and it led to a voice vote election of the Speaker.

It remains to be seen what the government intends to do about the appointment of the Deputy Speaker, a post that has traditionally gone to a member of the Opposition. This tradition continued till the 16th Lok Sabha when an MP of the AIADMK was Deputy Speaker. However, in the 17th Lok Sabha, the post remained empty for an unprecedented entire term. It remains to be seen how the government responds to the Opposition's demand for appointing the Deputy Speaker from among their ranks although the indication is that the NDA is likely to keep this post too within its fold.

The government needs to be mindful of the reality that the Opposition now has the numbers to stall crucial legislation and disrupt proceedings. Cooperation and consensus have to be found for day-to-day running of the new government. For its part, the Opposition needs to understand that the mandate is for ensuring proper scrutiny of legislative business and not constant disruption, as was the case in the past. The greater strength that it now has in the Lower House should be used to enforce accountability and pin the government down to meaningful debates.



RAVIKANTH





The vastness of Mahalanobis's idea of data

A VISIONARY. The Father of Statistics in India not only pioneered the use of large-scale sample surveys but also laid the foundation for the integration of tech in statistical analysis



PRASU JAIN PRAKHAR GARG

n a world riddled with algorithms, more than being humans, we have come to be defined as data points, universally categorised according to our data sets. Much like Darwin's Theory of Evolution, which hasn't been contested even by the most brilliant minds in the last two hundred years, we started with a single digit '0', then onto binary, and finally evolved into a myriad of complex mathematical problems, known as 'algorithms'. Should the joke be stretched too far, humans, in the end, are just numbers. But that is not how it always has been

Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis foresaw decades ahead, beyond these numbers, and influenced the ways of the world by converting us, data sets into able tools of nation building and giving much impetus to India's socio-economic growth at a time when even the idea of it was far-fetched. He once wrote that "data are not just numbers, they speak volumes." His stature needs no introduction but his contributions and legacy must invoke a renewed sense of introspection in this Indian age of digital transformation.

In January 2024, India started its four-year term as a member of the United Nations Statistical Commission, winning 46 out of 53 votes, after a gap of nearly two decades. This has highlighted India's history of statistical prowess and expertise, thus pushing its boundaries in

defining international standards, concepts and methodologies in Official Statistics. China, India's ambitious neighbour, who was also vying for a seat in the Commission, once had keen interest in the Indian Statistical system, which can be highlighted by the visit of their then Prime Minister, Chou En Lai to the ISI, Kolkata, in 1956.

 $PC\,Mahalanobis\,founded\,the\,Indian$ Statistical Institute (ISI) in 1931 which conducted numerous agricultural and socio-economic surveys back in the day. These efforts led to the establishment of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), which continues to play a crucial role in nationwide data collection for developmental planning. Mahalanobis's advocacy also led to the creation of the Central Statistical Office, earning him the title of the Father of Statistics in India

Recently, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released a detailed report on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23 (HCES), designed to collect information on household consumption patterns. The HCES data is crucial for understanding consumption patterns and socio-economic disparities in India but it was Mahalanobis himself who pioneered the use of large-scale sample surveys such as HCES,

Mahalanobis's ideas have given birth to an India that is determined

to look after its people using data, a public good, as a tool of nation building.

developing methodologies for the objective and representative collection of national-scale data between 1937 and 1944. His innovative use of randomization in selecting units for sampling remains a cornerstone of modern statistical practices. He is also known for developing the Mahalanobis D-square, a statistical measure of distance between two groups of objects, which is widely used in various scientific and industrial domains.

ASSOCIATION WITH TAGORE

Mahalanobis's contributions to statistics extended far beyond his initial work, as he used data in unprecedented ways that remain unmatched to this day. His interest in statistics began almost by chance in 1915 when a delayed voyage from England to India allowed him to explore the subject. However, it was Rabindranath Tagore who played a pivotal role in steering Mahalanobis, then a professor of physics at Calcutta's Presidency College, towards formal statistical activities. In 1917, Tagore introduced him to scholar Brajendranath Seal, who asked Mahalanobis to analyse the examination records of Calcutta University. This marked Mahalanobis's first statistical venture with real-life

Although his long association with Tagore is well known, few are aware that Mahalanobis served as Tagore's private secretary during his foreign visits. He wrote a series of essays titled *Rabindra* Parichay for the prestigious Bengali magazine Probashi and authored a book, Rabindranath Tagore's Visit to Canada in 1929. Notably, Mahalanobis was also present when Tagore met Einstein in

Mahalanobis once wrote, "Statistics must always have purpose, either in the pursuit of knowledge, or in promotion of human welfare." In 1931, when monsoon floods were common in eastern India, he conducted systematic statistical studies on rainfall and floods in Odisha and Bengal, leading to the construction of the Hirakud Dam in Odisha and the Durgapur Barrage in West Bengal for flood control.

Mahalanobis was instrumental in orchestrating different aspects of planning in newly-independent India, including the Second Five-Year Plan. Recognising the importance of technological advancements, he ensured that the $\overline{\text{ISI}}$ procured India's first electronic digital computer in 1956, followed by the second in 1959. His foresight in embracing technology laid the foundation for the integration of technological tools in statistical analysis.

In today's era of Big Data and AI/ML, where data is considered 'the new oil', Mahalanobis's work is more relevant than ever. His ideas have given birth to an India that is determined to look after its people using data, a public good, as a tool of nation building.

The theme for this year's National Statistics Day is 'Use of data in decision making' which is what he advocated for and worked towards all his life. Mahalanobis was, above all, a great visionary statistician, dedicated to using good data and good intentions to change the world.

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Developing robust AI safety policies

Regulations must be flexible enough to adapt to tech changes, and global best practices

arlier this year, a reported data breach at DigiYatra put thousands ■ of high-flying executives at risk, with their private and facial recognition data out there with criminals. While it is widely believed that AI may not directly cause any safety hazards, a National Institute of Standards and Technology report says that facial recognition algorithms from major tech companies exhibited significant racial and gender

The average financial costs per data breach is estimated at a minimum of ₹36 crore. In addition, enterprises will have to hire AI cyber security experts and probably upgrade the tech systems to ward off more damage in the future. These costs are comparably much less than the losses due to a data theft. The stakes for government are far higher, with much bigger losses as well as credibility with the citizens.

India's burgeoning AI sector is well aware of the need for a robust AI safety policy. But are the policymakers clear on this? And there are many challenges they should be cognisant of. Balancing innovation and regulation is the first. An evolving AI ecosystem like ours needs more flexibility in regulation. Striking a balance between pushing much-needed innovation and implementing stringent regulations is crucial. Overly restrictive

policies could stifle innovation, while lax potential risks. Although Indians are largely ignorant of privacy concerns, policymakers must adopt the best practices from Europe. The data privacy bill needs to be strengthened further for better data governance. The AI safety policy will need to align with this framework to ensure responsible data collection, use, and storage.

A third critical challenge is about addressing algorithmic bias. Our diverse population raises concerns about this bias. The policy should address how to mitigate this in areas like facial recognition, social benefits or loan approvals, ensuring fairness and inclusivity.

SHORTAGE OF SKILLS

India faces a shortage of skilled professionals in AI safety and ethics. The government needs to invest in training programmes and capacity building to create a workforce equipped to implement and enforce AI safety policies.

One key challenge as with most regulations in India is the weak enforcement mechanism. Developing robust enforcement mechanisms such as establishing clear lines of accountability and outlining penalties for non-compliance are crucial for AI safety regulation.

The last challenge policymakers must consider is alignment with other



A CHALLENGE. Making AI policies safe

countries' regulations. Consider global best practices and ongoing efforts towards AI governance frameworks for policyfinalisation. Collaboration with other countries can bring a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to AI safety, especially in areas like deepfakes. Governments worldwide are actively involved in formulating policies and India can take the lead just as it had in digital money. Consider the following while developing it:

Focus on human values: Policies should ensure AI development aligns with fundamental human values like fairness, transparency, and accountability. This means establishing ethical guidelines for data collection, use, and potential biases within AI algorithms.

Prioritise risk management: Consider frameworks for identifying, assessing, and mitigating potential risks associated with AI systems. Ensure

developers conduct thorough safety high-risk domains like healthcare or

Transparency and explainability: Promote the development of AI systems that are transparent in their decision-making processes. This can help stakeholders understand how AI systems arrive at conclusions and identify potential biases.

Human oversight and control: Policies should emphasise the $importance\, of human\, oversight\, in$ development and deployment. Humans should be in the loop for critical decision-making processes, especially in high-risk scenarios.

The government can refer to the best practices outlined in the the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act and South Korea's Ethical Guidelines for AI Development and Use and, of course, the Singapore Model AI Governance Framework to set the initial pace for the

Developing robust AI safety policies is an ongoing challenge. Regulatory frameworks need to be flexible enough to adapt to the rapid evolution of AI technology. International collaboration is crucial to ensure a level-playing field and prevent a fragmented global approach to AI safety.

The writer is a Fortune-500 advisor, startup investor and

• 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.

Hesitancy to pay taxes

This refers to 'The civic duty disconnect' (June 28). It is true that there is hesitation to pay or desire to avoid tax especially when infrastructure or other civic facilities are poor. We pay property tax but the roads, sewage systems and storm-water drains are not maintained properly.

The quality of roads is so bad that they require relaying every year, after rains. Obviously, the authorities will claim insufficiency of funds. When it comes to State/local taxes, effective collection mechanism is largely missing and thus the revenue to the government is reduced. There must be visible development

for increased willingness to comply. Also, there should be fairness and equity in levy of taxes, whether it is a central or local tax

Kasiraman Ramachandran

Natural farming

This refers to 'Shifting to natural farming' (June 28). During the Green Revolution, chemical fertilizer was used as a quick method of increasing production. Its continuous usage has had deleterious effects such as declining soil quality and chemical residue in crops. Switching over to traditional natural farming or organic farming can help undo these negative impacts.

Spreading awareness on the benefits of natural farming and changing the mindset of the farmers are the two big challenges foreseen Crop loss and reduced income on account of poor yield occurring during change-over period need to be compensated.

RV Baskaran

Credit to RBI

Apropos the report 'With low NPAs and robust earnings, banks can absorb shocks' (June 28), both the RBI and the government can claim credit for putting back scheduled commercial banks back on track which is the result of a decade of

As systemic stability in financial sector is vital, the RBI make sure weak NBFCs and cooperatives are strengthened.

MG Warrier

Disinflation worries

This refers to 'China disinflation can hurt India' (June 28). India, one feels, should diversify its imports as well as exports because it is very difficult to predict the economic scenario in other countries. Disinflation in fact is more dangerous than inflation. That China is experiencing a fall in aggregate demand and prices clearly suggests

thoroughly explore foreign markets and plan its export-import policies.

What it can at least do is that it can

that there has been no concrete

However, India cannot do much

perspective planning there.

about it.

Achieving self-reliance in all goods and services is impossible. But it can minimise the imports and maximise the exports to record favourable balance of trade and balance of payments. After all, the world is big. Also, it is imperative that India stops the flooding of substandard goods from China or other countries in the domestic market

S Ramakrishnasayee

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KARISHMA VASWANI

he clash between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea is on everybody's lips in Manila. Prayers broadcast on the radio plead to a higher power for provocateurs to be kept out. Tensions are high, and the Southeast Asian archipelago needs to work with both Beijing and Washington to lower the temperature,

but not capitulate to Chinese demands. Doing so would set a precedent for other claimants with stakes in the waterway that would be next to impossible to row

The challenge for Manila now is to balance its economic interests with China without ceding its territorial rights. The latest incident in the contested waterway, on June 17, between Filipino sailors on a resupply mission to the BRP Sierra Madre, and the Chinese Coast Guard was among the more aggressive recently. It's not as much that Beijing has won this round — the resupply mission was aborted — but that Manila bungled the fallout with various departments at odds about what actually happened. There appears to be a greater degree of unity now, and that is critical as the country attempts to manage the China threat.

The stakes aren't just about the Philippines' sovereignty. They are also about what lies under the waters: Huge reserves of oil, gas and fish. Security and trade in the Indo-Pacific is part of the US's multi-pronged strategy of engaging with partners and allies, which is why it is pushing for freedom of navigation there. About 60 per cent of maritime trade passes through the Indo-Pacific. Maintaining an international presence is essential, or else the territory risks being controlled wholly by China.

That was the pitch that US Ambassador to the Philippines MaryKay Carlson made at the East-West Center International Media Conference in Manila this week. She called on China to cease its "bullying behaviour," and "harassment of the vessels operating lawfully in the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone." All countries should

have sovereign rights to explore utilise conserve, and manage natural resources in their economic zones, and Beijing should end its interference, she said.

That's obviously not how China sees t — it lays claim to almost all of the South China Sea, and earlier this month put in place new regulations that effectively allow it to treat any foreign vessels as trespassers in its waters. It takes courage to stand up to Beijing: It is now the number one trade and investment partner for many countries in the region, although foreign direct investment flows to the Philippines have fallen in recent years, according to Arsenio M Balisacan, secretary of the National Economic and Development Authority.

Manila doesn't want to stop working with China, officials have told me during my visit, and there are already efforts underway to arrange a diplomatic meeting between the two sides. Any rapprochement would need to be carefully managed, so as not to rile up a domestic audience upset by what it views as a very public humiliation of Filipino forces.

Another proposal is for the Philippines to push ahead with a law of its own in the South China Sea that would allow it to affirm its jurisdiction under the auspices of the United Nations. The process for the bill to become law is quite far advanced by all accounts, and just needs to be signed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. In theory, it would allow the Philippines to closely monitor vessels entering its territorial seas and block those illegally entering, Jonathan Malaya, assistant director general of the National Security Council, told me. This would provide Manila with the legitimacy to defend itself against Beijing's claims.

Additionally, more frequent joint naval exercises between the US and the Philippines would also help to deter China. There is one expected in the coming weeks, according to the Washington Post. The US should help Manila by regularly patrolling the waters, and enlisting the support of Japan, South Korea and Australia, which have significant forces in the region and similar strategic aims. If your neighbourhood cop only comes out to police the surroundings every few months, one retired admiral told me, how safe will your home be?

These are all good measures. The key focus now is to ensure that Manila can assert its rights in the contested waterway, without being dragged into a dangerous conflict that would almost definitely involve the US and its allies. This round may have gone to China, but this will be a long and drawn out fight. There's still time to win the next one.

The writer is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia politics with a special focus on China. Previously, she was the BBC's lead Asia presenter and worked for the BBC across Asia and South Asia for two decades.





Navigating the hype-reality divide



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

t has been an education watching the T20 World Cup and the Euro on my mobile. I've been travelling, in North India and in Bengal, and often using 4G.

Connectivity has ranged from okay to terrible, making streaming a challenge. I use multiple service providers and devices and there seem to be few places where all three private service providers offer fast, stable connectivity. Using a VPN to stream the Euro for free is a joke given the latency.

Apart from streaming sports, another hobby that demands low latency is playing Blitz Chess. That too suffers from lags and disconnects and I can't play bullet (60 seconds/game) at all. On occasion, when I've had to make Zoom/ Meet/ Teams valle. I've had to ewitch off video

By global standards, digital India's 4G networks aren't up to the mark. This lacuna in telecom infrastructure is part of an endemic problem: Making large claims where the reality doesn't match hype.

India claims great airport connectivity but terminal roofs are collapsing. India claims excellent road networks but bridges give way and road surfaces crack

within months of inauguration. India also has fancy new trains, which

run slower than the earlier versions, and the technologically advanced safety features don't prevent accidents. Even berths collapse. In the interest of generating more revenues, the Railways have also reduced lower-class capacity, causing overcrowding.

The stock market and startup boom has funnelled large investments into an economy that is supposedly growing at great speed. But I wonder how much of that is hype, and how much of the investment is dependent on a lack of alternative investment avenues.

Starting with demonetisation and the goods and services tax (GST), policy changes have led to a shrinking of the informal economy. This has shown up in the micro, small and medium enterprises sector, which has shrunk in size, and struggled to generate enough activity to provide employment.

That is why unemployment trumped religion in resonance in the elections. Demonetisation and GST have also led to formalisation, and I suspect the formalisation masked the extent to which the informal economy compressed.

Prior to November 2016, the informal economy was somewhere around 35-40 per cent the size of the formal economy. I don't know if any serious attempt has been made to gauge the size of the inforpect it's a lot smaller in relation to the formal economy.

Demonetisation caused a collapse in small businesses, and the GST launch in mid-2017 led to further pressures on businesses that couldn't handle the paperwork. Covid and the lockdowns led to more compression.

The informal businesses that could transition to GST did so and joined the formal economy. This resulted in a

bump-up in formal GDP data, while the shutdowns of informal businesses have shown up in unemployment, rural distress, and a K-shaped recovery.

Money - household savings funnelled through systematic investment plans — has gone into the stock market because folks who would have earlier looked to open small businesses don't see opportunities. That's a working hypothesis which gels with anecdotal evidence. (Digitisation certainly helped by making it easier to invest)

Watching the World Cup, the Euro and the T20 World Cup has also meant looking at a lot of ads. The composition is revealing. There's an obsession with bodily functions, or personal care as it's known in management circles. Feminine hygiene products, toilet cleaners, shaving kits, condoms et al seem to

There are no big-ticket white goods on display. There are no mobiles, even though India is a big assembler of handsets. There are no cars. There are no fintechs, or other startups offering innovative services, and few mutual funds or credit card/ banking service providers.

The ads are all old economy, smallticket, and by brands, which have been around for decades. This contrasts with earlier years when sports channels were flooded with ads for mobiles, fintechs consumer electronics, vehicles, crypto and e-commerce/ quick commerce services. I presume the ad mix reflects changes in consumption. What's happened to all the startups and all the bigticket consumption?

All this is anecdotal, of course, but it does paint a consistent picture of an economy where there's some distance between hype and reality. Will that distance widen or contract?

A new paradigm for creating jobs

It would be prudent to take up a few sectors initially, get the policy instruments right, and put in the critical mass of resources to achieve a self-sustaining inflection point

he belief that we need higher GDP (gross domestic product) growth rates and employment generation would follow is crumbling. We have had high GDP growth rates but have not been creating the jobs that we need. The focus now has to be on job creation with GDP growth becoming the consequence.

This needs a fundamental change in our mindset. We need to move beyond the 'Washington Consensus", which we embraced with the economic reforms in 1991. The state should limit its role to maintaining sound macroeconomic fundamentals, providing better physical and social infrastructure, and

improving the ease of doing business. Free markets would then deliver. The limitations of this approach are best seen if we compare ourselves with China. In 1991, we were on a par in per capita incomes and technology. They are now five times ahead. Instead of leaving market forces alone, the state in China

steered industrialisation and success in strained for resources resorted to pricing exports, making China "the factory of the world". The Chinese learnt and improved on the policies adopted by South Korea and Japan, which had succeeded earlier.

AJAY SHANKAR

The Indian state now needs to assume greater responsibility for job creation. But for this, we have to first believe that the state can craft smart policies and implement them to get the private sector to invest in creating the jobs that we need. Leaving markets alone is no longer an option. We underperformed till 1991 by believing in centralised planning and the ability of the state to micro-manage the economy. After the reforms of 1991 we have underperformed by accepting that the state should not try to steer market forces to get desired outcomes.

There are two macro-level policy changes that are essential but not sufficient for success. First is the real exchange rate, which does not get the attention it deserves. There has been a consensus among economists in the world that an appreciation in the real exchange rate has an adverse effect on domestic value addition and job creation. India has been experiencing real exchange rate appreciation without an increase in productivity and exports that normally lead to a strengthening of the currency. This has been the result of the unusual combination of increasing remittances and large capital inflows into our stock markets. Our policy has been to let the markets determine the exchange rate. This has been hurting us.

It is time for a change and for the Reserve Bank of India to intervene in the markets to prevent exchange rate appreciation. The East Asians actually practised artificial depreciation to industrialise The second is to

reduce the cost of doing business. A poor, developing economy con-

distortions in the pre-reform era through cross-subsidies and extremely high tax rates on "luxury" items. In an open economy these stubborn legacy distortions impose a cost disadvantage beyond the control of a firm. Our costs of logistics are about 50 per cent higher than those of our competitors. Ideally diesel should be in the low or at best medium slab of goods and services tax (GST). But it is taxed at almost twice the highest rate of GST. Reducing the cost of business requires greater priority than improving the ease of doing business. The production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme is the result of the acceptance that our higher costs need to be mitigated by budgetary support. Since all production cannot be supported by PLI, it would be better to take decisions needed to lower the cost of doing business if we are to succeed in getting private investment to create jobs.

(Filling up vacancies in government is no solution to the real crisis.)

Then we need smart sectoral policies. First, identify labour-intensive sectors in manufacturing and services where we have the wage advantage to be major players in the global market. We have to give up the dated belief in the natural endowment of competitive advantage. In the contemporary high-technology global economy, firms create the competitive advantage. Governments can help firms to create this advantage. They can also pursue foreign direct investment in sectors where a large number of jobs would be created. To do this, pragmatic sector-specific policy instruments need to be evolved in consultation with market players. To illustrate, PLI for smart phones has resulted in Apple making India a manufacturing hub for the global market. In just a few years about 150,000 jobs have been created. The Apple example gives us an idea of our potential.

The key would be to put in place the measures that begin yielding results in the next two to three years. These would need to be specific to the sector selected. A policy instrument that is not in violation of our treaty obligations should not be off the table; provision of concessional finance, cheap land, public investment, government procurement with stipulation of domestic value addition, increase in import duties, etc. What would work for a breakthrough in garment exports would be different for what tourism needs. The Taj Mahal Hotel of Delhi is a good example of public-private partnership (when the phrase had not yet come into usage) where the New Delhi Municipal Council and Delhi Development Authority provided land and the building structure with the Tatas investing in finishing and furnishing and entering into a long-term revenue sharing contract. These were highly profitable investments for both sides.

It would be prudent to take up a few sectors initially, get the policy instruments right, and put in the critical mass of resources to achieve a self-sustaining inflection point. Spreading resources too thinly would be a mistake. After initial success, there would be greater state capacity and confidence for taking up more sectors. Success in the domestic market and in exports has to move in tandem as we are part of the global economy. Reverting to a protectionist and closed economy is neither desirable nor an option. A political-economy transition in favour of the producer who creates jobs and workers with their interests getting precedence over those of consumers and traders is essential for a breakthrough in job creation.

The writer is former secretary, DIPP,

Attracting Netravalkars

EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

he average Indian male loathes Saurabh Netravalkar. At 21, the Mumbaikar was selected to study computer engineering at the prestigious Cornell University in the United States. Years later, he joined Oracle as a software engineer in California.

Netravalkar's accomplishments do not end here. He is an international cricketer who won a crucial T20 World Cup game in the Super Over against Pakistan, plays the ukulele like a pro, and is an accomplished singer with a mellifluous, honey-dipped voice. If he sets his mind to it, he could ace the Scripps National Spelling Bee competition as well.

Indeed, Netravalkar is the guy every girl would like to introduce to her parents. The Cornell-educatedturned-software engineer-turnedinternational cricketer is part of the growing tribe of Indian immigrants who have made the US their home through talent, grit, and hard work.

Netravalkar is among the scores of Indians settled in the US on an H-1B visa. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that typically allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. They are essentially America's whitecollar coolies.

Netravalkar secured an H-1B visa based on the fact that he is a software engineer. Given his multifaceted nature, he has now excelled in

another domain - cricket. Over time, there have been several stereotypes attached to Indians in the US. They are known as the techies from Silicon Valley, or that random dude who runs the mom-and-pop store in the locality. Contrary to popular belief, Indian immigration to the US did not begin after the tech boom in the 1970s and 1980s. The earliest arrivals were Punjabis, Gujaratis, and Telugus who arrived in clusters at the turn of the 20th century. The liberalisation of the US immigration law in the 1960s attracted skilled Indian professionals

In the utterly compelling book, The Other One Percent: Indians in America, authors Sanjov Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh write that a majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants in the US today identify themselves as Indians because it has made their lives "much easier."

"That is, they were born in Bangladesh or Pakistan, but identified themselves as Indians by race (even when the census allowed them to identify themselves as Bangladeshi or Pakistani by race)," the authors say.

"Interestingly, most of these people were born after the Independence of India and Pakistan, and the Partition in 1947," they write.

According to a report by the US Immigration and Citizenship Services in January this year, of the 4,40,000 H-1B applications that were approved in 2022, nearly 73 per cent (3,20,000) were from Indians. There are other reasons why so many Indians bag the H-1B visa

every year. Their technical expertise, English language skills, ability to seamlessly integrate with the local population. and diverse array of talents in other domains, make them an ideal fit.

Netravalkar's spectacular career trajectory is a case in point. But it could change.

The US government is planning a rule tweak that would significantly increase costs of companies hiring foreign tech workers on H-1B and L-1 visas. This proposal by the Department of Homeland Security and the US Customs and Border Protection, if passed by the Senate, would require employers to pay an additional fee when extending the visas of these workers, on top of the fees already paid for the initial applications.

Capping the H-1B visa goes against the ethos of what the US stands fora welcoming country known for attracting talent and fostering innovation. These curbs notwithstanding, a sizeable portion of the economically sound second and third-generation Indian Americans may not have the same attachment to their homeland as their fathers and grandfathers.

In the future, they could integrate with the American mainstream, so much so that the notions of identity crisis that their previous generations have grappled with may become a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, the US needs to understand that it could potentially lose out on attracting several Netravalkars in the future if it curbs the influx of such industrious Indian immigrants.

Three elections, three mistakes



TICKER MIHIR S SHARMA

oe Biden had a disastrous evening on the debate stage on Thursday. He may still be a more reliable President than Donald Trump, three years younger than he is — but that says more about Mr Trump than anything else. Nor will it be easy to convince American voters that Mr Biden is worth voting for at this stage.

Yet replacing someone on the ticket at this late stage is not easy in the United States. It is just one way in which the US's constitutional system is poorly adapted to the modern age. The comparison with, say, the United Kingdom — which has several times been able to change how leaders of its parliamentary parties, and thus Prime Ministers, are chosen is worth noting. The US has far more rigid institutions and precedents. It is thus, paradoxically, far more likely to elect a

would-be dictator. Three large democracies are

in the coming months. In all three, the incumbents seem to have been guilty of horrific misjudgements. President Biden, clearly, should have started planning for a succession years ago: Few expected in 2020 that he would want to serve a second term in office, and assumed he was just running for a single term to stop Mr Trump from re-election. Yet at no point since has Mr Biden either built up the profile of his vice-president, Kamala Harris, or allowed an open or even covert leadership contest within his party for a successor. Choosing to run again - which, in the US party system, means that the party automatically rallies to you out of loyalty - was clearly a grievous error. In the United Kingdom,

meanwhile, the Conservative Party under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is staring at a defeat on July 4 — a defeat that may be of historic proportions. Some projections suggest that they might not even be the second-largest party in Parliament once the elections are done, with the centrist Liberal Democrats assaulting Tory strongholds in

energetically southern England and aiming for more than 50 of these seats. Constituencies that have staved Conservative for more than a century might go to the

likely to elect new leadership Liberals this time. Labour, meanwhile, has played a cautious game, choosing to commit to nothing rather than in any way disturb its 20-point lead in the polls.

This situation has been caused by 14 years of poor governance by the Conservatives. But the magnitude of the loss is also down to the poor judgement of Mr Sunak, who chose to call an early election before his party was really ready and well in advance of improving economic news. Inflation is finally declining, and rates might be cut in the fall, boosting growth. Mr Sunak could have waited for this tailwind to the economy before going to the polls. But, for no reason that anyone can discern, he

chose to go early instead. The consequences for the world's most successful political party might be dire. Some parties can survive complete wipeouts. But they are never the same again. The Congress in India is back near 100 seats in Parliament from 44 in 2014; the Pakistan Peoples Party collapsed to 42 seats in the National Assembly in 2013, and has never recovered its vote share since. Worse is possible. The Conservatives' counterparts in Canada were wiped out in the 1992 federal election there — with a massive 27-point swing against them — and the party was replaced by a more

populist right-wing bloc. That bloc was centred around Preston Manning of the Reform Party, and it is Britain's own Reform Party, centred around Nigel Farage, that threatens the Tories with extinction.

Meanwhile, in France, Emmanuel Macron may finally have made a mistake after years of balancing left and right expertly. Mr Macron unexpectedly called an early election. It looks now like this was a major miscalculation: His centrist bloc may be a weak third in elections, and lose many of its seats. His Prime Minister. Gabriel Attal, will almost certainly lose his job. Mr Macron calculated, perhaps, that the left would not be able to repeat the alliance it stitched up before the last elections; and that the right, which has multiple contenders, would be in disarray. Signs of this dissension did in fact emerge early on: But they have largely been buried as the campaign continued. The centre may practically disappear when the election results are announced on July 7.

The xenophobic, populist right may seize control in France, will likely storm to power in the United States, and might replace the traditional right in the United Kingdom. In each case, a single major miscalculation by leaders of the centre-left or centre-right must bear a large part of the blame.



{ OUR TAKE }

The debate on **US** presidency

Joe Biden's disastrous performance on Thursday has left Democrats shaken. Donald Trump is now the clear frontrunner

n Thursday, as American voters tuned in to their television sets and devices to watch the presidential debate, two questions dominated public consciousness. Was Donald Trump stable and disciplined enough to deliver a performance on stage for 90 minutes, without being a bully and alienating swing voters in swing states? Was Joe Biden physically healthy and mentally coherent enough to communicate effectively, and show that he could be trusted with one of the world's most high-pressure jobs for another four years when he would be 86? By the end of the first presidential debate, the voters had tentative answers.

Trump's record and rhetoric remain deeply disturbing. By one account, he lied over two dozen times in the 90-minute debate on issues ranging from his economic and foreign policy record to abortion and immigration. He refused to either accept the 2020 election results and condemn the attack on the US Capitol or commit to accepting the outcome of the 2024 election results. He had little to say on some of the world's most pressing challenges, particularly the climate crisis. Instead, he defended his decision to walk out of the Paris climate accord and sought to bracket Russia, China and India in the same category as climate freeloaders while suggesting that the agreement mandated the US to have responsibilities, which is a lie. Trump didn't explain how an across-the-board tariff increase that he has promised if elected would help either the American economy or conform to global trading rules. And the former president did not have specific answers on how he would end the war in Ukraine, except to brag that he would do it by January. He also offered little clue of what he thought of Israel's war in Gaza, or even if it should end at all. Yet, and this is the remarkable feature of American politics at the moment, Trump won the debate. He won because, irrespective of the nature of one's ideological agreements or disagreements with him or views on his political rhetoric, the 45th US President seemed like he was in control. It seemed like he was attuned to the concerns of American citizens on immigration, inflation and frustration with external entanglements. He was, by his dismally low standards, disciplined as he kept his performative volatility under check.

Biden lost. And the 46th President of the US lost not as much because of the substance of his policies as his utter failure to articulate his worldview and record. From his wobbly walk to the stage to his meandering sentences, from his weak rebuttal of Trump to his inability to even leverage issues on which Democrats score high such as abortion, Biden's performance will go down as a case study of what not to do at debates and how not to communicate in politics. In President Biden's case, this failure is a direct product of his age, which will lead to even swing voters growing sceptical of his ability to complete a second term. Being the American president requires exercising judgment on the most difficult issues, all the time. And if American citizens don't believe that a candidate is mentally sharp enough to exercise that judgment, that's a problem. If he truly believes that Trump's candidacy represents a threat to democracy, Biden must voluntarily step aside, free his delegates and, let the Democratic Party choose a candidate at the convention through an open electoral process. It is late. But shaking up the race late may help Democrats to galvanise their base and put up a contest in November. Otherwise, they can get ready for Trump's return to the White House.

Recalibrating relations with China, Pakistan

Manoj

Joshi

A confident and economically powerful India can explore ways to end the impasse in ties with its major neighbours

striking thing about a general election is that each one shifts the paradigm of governance in some way or the other. When a ruling party loses, the shift is marked. But even when a party wins successive elections, there can be a shift, though a concerted effort is on to affirm continuity in policies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)'s third consecutive

term in office Two areas that could benefit from policy shifts are in relation to Pakistan and China. In both cases, New Delhi's recent approaches have been the equivalent of walking on a treadmill – moving, but effectively staying at the same place. In the past four years or so there has been little or no effort

by any of the three parties which neighbour each other to take new initiatives. There seems to be a touch of indifference or lethargy. Can the 2024 general elections in India change

Recall that the 2019 election revolved around the Pulwama terror attack and India's Balakot strike. But in 2024, little has been heard about Pakistan, which though enveloped in a polycrisis, continues in smaller ways to stir up trouble in Kashmir. Given some of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that has dogged the elections, it would have been easy enough to target Islamabad, but that has not happened. Perhaps, that no longer resonates with the electorate.

On the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the ceasefire of 2021 holds good. There have been no serious terrorist incidents with Pakistani footprints. But there have been somewhat desultory attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri area, the latest in Reasi hours before Narendra Modi was to be sworn in for the third time. But the reality is since the abrogation of Article 370, India-Pakistan diplomatic ties have been downgraded and bilateral trade remains frozen.

An outright Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) victory would have made it a kind of legacy term. But even as the head of the NDA coalition, Narendra Modi remains a powerful leader who will be conscious of his policies from the point of view of legacy. His past has made it clear that he is not doctrinaire when it comes to hostility with Pakistan or China. He has attempted to make peace with both of them at various points in time. Do we have a combination of circumstances that could help him come up with new initiatives?

Prime Minister (PM) Modi's most definitive remarks on relations with China came out in an interview with Newsweek magazine in

April, when he spoke of the importance and significance of India-China relations and the need to "urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us"

India's stepping on China has been careful. Geopolitics and geoeconomics are taking it close to the United States and the West. It is a member of Quad, but it has

ensured that the Quad agenda is about dealing with the climate crisis, disaster management, strategic technologies, supply chain resilience, health security and counter-terrorism. Modi has pointed to India's participation in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to note that Delhi is willing to work with likeminded countries on any shared positive agenda

It can't be more specific than that. But, of course, it takes two hands to clap and a great

NARENDRA MODI REMAINS A POWERFUL LEADER WHO WILL BE CONSCIOUS OF HIS POLICIES. HIS PAST HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE IS NOT DOCTRINAIRE WHEN IT **COMES TO HOSTILITY** WITH PAKISTAN OR CHINA



It is important to address the border issue if India and China want stable relations

deal depends on what Beijing is after. Officially, as President Xi Jinping noted after his meeting with Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in 2023, China believes that improving relations between the two nations serve their common interests and "contributes to peace, stability and development of the world and the region". Since 2017, China has embarked on a build-up along the Line of Actual Control from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh. India has countered this. However, there has been little progress in their efforts to work out a border settlement through their special representatives (SRs). The last round of SR talks, the 22nd, took place in 2019. And neither have they been able to achieve the status quo ante in Ladakh as of March 2020, when the Chinese blockaded Indian posts in Eastern Ladakh

The 1993-2020 experience has taught us that setting aside the border issues to develop relations in other areas is no solution. As Modi has indicated, it is important to address the border issue if India and China want stable relations with each other. However, the Chinese insist that the boundary question "is a historical issue" and does not represent the "entirety of China-India relations". Their spokesmen have insisted that the resolution of the boundary issue was separate from the issue of "peace and tranquillity" in the border areas. Their move to send an ambassador to India after 18 months was another intriguing piece of the way Beijing operates since it happened in May amidst the general elections.

In the Newsweek interview mentioned earlier. Modi had noted that he wished the new Pakistan PM, Shehbaz Sharif, well on his assumption to office, and that Indian policy

was always to advance "peace, security and prosperity", but it can happen only in an atmosphere free of terror and violence. Sharif's congratulatory message after the swearing-in ceremony of the new Cabinet in Delhi was some-

what mealy-mouthed and ungenerous. Once again, the issue is of the two hands clapping, and to figure out what Islamabad wants and what its fragile ruling coalition is in a position to deliver. Making peace with the civilian establishment in Islamabad is relatively easy, but how to get the Pakistan army establishment on board? The last time the two were united was when Pervez Musharraf was both the president and army chief, and between 2004-2007, both countries came close to working out an arrangement on Kashmir.

Perhaps the way out is a restoration of the old composite dialogue wherein all outstanding issues can be discussed. The South Asian Asso ciation for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has been in the doldrums since the Indian boycott of the summit after the 2016 Ur attack, could be revived. The restoration of statehood in J&K could possibly be used to restore trans-LoC links. Back-channel diplomacy could help.

The elements of a new paradigm could emerge on a template where our economy has reached a transformative point and India appears as an island of stability and confidence in an otherwise disturbed world. Having dealt successfully with major security challenges, the country now needs to cement its success with some effective neighbourhood diplomacy.

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Weaponising law and a lie to attack Indo-Islamic heritage

Fahad

Zuberi

n June 21, Jannat-ul-Firdaus Mosque in Delhi was demolished citing legal violations. Sunehri Bagh Masjid and a *madrasa* in Sarai Kale Khan also face demolition, and earlier this year, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) demolished

Akhonji Masjid in Mehrauli. These demolitions have happened despite DDA's assurance to the Delhi High Court in September 2023, that it will not demolish any mosque or legitimate Waqf properties in Delhi. The submission came in response to a petition filed by the Waqf Board fearing that such demolitions would take place in the name of removing encroachments. How does DDA destroy Indo-Islamic heritage with such impu-

The destruction is achieved through first, a lie: The lie that this architecture does not belong to the people of India and is not their heritage. This popular consciousness is achieved by redefining "Indian Heritage". Over the last decade, we see extensive and exclusive promotion of temples and occasional Buddhist and Jain shrines as Indian heritage. Even temples that are constructed recently or are still under construction get comfortably narrativised as heritage. Everything else — the buildings built by Muslim monarchs and by the Brit-is, by exclusion, defined as heritage that

is not Indian. Out of this undesirable category, colonial structures are appropriated renamed and redeveloped — in a language of decolonisation. This appropriation allows colonial infrastructure to be used while furthering a partisan politics of anti-colonial reclamation.

Language plays a key role in this othering. The RSS has promoted the idea that Muslim monarchs of South Asia were invaders who disrupted and destroyed a thriving "Indian" civilisation. Therefore, to reclaim the glory of India, the markers of their presence and their culture must be erased. The land of India must be purified so that a new era of Hindu-led development can be ushered in. This language features

in the speeches of elected politicians as well as in mainstream discourse whereby Indo-Islamic monuments are often called "tombs of invaders". While temples are promoted as desirable catalysts of development by reconfiguring them into hubs of tourism and universal spirituality, Indo-Islamic architecture is painted as an undesirable memento to a victimised past. This undesirability is then exploited to demolish architecture with impunity and legitimacy.

To enact and legalise destruction, the law is weaponised. In case of the demolition of Akhonji Mosque in Mehrauli, for example, DDA referred to a 1994 notification under the Indian Forest Act. 1927 that marked the extents

THE TRUTH IS THAT THE ARCHITECTURE BUILT BY THE MUSLIM MONARCHS IN INDIA — INDO-ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE — IS OUR COLLECTIVE HERITAGE AS SOUTH ASIAN PEOPLE

of a notified reserve forest in the region. Similar municipal laws and building by-laws have been used to destroy other gravesites, mazars and mosques in a language of encroachment and illegality. This instrumentalisation of law allows destruction of Indo-Islamic heritage by law, not despite it. The bulldozer is, today, a political symbol in India — explicitly signifying politics of erasure and hatred.

The use of law also allows for an argument of 'the necessity of violence". In this logic, violence is justified to achieve a greater good. Once particular settlements have been painted as unwanted, they can make way for the development of a "pristine forest reserve", as DDA claims in the stated cases, or cleaner cities, as municipal bodies have justified while demolishing mosques in the name of removing encroachments. The proposal to demolish the Sunehri Bagh Masjid in New Delhi for better flow of traffic follows a similar logic. Scholarship has shown that such laws were used to demolish architecture of the "natives" by the British as well — including in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1857 when neighbourhoods in Old Delhi were flattened in the name of public hygiene and sanitation. The State of India seems to be repeating this colonial doctrine and

its processes — only this time, against its own citizens and to destroy its own heritage. Architecture is our easiest access to history

and the site of our future imaginations. Archeology allows for an interpretation of the past and construction provides a canvas for the tecture becomes: of some of the most violent political conflicts. It was precisely to safeguard heritage from such political conflicts that the UNESCO World Heritage Sites category was developed and adopted between 1965 and 1972 by the United Nations. The idea of World Heritage recognises that contemporary politics decides the preservation or destruction of heritage, and that it can be done legally" by sovereign nations at their will, and therefore, needs universal protection. India has adhered to the convention and its norms, is a member State, and enjoys great capital-flow and soft power from its 42 World Heritage sites.

The truth is that the architecture built by the Muslim monarchs in India — Indo-Islamic architecture — is our collective heritage as South Asian people and as members of a collective humanity. We do not find Sultanate or Mughal architecture anywhere in the world but in the Indian subcontinent. However, politics that seeks supremacy of an identity and erasure of the other will first assign a past — an unwanted one — to the other and then erase it in a spectacular display of violence and destruction. Let us not forget that it was the destruction of a mosque that generated decades of political propulsion in India.

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Goodbye to greed-centric conservation paradigms

greed. Our greed for more, better, faster, and cheaper has, throughout history, led to cascading damages on the planet and

part of our basic instinct. Yes, I know. I have heard all the excuses. "We are the apex species and our activities for our growth are bound to have an impact on other species." "Survival of the fittest. Each species is responsible for their own survival." But the most common question asked is "What's in

other species we coexist with. So

much so that greed has become a

it for us?' Due to this mindset, anthropocentric approaches such as "ecosystem services"

e humans are known for our are being applied as it is the easiest way to convince decision-makers to undertake conservation efforts. This involves setting an economic value to a species to deter-

mine the financial viability of its conservation. For if something doesn't have an economic value or serve our greed, why should it exist at all? This is where humans are

Tejas Singh Kapoor

headed. We do not want to work towards conservation for conservation's sake but only for the economic benefit conservation brings

And it doesn't end here. When we, humans, decide to work towards conservation, most often, it only materialises after realising its impact on us. Climate action,

for example, although not to the tune required, has only become possible after realising the impact it is having and is going to have on us.

Apart from mitigation, it is focussed on how we may adapt to its adverse effects. But do we really think about the impact that our climate actions, let alone the climate crisis itself, have on other species?

Changing our perspective on nature is the priority. We must not consider nature to be a separate entity from whom we must reap benefits, but consider ourselves a part of nature itself, as much as any other species on the planet.

The Supreme Court in Centre for Environmental Law (CEL), WWF-India v. Union of India laid down the "species best interest" standard and emphasised that "our approach should be eco-centric and not anthropocentric". The court also stated that "species (have) equal rights to exist on this earth". Similarly, "rights of nature" is being adopted internationally, starting with Ecuador in 2008, under which nature is given legal recognition, equivalent to

humans, with a right to thrive and be pro-

It is time for this shift from an anthropocentric approach to an eco-centric one. Conserve by understanding what is in the best interest of the species and not what is in the best interest for humans. Conserve because each and every species has a right on the planet as much as we do. Conserve because it is the right thing to do. Conserve because that is the humane thing to do.

Conserve for the sake of conservation. Do we want future generations to look back at us and ask how and why we did this to nature? It is time for humans to be known for "humanity", which must extend not just to our fellow humans but also our fellow Earth inhabitants. Let's change the narrative and let history remember humans for being humane, not greedy.

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{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

MAPPING THE MONSOON

The monsoon is India's lifeblood. On Friday, Delhi woke up to inundated colonies, with the city's infrastructure brought to its knees at many locations, thanks to a record quantum of rain over a short duration. Over this weekend, monsoon would have covered most of India

This week, we revisit a classic of travel literature, Alexander Frater's Chasing the Monsoon (1991), that maps the passage of Indian monsoon through vignettes from the places it passes through — Kerala, where it announces its arrival, to Meghalaya, where its abundance is most felt. Frater, a travel writer for *Observer*, undertook the eponymous "chase" in 1987. While the science of the phenomenon often dominates monsoon analyses, Frater's book focuses on people's experiences of the rains (or the lack thereof) and how it shapes life through conversations with poets, waiters, and babus. This book is more about the magical experience of the monsoon, not dry statistics.



Chasing the Monsoon: Alexander Frater Year: 1991

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

POLITICS IS THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE, THE ATTAINABLE — THE ART OF THE NEXT BEST.

— OTTO VON BISMARCK

The Indian EXPRESS

∽ FOUNDED BY ∽

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BIDEN DEFEATS BIDEN

In an insipid debate, Trump has scored over Biden, triggering speculation about Democrats wanting to replace their candidate

VER THE LAST many decades, the US presidential debate has emerged as the gold standard for intense political argument at the highest levels during elections in democratic societies. By that exalted standard, the first debate between incumbent president, Joe Biden and his challenger, former president Donald Trump has been a disappointing one. Part of the reason was the debate's format. To avoid disorderly interventions, CNN chose to mute the microphones of the candidate going beyond his stipulated time and interjecting when the other was speaking. CNN also did away with the live studio. As a result, the "debate" was more like a press conference with each side making its points, irrespective of the question asked, and taking regular potshots at the other. The two ageing old White men have not, in any case, enthused the American electorate.

The expectations of success for either candidate were also rather low. Trump's supporters were pressing him to be less aggressive and more agreeable; Biden's were hoping that the President will dispel concerns about his age — at 81 he is the oldest president in the history of the United States. By those metrics at least Trump, 78, appears to have come out better. Although the fact checkers are having trouble with many of his claims, Trump was restrained and looked vigorous in contrast to the incumbent. Biden's supporters have become despondent with the president's lack of energy and focus. Biden's several stumbles during the 90 minute standoff have triggered speculation that Democrats might want to replace him as their presidential candidate. While this might be easier said than done, the debate that was to lift Biden's fortunes has cast a dark shadow not only over his own candidacy but also the prospects for the Democratic Party as a whole during the election. A third of the Senate and the entire House of Representatives is up for re-election in November.

What happens in America, of course, does not stay within America. Given the global salience of the US policies, America's friends and rivals alike are playing close attention to US elections and the arguments between Biden and Trump. Foreign policy did not figure too prominently in the debate that was focused on domestic issues such as economy, inflation, social security, illegal immigration, and abortion rights. To the extent they did, both Biden and Trump were strong in their support for Israel and tough on China. Trump accused Biden of mismanaging the crisis in Ukraine and promised to settle the issue in the few weeks between the election in the first week of November and the swearing in during the third week of January 2025. Delhi believes that India will face no major challenge from the potential change of political guard at the White House. After all, India has seen its relations grow under both the presidents. As Republicans gain an edge over Democrats after the first debate, Delhi must, however, prepare itself for a more muscular and utterly transactional Washington in the second term of President Trump.

THE MODERATING FORCE

Crisis in Akali Dal will benefit hardliners in Punjab.

The party must resolve its leadership crisis BOUT THREE-AND-A-HALF YEARS after it celebrated its centenary, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the country's second-oldest political party after

the Congress, is in the throes of an existential crisis. A section of its leaders is openly voicing what has long been whispered: President Sukhbir Singh Badal must relinquish his post to save the party. This demand surfaced days after the party secured just one of the 13 Lok Sabha seats, with 10 of its candidates losing their deposits, and two Independents winning on the Panthic agenda, once associated with the Akalis. Adding insult to injury, the BJP, its former junior alliance partner of over two decades, garnered a higher vote share. The fortunes of SAD, which ruled Punjab for two consecutive terms starting in 2007 — unprecedented in a state where it used to alternate power with the Congress plummeted in the 2017 assembly elections when it won fewer seats than the newcomer Aam Aadmi Party and hit rock bottom in 2022 when it secured only three assembly seats.

Many blame the party's misfortunes on its descent into family politics, the rise of the drug menace under its watch, and its mishandling of the sacrilege incidents in 2015. Active in electoral politics since 1937, the SAD was known as a cadre-driven party often run by iathedars" who took pride in standing up for various causes. In the countryside, the Akalis, often identified by their blue turbans, were known for their *morchas* (agitations). When the late Parkash Singh Badal, who took over as party president in 1996, anointed his son Sukhbir as president in 2008, it was the first time in the party's history that an incumbent president had elevated a family member to the post. Afterwards, many of his immediate family members joined the state cabinet while Sukhbir became the deputy chief minister.

Even as a faction of rebels seeks Sukhbir Badal's ouster and vows to launch a movement to revive the party, friends and foes alike agree on the importance of a robust Akali Dal in Punjab's politics. The party has been a moderating force in a state where religion often mixes with politics. The vacuum left by its decline is now being filled with hardliners like Amritpal Singh, who won the Khadoor Sahib seat despite being in jail under the National Security Act. As the state anticipates by-polls following the victory of four MLAs in the Lok Sabha polls, there are indications that more radicals might enter the fray. Against this background, the Akalis must return to their roots and regain lost ground — with or without a Badal at the helm.

ACHING FOR AN EPIPHANY

A study shows ancient Egyptian scribes were more prone to orthopaedic malaises. One needs to read the subtext

HE PERILS OF the writing life, it turns out, are more than just writer's block. One might blame modern humans and their sedentary lifestyles for what it's worth, but turns out bad back, poor posture, eye strain, headaches, arthritis and stressinduced injuries have been the thinking man's inheritance since ancient times. A study by the National Museum of Prague of the skeletal remains of 69 adult male scribes, buried in Egypt's Abusir between 2700 and 2180 BC, has shown that they suffered from orthopaedic malaises whose modern equivalent would be carpal tunnel syndrome or repetitive stress injury.

Unlike the ancient Greeks, whose lyceums laid equal emphasis on the life of the mind and physical training, there has mostly been a demarcation between the thinker and the doer. While a life of contemplation offers its own nourishment, for the ancient Egyptian scribes, there were rich material rewards, too, including career extensions well into one's prime. Part of the social elite — only 1 per cent of the contemporary Egyptian population was literate after all — they held high administrative positions in the Pharaoh's court, recording for posterity its workings in detailed hieroglyphics. On the flip side, the physical toll of all that sitting around was also considerably more than those suffered by the non-scribes, whose physical exertion kept them fitter and leaner.

The ergonomic challenges of these Egyptian scribes hold a lesson for modern generations. That laptop that has become a body extension, or the desk where one sits for hours on end, the tablet that has replaced the papyrus all carry an implicit warning: The implements might have changed, but the subtext hasn't. There remains a life beyond the job that requires movement and engagement, not just of the mind, but also of the body. After all, what use is an epiphany if you have lost the health plot already?

Why the hurry?



Institutional readiness for new criminal laws is a concern. They require a serious nationwide audit

Anup Surendranath and Neetika Vishwanath

AS WE STAND at the cusp of the new criminal laws coming into force on July 1, it would be naive to ignore the confusion that awaits us in the administration of criminal justice. Of equal concern must also be the regressive provisions that confer expanded police powers and dilute civil liberties. While there are some positive changes, our institutions do not have the capacity to implement them. We are forced to again ask: Why are these provisions being rolled out, especially when there has been no reliable and independent assessment of institutional preparedness across the police, courts and prisons to implement them?

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) will replace the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC), the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC), and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (IEA) respectively. These new laws were presented as an exercise in decolonising our criminal law. However, it is now evident that this claim cannot be defended. Seventy-five per cent of the existing provisions have been retained verbatim in the new laws. Besides, decolonisation cannot be understood as merely legislative changes. Our criminal justice institutions continue to be afflicted by colonial legacies and require fundamental institutional reform.

What then does it mean to "reform" the criminal justice system? Certain new provisions that confer excessive police power using vague definitions of offences, enhance durations of police custody and permit trials in-absentia are regressive. They do not amount to the kind of systemic reform proclaimed. Positive changes like timelines for different stages of the criminal process, recording of search and seizure by the police and more scientific investigations do not come with commensurate effort to build procedural protections or institutional capacity.

Some changes are alarming in terms of the police powers they confer. Section 187 of the BNSS substantially increases police powers by

Certain new provisions that confer excessive police power using vague definitions of offences, enhance durations of police custody and permit trials in-absentia are regressive. They do not amount to the kind of systemic reform proclaimed. Positive changes like timelines for different stages of the criminal process, recording of search and seizure by the police and more scientific

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expanding the maximum limit of police custody from 15 days to 60 days or 90 days. The proviso to Section 167(2)(a) of the CrPC allows the magistrate to extend custody of an arrested person beyond 15 days as long as it is not in police custody, meaning that beyond 15 days, the person has to be in prison and not with the police. However, the corresponding Section 187(3) of the BNSS has deleted the words "otherwise than in police custody" that exist in the CrPC, opening up the possibility of police custody for much longer durations than those envisaged in the UAPA [Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act] or erstwhile stringent legislation like the POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) and TADA [Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act]. Significantly longer police custody is applicable for all offences listed in the new BNS.

The addition of vague offences that confer significant police powers also raises alarm for civil liberties. The provisions on "false and misleading information" (section 197) and "acts endangering sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India" (section 152 as the replacement for sedition) are extraordinarily vague. The potential for grave abuse is evident.

Worryingly, the BNSS also permits trials in-absentia, that is, prosecution and adjudication of complete trials against absconding proclaimed offenders in their absence. While the CrPC only allowed for the evidence to be recorded in the absence of the accused, the BNSS completely suffocates the accused's right to defend themselves.

Retention of large parts of the existing laws also raises another set of crucial questions. What was the need to repeal the existing laws? Could the changes have not come in the form of amendments? The new laws in their respective "repeal and savings" provisions provide for a limited application of the IPC, CrPC and the IEA in proceedings which are pending immediately before these new laws come into force on July 1. However, these provisions fail to provide sufficient clarity on various counts. For instance, while Section 358

of the BNS states that the IPC will continue to apply in case of offences under the IPC, it is unclear whether it will only apply to cases in which the date of the offence is before July 1 or also in instances where some proceedings, investigation, or remedy concerning an offence under the IPC are pending. Similarly, Section 531 of the BNSS and Section 170 of the BSA state that if there is any appeal, application, trial, inquiry or investigation pending before the enforcement of the new legislation then such proceedings will be governed by the provisions of the CrPC or IEA. However, there is confusion about the applicability of the new laws in cases where a proceeding has been concluded under the provisions of the CrPC, but further proceedings remain. For instance, if an investigation has concluded before July 1 but the trial is yet to begin, it is not clear whether the framing of charges, trial and appeal will proceed under the CrPC or the BNSS. These are not new issues and have been a site of judicial confusion with contradictory judgments by High Courts.

The institutional readiness for these laws coming into force is a serious cause for concern. Police personnel and multiple levels of judicial officials need to be ready with the knowledge of these laws for even the very first step of registering FIRs from July 1. There has been no in-depth assessment of preparedness across different institutions of the criminal justice system across different states. Merely stating the number of training sessions and number and attendees will not do. There is far too much at stake in terms of liberty and justice for us to leave it to the hope that we have done enough to prepare our institutions. The implementation of these laws must be postponed until there is a thorough and independent audit of the preparedness of our criminal justice institutions across the country.

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THE MARRIAGE PENALTY

Foxconn's alleged hiring bias begs the question: Where's the support system?

Paromita Chakrabarti

IMAGINE, IF YOU can, a workforce dominated by women. Imagine, too — and this might be easier given the certainty of firefighting that working women across the spectrum carry out in their own backyards — the constraints each of them has had to overcome to be where they are. What might thread their disparate stories together? Marriage and motherhood penalties at the workplace. Check. A loop that doesn't stop at 9-5 but spills over all hours, every day. An ability to multi-task that allows them to carry out a precarious balancing act nonetheless. Check and check.

When it comes to the last though, especially in blue-collar jobs, including gig work, the imagination seems to falter. A Reuters investigation of Apple iPhone maker Foxconn's assembly headquarters in Tamil Nadu's Sriperumbudur has thrown up anomalies in the hiring process — married women are apparently rejected on grounds of pregnancy, family commitments, greater number of leaves or, as one former HR executive put it, "cultural issues", including and not limited to wearing jewellery that interferes with the production process.

Over the years, Foxconn's track record as an employer has come under scrutiny, especially in China, where its biggest iPhone plant in Zhengzhou saw a spate of employee suicides over a decade ago, leading to an investigation of working conditions. Now, in India, the Ministry of Labour and Employment has sought a report from the Tamil Nadu labour department, prompting Foxconn to come out with an informal statement reiterating its commitment to workplace equality: Twenty-five per cent of recent hires have been married women. With

In India, where political parties have only recently woken up to women as a constituency and where gender parity is held up as one of the government's primary commitments, equality often remains notional. In 2023, for instance, women's labour force participation stood at 32.7 per cent vis-a-vis 76.8 per cent for men. The loopholes are many and the employment process inhibited by a profound lack of imagination.

roughly 70 per cent women employees, and with total employment touching 45,000 workers at its peak, its Tamil Nadu factory apparently offers maximum female employment in the country.

On paper, this sounds impressive. Yet, in India, where political parties have only recently woken up to women as a constituency and where gender parity is held up as one of the government's primary commitments, equality often remains notional. In 2023, for instance, women's labour force participation stood at 32.7 per cent vis-a-vis 76.8 per cent for men. The loopholes are many and the employment process inhibited by a profound lack of imagination. In the Foxconn investigation, an applicant's question about childcare provisions receives a swift rebuttal from a recruiter — married women are unwelcome. It is this failure of the imagination that invisibilises women's perennial mental load, that will not ensure creches at workplaces, or consider the disproportionate care burden on women. It will take recourse instead in patriarchal arguments that valorise longer hours over efficiency, conformity over commitment. It will legitimise lack of opportunity or pay imbalance by holding up the hurdles as yardsticks, putting off more and more women from nec-

essary employment. This failure is not that of the government, political parties or corporates alone. It begins with individuals and families and seeps into organisations, from societies into governments. Far too many women are told that they are "fortunate" to have families that "allow" them to work or have partners who help around the house. Even more are expected to return home after a long day to cook, clean and see to its upkeep. The UN's Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023 report warned that unless addressed, entire generations of women would end up spending disproportionate amounts of time on housework, hemmed in by prejudicial norms. It is a disconcerting thought.

Earlier this year, in Union of India and Others vs Ex. Lt. Selina John case, the Supreme Court observed that rules which penalise working women on the grounds of marriage are unconstitutional: "Terminating employment because the woman has got married is a coarse case of gender discrimination and inequality. Acceptance of such [a] patriarchal rule undermines human dignity, right to nondiscrimination and fair treatment." John was a former officer in the Military Nursing Service but her case serves to show the discrimination that extends across the employment matrix, amplified, as always, among the economically weaker. For India to emerge as the third-largest economy in the world that puts women at the centre of change, it will need to reorient its metrics of assessment and strengthen enforcement of regulations.

There is a proverb that generations of Bengali women have grown up with: Je raadhe, she chul-o bnadhe (The one who cooks also finds time to take care of herself). In essence, that multi-tasking comes innately to women. There would, doubtless, be equivalents of this in other Indian languages, powering women to do more, to take on more, because they can. The support system? That's where the imagination has to come in.

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INDIAN EXPRESS

JUNE 29, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

NSA ON AKALI CHIEF

THE AKALI DAL and SPGC acting presidents, Ujagar Singh Sekhwan and Atma Singh, were detained on June 28, under the National Security Act. According to party sources, the Akali Dal was planning to launch a non-cooperation movement in Punjab, to protest the arrest. They've also drafted a resolution, condemning military action and demanding withdrawal of security forces.

RUMOURS RIFE IN J&K

CLOSE AIDES OF J&K chief minister, Farooq Abdullah have denied rumours regarding the

dissolution of state assembly, claiming that the incumbent enjoyed majority support in the assembly. Shah's aides however say that the NC government is on its way out. Mufti Sayeed, a state Congress president, said that the Centre had no inclinations to dislodge Abdullah, unless decided by the PM.

WAGE CUTS IN IA

ALL INDIAN AIRLINES workers who stayed away from work after the call for strike by the ACEU on June 28, will have eight days of wages deducted from their salaries. The IA management claims that this is permissible under the Payment of Wages Act. They also added that they'd notified all workers of such actions on the eve of the strike. Close to 5000 workers joined the strike, all of whom face the prospect of wage cuts.

Indo-Sri Lanka Talks

MINISTER OF EXTERNAL Affairs, PV Narasimha Rao, and Sri Lanka's Minister for national security, Lalith Athulathmudali, held detailed discussions on June 28, on the Tamil question and Indo-Sri Lanka relations. While details remain elusive, it is fairly certain that GOI is going to reiterate that Sri Lanka's Tamil question should be settled by talks involving all interests and parties.

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3 THE IDEAS PAGE

The Sangh silence on 1975

The Emergency remains a stain on our democracy but let's not forget who does not respect the Opposition in 2024



LALU PRASAD AND Nalin Verma

AFTER BEING RE-ELECTED as Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Om Birla said — and Prime Minister Narendra Modi endorsed his statement — that June 25 should be treated as a "black day" as the anniversary of the imposition of Emergency. The duo is trying to use the House to deflect the attention of the people from the monumental failures in governance and in upholding the Constitution.

Shockingly, Modi and his BJP-RSS friends are "enlightening" the next generation about a period in which they played a dubious role. I (Lalu) was the convener of the steering committee that Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) – the greatest people's leader after Mahatma Gandhi — had constituted to carry forward the movement against the excesses of Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. I was in jail under the Maintenance of Security Act (MISA) for over 15 months. My colleagues and I had not come across many of the BJP ministers speaking about the Emergency today. We hadn't heard of Modi, J P Nadda and some of the PM's other ministerial colleagues who today lecture us on the value of freedom. The then Prime Minister had resorted to

constitutional provisions to declare Emergency. Indira Gandhi put many of us behind bars, but she never abused us. Neither she nor her ministers called us "anti-national" or "unpatriotic". She never enabled vandals to defile the memory of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar — the architect of our Constitution. She also did not associate with those who endorse lynch mobs to kill and maim minorities and Dalits in the name of religion and caste. Cattle traders were not persecuted and killed on suspicions of possessing beef.

The assassins of Mahatma Gandhi were not worshipped during the 1975 Emergency. Young people were free to choose partners of their choice. They were not persecuted in the name of a fictitious "love jihad".

Modi talked about "vote jihad" in the 2024 election campaign and invoked superstitious ideas about eating "machhli (fish)-mutton". This is in line with earlier statements. Indira ii never said that Lord Ganesha got an elephant's trunk through plastic surgery. She made India a nuclear power. The Indian Army, during her tenure as PM, defeated Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The current PM shows off more with achievements far less substantial.

The 18th Lok Sabha, on the first day of its first session, should have discussed the rot in educational institutions, exam-paper leaks, burgeoning unemployment, caste census, reservation for the marginalised classes, unprecedented inflation, threats to the Constitution, special category status for Bihar,



C R Sasikumar

violence in Manipur, misuse of investigating agencies against the BJP's political opponents, subjugation of the democratic institutions, capturing the media, and lodging the journalists, writers, and activists in jail.

Instead of letting Parliament function as a forum to discuss pressing issues, the BJP is back to misusing the House to misinterpret the history of Emergency. The entire Opposition under the banner of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) has a valid mandate — which it will use — to reign in the Sangh Parivar's authoritarian streak.

The PM is now in power with the Telugu Desam Party and Janata Dal (United) as crutches. But he is acting like nothing has changed. That is a fool's paradise.

Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav, Supriya Sule, and several other young MPs elected on INDIA's ticket are performing extremely well. People are with the INDIA bloc. The election results have shown that Modi has lost the trust of the people. The INDIA bloc MPs should keep raising their voice for people's causes in the House.

Modi, Birla, Nadda and their likes are trying to spread falsehoods and project themselves as the "heroes" of the battle against Emergency. There is no doubt, of course, that the Emergency will always be a stain on our democracy. There were, of course, valiant leaders against Emergency. These included Chandra Shekhar (former The then PM resorted to constitutional provisions to declare Emergency. Indira Gandhi put many of us behind bars, but she never abused us. Neither she nor her ministers called us 'anti-

national' or 'unpatriotic'. She never enabled vandals to defile the memory of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar — the architect of our Constitution. She also did not associate with those who endorse lynch mobs to kill and maim minorities and Dalits in the name of religion

Prime Minister), George Fernandes, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Sharad Yadav, Karpoori Thakur, Ramanand Tiwary, Raj Narayan and my friends in Bihar — Nitish Kumar (Bihar CM), Ram Vilas Paswan, Shivanand Tiwary, Abdul Bari Siddiqui and countless others.

In fact, JP never liked the dualities of the Sangh Parivar leaders. He asked them to disassociate from the RSS to join the Janata Party, based on his philosophy of socialism, equality and justice. Sangh leaders never abided by JP. They used the movement to gain recognition in society and continued with their communal ways.

Veteran socialist leader Shivanand Tiwary recalled how the then RSS chief Balasaheb Deoras, arrested under MISA, wrote a letter to Indira Gandhi supporting her 20-point programme that her government had put in place to garner public support for the Emergency. He also pleaded with other RSS workers.

Yes, let's all pledge to fight for freedom and to ensure that no one can shred the Constitution, misuse it to bludgeon the Opposition. 1975 can never, and should never, be repeated. But let's also not forget who's in power in 2024 and who refuses to respect the Opposition.

Lalu Prasad is president of the Rashtriya Janata Dal. Nalin Verma is his biographer, journalist and researcher in folklore

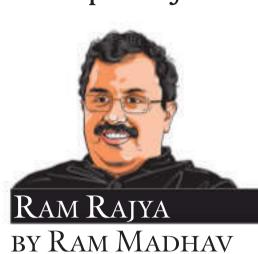
A partnership of democracies

"Lurking in Labour's manifesto is a plan to give ordinary people opportunity, security and dignity. Bliss in this dawn to be alive? Maybe not quite, but viewed amid the debris of the last decade, Labour's putative parliamentary majority

seems an almost unimaginably hopeful starting point." — THE GUARDIAN

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Indo-US ties have gained momentum under PM Modi. Task ahead is to sort out differences, especially on strategic autonomy for Delhi



INDIA AND THE United States of America have been close allies for more than two decades. India recently elected the Narendra Modi-led government for the third consecutive term. In the US, the presidential elections are scheduled for November and a new government led by Joe Biden or Donald Trump will be in place in January next year. Either way, it will be a continuation of the relations built by Modi in the last 10 years. Jawaharlal Nehru had the opportunity to meet three presidents — Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and John F Kennedy. In a decade of his tenure, Modi has already met

three American presidents – Barack Obama,

Donald Trump and Joe Biden. He waits to

meet the one among the latter two who gets

a second tenure. Although India and the US established diplomatic ties soon after Independence, the relationship had to endure Cold War era distrust and American wrath over India's nuclear programme. The Americans wanted the former British colony to become their ally. Nehru's refusal to do so and his pursuit of an independent foreign policy of non-alignment didn't go down well with successive US administrations. Although the Kennedy government was helpful during the Indo-China war of 1962, and the US extended assistance for India's Green Revolution, President Richard Nixon openly sided with Pakistan and China during the crucial years of 1969-74. Indira Gandhi's decision to test the first nuclear device in 1974 angered the American leadership, which continued through Bill Clinton's years in office when India tested

a more powerful device during Atal Bihari

Vajpayee's regime in 1998. Credit for steadying the relationship goes to Vajpayee as the prime minister. Although the Clinton administration imposed serious sanctions in multiple areas after the Vajpayee government conducted nuclear tests, Clinton's visit to New Delhi in March 2000 and Vajpayee's deft diplomatic handling helped diffuse the situation. The first major breakthrough happened in the form of a vision document released jointly by the two leaders. "We are nations forged from many traditions and faiths, proving year after year that diversity is our strength. From vastly different origins and experiences, we have come to the same conclusions: that freedom and democracy are the strongest bases for both peace and prosperity and that they are universal aspirations, constrained neither by culture nor levels of economic development", that statement read.

Later that year, Vajpayee was in New York for the UN General Assembly where he addressed the Asiatic Society. His famous statement that India and US were "natural allies" became the basis for the new relationship in later years. During his visit to the US in 2013, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the US-India partnership in the joint statement with President Obama as "a

defining one for the 21st century."

Under Prime Minister Modi, this relationship has acquired greater momentum. Modi is the only Indian prime minister to have visited the USA eight times in 10 years In their joint statement last June, Modi and Biden affirmed a vision of the US and India as "among the closest partners in the world - a partnership of democracies looking into the 21st century with hope, ambition, and confidence". From "natural allies" to "hope, ambition and confidence" is a great journey of the bilateral partnership, which Modi described as one spanning from the "seas to the stars".

As the two governments embark on their new journeys, this relationship faces an important test. There are issues on both sides that cause unease. India's insistence on "strategic autonomy" is raising hackles in foreign policy circles in the US. India's steadfast refusal to consider the Quad as a maritime alliance, something like an Indo-Pacific NATO, too is making sections of the American establishment squirm. While there is palpable enthusiasm on the Indian side over the security and development potential of the Quad, the other side appears to see greater merit in pursuing the AUKUS agenda more vigorously.

Biden's decision to pull out of the Quad summit in Australia last year and not visit India in January this year for another possible Quad summit led to commentators suspecting deliberate neglect of the arrangement by the US leadership. At the same time, AUKUS is rapidly growing as an area of greater strategic interest for Australia, the US and Japan. The latest Defence White Paper released by the Australian government speaks at length about cooperation in AUKUS but has a cursory mention of the Quad. The possible expansion of AUKUS will also redefine the partnerships among Quad nations.

India's other concerns were highlighted in a speech by foreign minister Jaishankar at the UN last September. "From time to time, respect for the UN charter is invoked. But for all the talk, it is still a few nations who set the agenda and seek to define the norms. This cannot go on indefinitely" Jaishankar lashed out in an address, which some called "bold" while others saw in it India's growing "belligerence". In a clear message to the West over the much-touted argument about "rules-based order", Jaishankar cautioned that "rule makers should not subjugate rule takers" and "rules will work only when they apply equally to all". Indirectly referring to the turn taken by the Khalistan issue in the US and Canada, he came down heavily, saying that "political convenience" is determining responses to terrorism and extremism. "When reality departs from the rhetoric, we must have the courage to call it out", he said, highlighting the "sentiment of the Global South" that "without genuine solidarity, there can never be trust".

Growing global challenges, including the rise of China and the unfolding new Cold War-like situation call for greater understanding and coordinated action between the US and India – two powers committed to the same ideals in two different geo-strategic locations. That understanding will decide the future trajectory of the relationship.

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



The family we choose

and caste.

With a new Parliament, let's have conversations on a more expansive kinship

Vivek Divan

IN THIS TIME of hyper-sensationalism, and social respect.' meaningful events often get overshadowed by stories of less substance but more appeal. Modern media has fuelled this detrimental trend, sometimes enabled by those who cultivate ties with it to garner attention. So, while news of queer marriage equality made headlines as a result of a poorly conceived effort at litigating this issue before the Supreme Court, a significant moment in the same court three months ago failed to receive even the slightest attention.

In March 2024, the Supreme Court issued a ruling in *Devu G Nair v Kerala & Ors* about two adult women in an intimate relationship, allegedly being rented asunder by one of their parents. In highlighting the realities that confront queer people too often, the court expressed what it had imbibed in 2023 while hearing one of the interventions made in the marriage equality case (apart from important guidelines, it issued on how scrupulously courts should handle such matters):

"[T]he concept of 'family' is not limited to the natal family but also encompasses a person's chosen family. This is true for all persons. However, it has gained heightened significance for LGBTQ+ persons on account of the violence and lack of safety that they may experience at the hands of their natal family. When faced with humiliation, indignity, and even violence, people look to their partners and friends who become their chosen family. These chosen families often outlast natal families as a source of immeasurable support, love, mutual aid,

It is this idea that many in the gueer community have argued is the legal framework that must be granted to us: one which recognises that the assumption of the natal family being respectful of us, is a grave misunderstanding and that our lives should be vested with the respect, dignity and security that we inherently deserve. As we celebrate Oueer Pride this month,

we must reimagine and recast our claims to socio-economic rights to challenge conventional constructs of the social structure. It is the only way in which the needs of all of us can be catered to. In seeking legal recognition of chosen families, the queer community's priorities can be fully addressed. While the rights that those in intimate coupledom should obtain are necessary, those who seek to consolidate our legal rights through other relationships, must also not be denied.

This may seem like a far-fetched notion, but it is not. In certain contexts, the law already recognises associations not defined by birth, marriage or adoption, thereby giving less importance to these criteria for relationship recognition. Take the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, which empowers one with the right to nominate any person to give effect to advance directives related to one's mental healthcare treatment in the event of incapacity. The Uttar Pradesh Revenue Code, 2006 as amended in 2020, recognises third gender persons as partners for succession to agricultural land. Indeed, the idea of a chosen family has even been

accepted informally and practised non-controversially for long, as seen with hijra gharanas (though their endorsement through law remains inconsistent). In Deepika Singh v Central Administrative Tribunal (2022), the Supreme Court recognised that in certain relationships "manifestations of love and of families may not be typical but they are as real as their traditional counterparts. Such atypical manifestations of the family unit are equally deserving not only of protection under law but also of the benefits available under social welfare legislation."

Envisaging a legal framework that includes a broader canvas of people and their lived realities is not such a stretch of the imagination. We can learn from jurisdictions that have already done so, such as Hawaii and Massachusetts in the United States. It would entail recognising domestic partnerships with certain characteristics those formed by competent adults; of mutual support and commitment; between those who could cohabit, are unmarried, not blood relatives, and consider themselves to be a family.

Being queer bucks the current dominant trends of majoritarianism, conformism, and unquestioned compliance. At the heart of being queer is to celebrate difference, and be sensitive to the realities of the marginalised. Very, very few of the millions of us in the LGBTQ+ community in India have the luxury of being in romantic, intimate relationships, and even fewer have the good fortune of imagining the security of shelter and stability. Indeed, the queer community in India has within it several who are single senior citizens. For many of them, the security of marriage fails to address the preoccupations of ageing. And so, when we seek emancipation, our imagination should not be limited to that institution or civil partnerships.

We have a new parliament now, one which comprises those who serve us from political parties whose manifestos espouse queer equality. Others have trumpeted "sabka saath, sabka vikas" as their brand. It's time for them to walk their talk.

Indeed, there is a means through which to do so. Pursuant to the Supreme Court's directive in the marriage equality case, the Indian government constituted a committee to "examine the various issues relating to queer community" through an order in April 2024. It is incumbent on such a committee to fully grasp the socio-economic realities of India's queer people, and consider ways in which legal rights are bestowed on them in all their complexity. This must include offering legislative solutions that ensure equality in all manner of relationships - chosen families or queer couples. It would be not only the necessary thing to do to effect change, but also unique in the world. Instead of aping Western trajectories of queer citizenship that have failed to speak for all in those LGBTQ+ communities, India's evolution would be more inclusive and certainly more meaningful.

> The writer is head, Centre for Health Equity, Law & Policy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DISTRESSING TREND

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Unfit India' (IE, June 28). Almost 50 per cent of adults in India had insufficient levels of physical activity in 2022, according to a study published in *The Lancet Global Health* journal. It is projected that in 2030, 60 per cent of India's adults will be at risk of health issues, should the current trends continue. According to the WHO, the rising levels of physical inactivity are contributing to non-communicable diseases. This data calls for all stakeholders

to initiate corrective measures. Khokan Das, Kolkata

BRIDGING THE GAP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A roadmap' (IE, June 28). President Droupadi Murmu's speech in Parliament emphasised India's economic performance. Despite inching closer to being the third-largest economy, India is one of the poorest countries among the developed economies. The gap between the rich and the poor has only expanded over the years. To become a developed economy, India should create better employment opportunities, introduce more skill development training and make available basic necessities to the poor.

S Haritha Rao, Hyderabad

LEARNING RIGHT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Not by a single exam' (IE, June 28). Reforming the assessment system and tapping into available technology to keep scandals in check will only answer the secondary concerns regarding the integrity of the examinations. Our education system requires a more comprehensive approach. Rather than a standardised centralised system of education, we need to focus on a more individualistic and holistic ap-

proach. Schools and teachers should

have the autonomy to experiment. Aishwarya Shetty, Mumbai

WHEEL OF JUSTICE

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'More police powers, denigrating Satyagraha, names in Hindi, Karnataka objects in its report to Centre' (IE, June 28). The Centre claimed that replacing the IPC with the new criminal laws is a move to decolonise the justice system. But the BJP has been accused of non-consultation by the states and Opposition. The inherent risk of a hunger strike being seen as an attempt to suicide under Section 226 of BNS will certainly disparage the memory and legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, Jatin Das, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt, etc.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

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111011 SATURDAY, JUNE 29, 2024



• FUTURE OF AI

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg

The future is not going to be one Al. It's going to be a lot of Als with a lot of different people being able to create different things

Moving the monolith

Railway reforms require much faster pace to produce tangible outcomes

N2019, A high-level committee headed by Bibek Debroy of fered a set ofsolutions to address the huge resource gap faced by Indian Railways (IR). The solutions included an organisational restructuring of the unwieldy monolith to ease its slow decision-making process, and a shift to commercial accounting. It also proposed that an independent regulator be set up, to herald the pricing of services commensurate with costs. The panel fought shy of proposing "privatisation", or even "deregulation", but pitched for substantial "liberalisation". The central theme that ran through the report is that mobilising resources from the private sector is necessary to supplement taxpayer monies, for the much-needed scaling up and modernisation of railway infrastructure. Seven years earlier, the Anil Kakodkar panel reviewed the IR's safety features, and recommended several measures, entailing financial investments of ₹1 trillion over a five-year period. In 2015, another panel suggested a road map for asset monetisation, and restricting all fresh investment in rolling stocks to public-private partnerships (PPPs). In fact, an earlier Debroy panel had also suggested that private train operators be allowed.

Some of these recommendations have been acted upon. PPP models are being tried in various areas, even as bids called for the running of "private trains" came a cropper (the likes of Bombardier, Siemens, and Alstom showed some initial interest but quickly back-tracked). The unhealthy practice of cross-subsidising the passenger segment via artificially high freight rates is being reversed, albeit slowly. Passenger revenues were 43% of freight receipts in FY24, up from 40.5% in FY16, even though the number of passengers in FY24 were 6.84 billion, far lower than the FY19 peak of 8.44 billion. But the pace of the reforms has been slack, and their scale below par. Political considerations and the entrenched bureaucracy of IR have kept weighing in.

Inevitably, loopholes in the railway safety system continues to get exposed with unacceptable frequency, the latest being the collision in West Bengal on June 17. The accident on a stretch where Kavach, the anti-collision device, is yet to be installed, killed 11 people. To be sure, the device that would trigger automatic braking is operational in only 1,500 km of the IR's 68,000-km network, even three years after its roll-out. There aren't enough vendors to manufacture and supply the necessary equipment, and IR isn't in a position to crowd in the investors either. IR is overstaffed, and performs several un-remunerative operations, but it also keeps a huge vacancy of nearly 20,000 in safety-critical posts like loco crew/station masters.

For the record, the IR reported an operating ratio of 98.65% in FY24, implying it expends 98.65 paise to earn a rupee. If it hadn't starved the various investment funds, it would have posted significant deficits all through the recent years. This explains the heavy, and rising, reliance on the Budget for railway capital expenditure (23% of the central government capex goes to the sector), IR's heavy indebtedness, and the freeze on its fresh borrowings. While 46% of resources for financing of IR's Plan Expenditure came from the FY15 Budget, over 96% of its capex of ₹2.62 trillion for FY25 were projected to be funded out of the Budget. The way out of this mess is well-defined. Sharper tariff optimisation, market development, efficient resource allocation, HR upgrade, and, above all, creation of profit centres (like the dedicated freight corridors) and the conditions for larger private investments.

Cathay shows what's important in cockpit

PILOTS MAKE MISTAKES. That's usually not a problem because there are enough checks and balances in flight procedures to ameliorate the risks. What is a problem is when aviators lie about, or cover up, their errors.

When Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd. decided this week to remove three cadet pilots from its US training programme, it wasn't because of the trainees' competence, or possible lack of it. Instead, the Hong Kong flag carrier highlighted the importance of a crucial ingredient on the flight deck: integrity. It's the right move for an airline that has come under fire for the way it has treated staff — especially pilots — and goes some way toward rebuilding a sense of trust among employees and the public.

A number of incidents occurred at the Arizona flight school where new recruits are sent that led AeroGuard Flight Training Center to suspend all solo flights for Cathay cadets. Among them, a wingtip collision with a fixed object, a propeller strike caused by a bad landing, and a complete runway excursion, where an aircraft leaves the tarmac, Bloomberg News reported, citing an internal memo. The problem is, some of them didn't disclose their mistakes.

Removing solo flight privileges is a tough punishment for a student pilot. It signals that the school and its instructors don't trust the trainee to act safely or with integrity. An aviator's first solo — usually a lap around the airfield — is a big deal, and rightly celebrated. It's the first time they've been fully entrusted with all aspects of flight, including safety and the requisite checks. Many pilots, myself included, have the certificate of that achievement framed and mounted.

But having the technical skill to fly is only a small aspect of aviation. It's often said that a pilot's licence isn't so much permission to fly, but permission to learn. What instructors look out for, and try to teach, once the basics have been mastered, is good judgement. Flying can be quite mundane, a sign of just how safe it is, with the true test

of an aviator's worth coming when things go wrong.

Flight instructors are not short of tales of stupid things their students have done: It's part of the learning process.

Even among professional aviators, runway incursions — taxi-

ing onto the wrong runway or at the wrong time — are among the top incidents reported to aviation authorities. But that's the thing they get reported

CULPAN

Bloomberg

the thing, they get reported.

A major tenet of global aviation is that pilots don't get prosecuted following crashes. The reasoning is that an aviator freed from the risk of civil or criminal charges can honestly discuss an incident, including their own role in it. This allows investigators to have a full understanding of the situation, and make recommendations that improve safety for

everyone. It's a great model that has since been implemented in other sectors, including healthcare. But that tacit agreement cuts both ways: The pilot needs to come clean. Sometimes a seemingly minor event, like a wingtip strike, occurs because of pilot error. But if it happens often, then aviation officials may start to see a pattern and find ways to prevent them from recurring.

Reporting an incident also allows licensed aircraft maintenance engineers to assess any possible damage and check whether the aircraft is fit to fly or in need of repair. And it has had tangible benefits — global accident rates fell from 2.57 per million departures in 2018 to 2.05 in 2022, according to data from the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization.

In failing to report the incidents, the Cathay trainees deprived the rest of the industry of the chance to learn from their mistakes, and may have put others in danger. It also dishonours the millions of aviators before them whose mistakes and transparency allowed new students to have a better, safer aviation journey.

Yet it must also be recognised that these cadets may not have been adequately taught the importance of coming clean versus suppressing information. If they feared making an honest mistake more than being caught lying, then the incentive was there to hide or obfuscate. In addition to an investigation into the incidents and their coverup, Cathay and its training schools need to have a tough conversation about precisely

why students didn't feel compelled to come forward honestly.

Besides the basics of flying — aviate, navigate, and communicate — instructors can hope to instill in young pilots good judgement. It may be tougher to teach integrity.

TASK FOR NEW REGIME

NEED TO REVAMP GROWTH ENGINES AND KICK-START NEW ONES MAKES TASK MORE COMPLICATED

The growth agenda for UK

S IN MANY other developed countries lately, the two major political parties in the United Kingdom have embraced economic growth as their top policy priority. Following the volatile 49-day experience of Liz Truss's government and its "dash for growth" in 2022, however, both parties emphasise that there are no financial shortcuts. The focus, instead, is on devising measures to boost productivity, resource allocation, and growth over the long term. In this respect, the opposition Labour Party is ahead of the ruling Conservatives, though both are still working out the details of actual implementation.

Buoyant, durable, sustainable, and inclusive growth is essential for a countrywhere the older generations risk seeing their children end up worse off than they are. That has not happened in many decades. Only growth can deliver the resources needed to enhance living standards, improve public services, support sustainable energy initiatives, limit the scale of generalised tax increases, and combat inequality of wealth, income, and opportunity.

In short, it is all about increasing the safe speed limit for economic growth. The Bank of England (BOE) estimates the UK economy's potential growth may be as low as 1%. At that speed, much that ails the country is likely to get worse, rather than better, over time. Moreover, this already weak growth potential could deteriorate even further if the problem is left to fester.

There is no singular, silver-bullet initiative that can change this outlook. Many British politicians are still haunted by the Truss saga, when the

ALMOST SEVEN YEARS have passed by

since India's tryst with the goods and

services tax (GST) began on July 1,

2017. It has been a trailblazing change

in the tax landscape brought about by

the consolidation of 17 central and

state taxes and 13 cesses into a simpli-

fied tax structure across the nation.

Looking back, one cannot but acknowl-

edge that GST has stoically straddled

these eventful years amid the chal-

lenging transition, global pandemic,

and geopolitical turbulence. With GST

already having achieved a tax buoyancy

of over 1.4 during FY24, it promises to

fuel a resurgent India's economy. The

scale, speed, and complexity of the

transformation brought about by

India's GST remains unparalleled.

Brazil, for instance, is now on the verge

of initiating a seven-year phased roll-

out of the new value added tax system

by 2033 to streamline the maze of its

India's GST has several unique cre-

dentials. To begin with, underpinning

the edifice of GST is the new constitu-

tional body — the GST Council —

embodying the spirit of cooperative fis-

cal federalism. The GST Council's col-

lective wisdom and collaborative

efforts during the last 53 meetings

since September 2016 have helped

India to usher in a uniform, transpar-

ent, and technology-based GST regime.

The gross GST collections during 2024-

25 are on a roll — likely to exceed

₹10.68 trillion, and an increase of

11.6% over the previous year. The

number of active GST taxpayers (at over

14.6 million) has more than doubled

federal, state, and municipal taxes.

GST's unique credentials

MOHAMED A EL-ERIAN

President, Queens' College, University of Cambridge and professor, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. *Views are personal*

use unfunded tax cuts as a stimulus, only to create a damaging episode of financial instability that forced a change in government. It is now widely acknowledged that after so many years of insufficient investment and sagging productivity, achieving high-quality growth requires a comprehensive policy approach that builds on many intermediate objectives.

The Labour Party has

newly arrived prime minister tried to

gone further in specifying such structural reforms. Its Following the programme includes pro-49-day experience posals to revamp the planof Liz Truss's ning system, boost infragovernment and its structure, improve trade links, crowd in domestic "dash for growth" and foreign private investin 2022, both ment (including through an energised National parties emphasise that there are no Wealth Fund), remove tax distortions, and pursue financial shortcuts sector-specific initiatives. The party has also identified promising public-pri-

vate partnerships geared toward enhancing investible funds, while encouraging innovation and efficiency.

Labour has indicated that it would try to "hardwire" many of these reforms by strengthening existing institutions. To ensure that all its policies remain compatible with financial stability, it has committed to adhere to the same public-debt "rule" as the current Conservative Party.

The challenge now is to devise a detailed execution plan, one that includes a high-frequency monitoring system to provide real-time feedback and allow for timely course corrections, if needed. Any economic-policy road map must favour comprehensive over piecemeal reforms. Such

reforms should be implemented simultaneously, rather than sequentially, and they should come sooner rather than later.

As Labour demon-

strated with its successful take-off after coming to power in 1997, a new growth emphasis would benefit from serious credibility-enhancing steps. That is what then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown did

with his surprising and insightful decision to hand over the reins of interest-rate policy to the BOE, thus enshrining the principle of central-bank independence.

One must hope that the current Labour leadership has not ruled out too

The scale, speed, and complexity of transformation

caused by GST in India is unparalleled. But there is a

need for more collaborative and innovative reforms

much policy flexibility in its pursuit of a decisive election victory. Some of the most powerful measures that it is proposing would require resources up front, but their growth and financial benefits would materialise only over time. The next government also will find itself confronting a more complicated, increasingly fragmented international system; and it will need to secure consistent buy-in from the private sector, which ultimately must do most of the heavy lifting.

Another, related task is to improve the functioning of existing growth engines while also supporting the development of the sectors and industries that will drive growth in the future. Striking a proper balance may prove to be the most difficult part of the challenge, given the country's resource constraints and the fact that some key initiatives are better pursued at a regional level. (With its lack of sufficient robust regional initiatives to drive innovation in artificial intelligence, life sciences, and sustainable energy, the European Union currently faces a similar problem.)

Promoting high, durable, sustainable, and inclusive growth was never going to be easy after so many years of neglect. The need to revamp the UK's existing growth engines and simultaneously kick-start new ones makes the task even more complicated. But to paraphrase US President John F Kennedy's famous moonshot speech, the winning party must do these and "other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard".

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GST reforms for a resurgent India



S RAMESH

Managing director, Price Waterhouse & Co LLP, and former chairman, Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs

since its inception, thanks to the simple and transparent onboarding processes under the GST Network portal. The relentless drive against tax evaders and enhanced Know Your Customer norms, including biometricbased Aadhaar authentication of applicants for GST registration, have also hastened the transition of smaller players into the formal economy. Innovations like the E-Way Bill, real-time einvoicing, and reporting of monthly GST collection data have enhanced the availability of high-frequency economic indicators. The data-sharing protocols with other agencies and the adoption of advanced data analytics by the tax department have virtually unleashed a potent war on GST evaders, espe-

tion of advanced data analytics by the tax department have virtually unleashed a potent war on GST evaders, especially those using fake bills and dubious entities. In particular, the Directorate General of GST Intelligence, the investigating arm of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, has

unearthed over 6,074 cases of fraud to the extent of nearly ₹2.01 trillion during FY24, which represents approximately 10% of the annual gross GST collections.

Areas for policy reforms

Despite these salient achievements, there are clearly several areas where GST reforms are an imperative. First and most importantly, the multiplicity of rates with the added complexity of inverted duty structure needs to be

addressed by the newly constituted Group of Ministers under the GST Council. The rate restructuring should enable Indian manufacturing to be competitive and integrate with the global value chain. The council should also take a candid call on how to recast the compensation cess, which is no longer needed for payment of compensation to states. Secondly, GST unfortunately does not cover large sectors of the economy like petroleum/natural gas and real estate, leading to a cascading of taxes. Aviation turbine fuel and natural gas are low-hanging fruits, which can be subsumed under GST at

the earliest. A clear road Most importantly, map for inclusion of these areas would help busithe multiplicity of nesses in their strategic rates with the investments and longadded complexity planning. Third, of inverted duty restrictions on availing of input tax credit (ITC) have structure needs to left businesses in the conbe addressed by struction, telecom, hospithe Group of tality, and other sectors **Ministers** grappling with issues such as working capital crunch. Policy reforms in easing

ITC availability would bring down costs and enhance ease of doing business. Fourth, a relook is needed at the heightened intensity of audit and investigations that have burdened pan-India entities with huge compliance, in terms of cost, time, and resources. Fifth, in the absence of the GST Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT), taxpayers are unable to obtain efficacious remedy, forcing many to approach courts by invoking their writ jurisdiction. Operationalising GSTAT with end-to-end digital processes

should therefore be a top priority.

Ushering in tax certainty The 53rd GST Council meeting held

on June 22 has been a harbinger of tax certainty to businesses by proposing a new provision to provide tax relief based on non-collection/non-levy of taxes as a general industry practice. This is a welcome step as we have seen how huge retrospective tax demands can imperil many sectors. India Inc has also welcomed the quietus given to the anti-profiteering provisions in GST with a sunset date of April 1, 2025. As a dispute mitigation measure, it has been announced that the tax administration would desist from filing appeals in the tribunal as well as the high courts and Supreme Court below a threshold in the amount involved in the tax dispute. This and other measures, such as reduction in the mandatory predeposit amount for filing appeals, would streamline the GST dispute resolution process. Likewise, the amnesty provisions proposed for waiver of interest and penalty on certain tax demands up to FY21 would certainly earn the trust of thousands of taxpayers who faced a lack of clarity in tax provisions in the initial years of GST.

Road ahead

As India gears up towards its goal of becoming the third-largest economy, GST would be a critical lynchpin in supporting our growth and development. There is clearly a need for more collaborative and innovative reforms in the ensuing years to make GST truly responsive, tech-driven, sustainable, and fit for Viksit Bharat.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Labour violations

Apropos of "Foxconn's labour pangs" (FE, June 28), the issue has gained attention because of it surfacing in social media. Many labour violations take place on a daily basis. Some workers approach the authorities and others bear all sorts of ordeals. Even those who seek intervention do not get justice for various reasons. When India embraced new economic and industrial policies a few decades ago,

the labour department was stripped off the few powers it had. With the recruitment of workers under contract, daily wages, or as outsourced and casual, and contingent systems, workers do not even know their employers. Owners claim that workers engaged in various jobs are not their employees and the contractor disowns them in case of accidents. This is all a part of "ease of doing business" that prevents investors from facing inspections,

monitoring, and statutory wrangles.

The situation is likely to get worse as the four labour codes are in favour of managements and permit them to hire or fire as they please. We need investments, but it need not be without any conditions. Labour unions may be called for discussion and consultations to create an atmosphere that brings the employers, employees, and the government together.

—AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

New Delhi

Probe allegations

—Bal Govind, Noida

At a time India is aiming to replace China in the global supply chain, incidents such as discriminatory hiring are avoidable. Though Foxconn has denied allegations of not employing married women and said women form 70% of its workforce, an unbiased, time-bound investigation is necessary.

•Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

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— Ramnath Goenka

HEED RBI'S WARNING ON RISING HOUSEHOLD **DEBT, FALLING SAVINGS**

HE latest round of banking stress tests confirm that bad loans will likely settle at a multi-year low of 2.5 percent this fiscal, provided there is no fresh trouble. According to RBI's Financial Stability Report released Thursday, bad loans as a proportion of overall loans touched a 12-year low of 2.8 percent in 2023-24, but could rise to 3.4 percent under severe stress. As for sectors, agriculture saw the highest impairment ratio in the previous fiscal, while retail loans saw an across-the-board reduction in gross nonperforming assets (NPAs). The industrial sector, too, saw its asset quality improve across multiple sub-sectors. A key indicator of asset quality, the ratio of special mention accounts—where payments are overdue by 60-90 days—is showing relatively low levels of potential impairments. On balance, domestic financial conditions are buttressed by healthy balance sheets across financial institutions, improving asset quality, adequate provisioning and robust earnings.

It's heartening that banks have enough capital buffers to overcome any macroeconomic shock, while their earnings remain robust. In other words, the Indian banking system is well-positioned to spur credit growth. However, it's the demand that needs to pick up pace. While the growth in the services sector, especially in retail loans, seems unstoppable, a rise in industrial credit remains elusive. Banks also seem to be wary of large borrowers or handing out big-ticket loans, which actually led to a disproportionate rise in bad loans just a few years ago. But it's also true that such caution has helped lower the gross NPA ratios. According to the RBI, the sustained reduction in the gross bad loans since March 2020 has been primarily due to a persistent fall in new NPA accretions and increased write-offs.

But unlike in the past, when the RBI would warn about rising stress in industrial loans, this time the central bank raised red flags over household debt. With overall household savings declining and financial liabilities increasing, it noted that household debt warrants close monitoring from a financial stability perspective. Households' financial liabilities shot up post-pandemic, while their savings declined to 18.4 percent of GDP in 2022-23, down from an average of 20 percent during 2013-22. The government had attributed the decline to a rise in physical and financial assets. That could be true; but it's also essential to prevent any build-up of reckless lending.

CPM CANNOT AFFORD ANOTHER MISSTEP

T was a political murder that had rocked Kerala. The ripples from the brutal killing of T P Chandrasekharan, a former CPI(M) leader who had floated a new party called the Revolutionary Marxist Party, in Vadakara in 2012 are yet to calm down. The allegation that the CPI(M) leadership was somehow involved in the murder—despite the party leadership's steadfast denial—is very much alive. The opposition has used the case to corner the LDF every election since then. The fact that K K Rema, Chandrasekharan's wife, is now an MLA backed by the Congress-led UDF has also kept the politics around the murder alive. It is indeed a subject the ruling CPI(M) would prefer to forget.

The LDF government was again caught on the wrong foot as officials from the Kannur Central Jail sought police reports on CPI(M) workers undergoing life sentences in the case to grant them early remission as part of Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav. While handing out life sentences to the 12 convicts this February, the high court had said that nine of them would not be entitled to remission before completing 20 years of imprisonment. The move by the Kannur prison officials is a blatant violation of this order. The opposition created a ruckus in the assembly claiming that it indicated the government was trying to protect the criminals. Rema alleged that the jail superintendent, on his own, could not have taken such a decision without the backing of the chief minister, who is also in charge of the home department.

The state government has been denying any hand in this ever since the controversy broke out. Insisting that none of those convicts are being considered for remission, the government has also ordered the suspension of the prison officials who had initiated the move. The opposition alleges that the government is trying to save face by scapegoating the officials. The CPI(M) is not in a position to afford one more political misstep after the recent election rout. If the party and the government do not learn lessons from its mistakes, it might not take much time to disintegrate in the state as it did elsewhere. The leadership must realise that the party no longer has the sturdiness to withstand yet another *faux pas*.

QUICK TAKE

DEBATE STIRS A WORRY

OST observers of American politics described Friday's debate between Joe Biden, 81, and Donald Trump, 78, as "unwatchable" or "excruciating". From the blue corner came the incumbent US president's often-incomprehensible jabs in a raspy voice, and from the red corner came the former president's bluster. Biden's former chief of staff Ron Klain once said, "While you can lose a debate at any time, you can only win it in the first 30 minutes." By that measure, Biden lost. A televised debate between top leaders is a tradition worth emulating. But seeing the two main contenders for the world's most powerful office falling short of the role requirement is a cause for worry.

he new Lok Sabha started with the president addressing both Houses of parliament. Article 87 of the Constitution provides for this address, which contains details of the government's programmes for the year. It is repeated every year.

This practice was adopted from Britain, where the monarch addresses the Houses of Lords and Commons jointly at the beginning of the year.

The interesting thing about this address is that it is prepared by the government and the president only reads it. The president cannot make any changes in this address. The reason is that in the parliamentary form that we have, the government is accountable to parliament and, therefore, it is responsible for whatever is said in the address.

Parliament is run on rules. No one can raise a matter in the House without the support of the rules. The rules being followed today are, in a way, a continuation of the standing orders of the Central Legislative Assembly of British India that have been suitably modified since independence. There is a view among parliament watchers that some of the rules need to be revisited to give more freedom to the members and to dilute the absolute discretion vested in the Speaker without, of course, compromising his authority in any way. A few examples can be cited.

Rule 43, relating to questions, says that a question can be disallowed when the Speaker feels "it is an abuse of the right of questioning or is calculated to obstruct or prejudicially affect the procedure of the House". It's not clear what those words mean. Rule 41 lays down a plethora of conditions that govern the admissibility of a question. So, in the normal course, a question that conforms to these conditions should be revocation of Rule 43(1) of the Rules of a motion named 'Motion of Thanks' in admitted. In other words, an MP has the right to have a question admitted if it conforms to these conditions.

Then why should the Speaker have the power to disallow any question on the vague grounds laid down in Rule 43? It must be remembered that the right to ask questions in parliament flows from Article 75 of the Constitution, which says the Council of Ministers shall be effectively responsible to parliament. The Speaker's discretion to disallow a question may be seen as a case of infringement of a constitutional right of MPs. Therefore, a case can be made for the

Parliament is run on strict rules. A few stem from British practices, others were moulded post independence. Revisiting some of them might improve the working of the legislature

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

A RELOOK AT THE RULES OF THE HOUSES





Procedure in the Lok Sabha.

Now, if a question is disallowed, the MP has no right to make a representation to the Speaker. It is an irony that the Constitution gives the right to every person to make a representation to an authority, but MPs are not allowed to make a representation to the Speaker if his or her question has been disallowed. (M N Kaul and S L Shakdher, 6th edition, Page 504)

After the president has delivered the address, it is customary for both Houses to debate it. Article 87(2) mandates such a debate on matters referred to in the address. This debate takes place on

each House. It is odd that the Motion of Thanks to the president is subject to amendments. This time, there was a case of amending the motion by the opposition in the Rajya Sabha because the ruling party did not have a majority. This can be seen as being rude to the president. In fact, this procedure described in the rules is not in conformity with Article 87 of the Constitution, which simply says the Houses shall discuss the matters referred to in the address. It does not mention any Motion of Thanks. By this article, a debate can be raised on the address with or without a motion. After the debate,

a separate resolution can be adopted unanimously by the Houses thanking the president for the address.

Thus, the ignominy of amending the motion can be avoided, and a more dignified way of expressing their gratitude to the head of the

state can be adopted. Both Houses have equal rights in the matter of passing laws. The only exception is in Money Bills, which are defined in Article 110. Any Bill that deals with taxation, withdrawal of money from the Consolidated Fund, government borrowings, etc is a Money Bill. The Rajya Sabha has no power to pass or reject a Money Bill. It can only make a recommendation, which may or may not be accepted by the Lok Sabha. Thus, only the Lok Sabha has the final say on money Bills.

Under Article 110(3), it is the Speaker who certifies a Bill as a Money Bill. Such a certificate becomes crucial when the ruling party does not have a majority in the Rajya Sabha. In the 16th Lok Sabha, even an amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 was certified as a Money Bill, thus escaping the scrutiny of the Rajya Sabha.

The Supreme Court is seized of this matter, but it has not moved towards a resolution on it. It is necessary to review Article 110(3) as well as the gamut of provisions relating to the role of the Rajya Sabha in financial matters. We have just followed British practice in this regard. But our Rajya Sabha is unlike the House of Lords, whose financial powers were taken over by the Commons in a century-long confrontation with the lords, who are not elected.

Voting procedure in parliament needs to be revisited. On most occasions, the Houses decide issues by voice vote, which is not clearly sanctioned by the Constitution. Article 100 says that all questions shall be determined by a majority of votes of the members present and voting. This article implies that all questions should be decided by recording the votes. Majority can be determined only in terms of numbers. It is a matter of crucial importance.

The new Lok Sabha is unique in that the opposition has 234 members. A large dose of wisdom would be needed to navigate the House through turbulent waters. If the politicians act wisely and with tact, this Lok Sabha can create history.

(Views are personal)

MICRO RACISM 2.0: **IDLI-DOSA** vs PANI-PURI

T'S nice to see a coalition government in Delhi led by PM Narendra Modi's BJP taking power with critical support from the TDP under Nara Chandrababu Naidu. This should augur well for south-north relations. I put south before north with deliberate

intent. Mathematics teaches us that a permutation is not a combination; the former involves a sequence that has its own meaning. It's time to apply that concept in our social, political and cultural life, just to get a hang of what things were, are and could be. Saying south-north relations instead of the other way should help us understand how equations work in a world where per-

spectives differ by points of view. The provocation is a story about actor Shruti Haasan, who shut down a request during a live session on Instagram. It seems she was asked by a follower to say something in a south Indian accent and she called it an act of "micro racism". This is what she said in Insta-slang: "So, this sort of micro racism is not OK. And it's not OK when you look at us and say idli-dosasambar either. And no, you don't imitate us

well, so don't try and be funny." Point taken. Let me add that we Indians have a strange way of describing southerners as 'south Indians'. Can we drop that 'Indian' bit? It kind of states the obvious. Perhaps there is a post-colonial interpretation to this—about seeing one's own self from an outsider's POV. That may be an excellent practice spiritually, but perhaps not in a socio-political sense.

What Haasan did was a rare act of a southerner retorting in a firm manner. It represents a new pushback from the south of the Vindhyas against what one has experienced in the north for decades. As a kid growing up in New Delhi, I was used to southerners being called 'Madrasi', mocked in supposedly funny accents and described in idli-dosa idioms. Social media has turned the southern annoyance into amusement, with jibes flying both ways. Southern retorts are often targeted at the so-called 'national' TV news channels based in the north that frequently play down southern issues or reveal a superficial understanding of them. Such media outlets have been suitably dubbed by a humourist as 'Amit media', with Amit serving as a catchphrase for a typical northern name, much like idli-dosa. If I may be allowed a somewhat microracist pun on north-speak, this idli-dosa



REVERSE SWING

conversation is getting batter and batter. We heard some news of unwelcome deterrence in this matter earlier this year, when a DMK minister taunted Tamil Nadu's governor for asking southerners to learn Hindi for better prospects. "While English is an international language,

Tamil is a local language. We were told that



Actor Shruti Haasan recently shut down a fan's request to say something with a southern accent, calling it "micro racism". After decades of being lampooned as the idli-dosa people, southerners have started calling those north of the Vindhyas as the pani-puri people. Both are best avoided

learning Hindi could land us with jobs. Is that so? You go and see in our state and in Coimbatore. Who are those people who sell pani puris?" the minister said in a reference to northern migrant workers.

The harsh fact is that 'pani-puri' is now an oft-used expression in Tamil Nadu to describe migrants from the north. When southerners went north soon after independence to seek jobs in the national capital, they were mocked as migrants, not as employees of a new republic. The boot is on the other foot now.

The Hindutva-Dravida divide in ideologies is aiding tensions that reflect in the streets as micro-racist humour. Jibes and memes are seeing a reverse

swing from the south, which is new.

Politics has become extra-sensitive. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor walked into hard retorts from the BJP earlier this week after sharing on social media a meme on Uttar Pradesh linked to its exam paper leaks. The joke mocked UP as one where answers are known before they get questions.

It should not surprise us touchy folks from northern states are no longer amused by the academic acronym, BIMARU. The term, coined by demographer Ashish Bose in the mid-1980s, was created from the first letters of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Used academically to denote states that ranked low on income and human development indices, it also became a pejorative as southern states marched forward in economic terms.

But these Hindi states were and are politically crucial. With the economically prosperous south also becoming politically significant, we may as well question headlines that describe Hindi-speaking states as the 'heartland' of India.

We may gently point to how southerners, Sikhs, Bengalis and even northern Biharis have been routinely lampooned in Bollywood for their accents. The current pani-puri pushback pales in comparison. Decades after its release, Mehmood's ostensibly Tamilian accent in Padosan stands alongside its memorable music as a stark reminder of idli-dosa politics.

To get the point across, I may as well use a line from a Bollywood hit set in UP, Tanu Weds Manu Returns: "Kya Sharma ji! Hum thode bewafa kya huye, aap to badchalan ho gaye." (What is this, Mr Sharma! I turned just a tad disloyal, whereas you have become characterless.)

The rise of southern micro racism, much like its northern part, is best nipped in the bud. The occasional pani-puri references stand against decades of northern stereotyping of southerners. The south is no longer going to watch this standing by idly. Or should that be idli?

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Discipline, decorum

Ref: Cooperation needed to end continued paralysis of parliament (Jun 28). High-pitched battles, showmanship and acrimonious debates that result in paralysing the functioning of parliament should be avoided. It is the responsibility of leaders to inculcate discipline and decorum in their members. Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Opposition's responsibility The editorial aptly highlighted the equal

responsibility of both the ruling alliance and the combined opposition. The opposition has more onus than the government, since this time people voted for more legislators from the INDI Alliance. Instead of conflicts, there ought to be consensus and conciliation on the proceedings. That the Speaker had to adjourn the Lok Sabha after the ruckus over NEET issue does not augur well. R Sridharan, Chennai

Hamas attacks

Ref: How the Gaza fallout is coming closer to India (Jun 28). The author talks of the horrific violence Israel let loose in Gaza, but he has no word against Hamas's savage attacks on Israel that triggered Israel's defensive offence. Paradoxically, while he underscores the importance of India's foreign policy, he eulogises Rahul Gandhi for keeping away from talking about it.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad **EVM** doubts

Ref: Quietening those who cast doubts on EVMs (Jun 28). The doubts over EVMs in India always depend on where the parties sit. When the present ruling party faced defeat twice, they not only had doubts, 6 V L Narasimha Rao wrote a book, Democracy at Risk: Can We Trust Our Electronic Voting Machines? Might be worth a read.

N Nagarajan, Secunderabad

Ecosystem's importance Ref: Don't politicise effort to save flora & fauna

(Jun 28). Due to extraction and its effects on flora and fauna, there is a visible change in climate as well as the environment. The government should take notice of this issue. We must realise the importance of the ecosystem. Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Opening performance

The Indian cricket team's management is making a mistake by making Virat Kohli play as an opener. During this tournament, his performance as opener has been pathetic. He is better at one down. Hope the management looks into this and Kohli's batting order is changed for a better performance. Durga Prasad Chirala, Vijayawada

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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The Edit Page

To Live in the Age of Prolonging Youth

Anti-ageing: science's at it, commerce will follow

At the cusp of colonising space, humankind is also beginning to stretch a frontier of time — that is, of human lifespan. Biology is throwing up interesting insights on how to arrest, if not reverse, ageing. For now, consumers for these advances, as in space travel, are the uber rich. But that's a stage in the evolution of most mass-market technologies. Early adopters, from air travellers to those undergoing cosmetic surgery, are willing to fund development for the less well-off. Those who can afford them have a menu of promising choices among blood transfusion, cell regeneration and chemical low-calorie diets. For the rest, traditional wisdom on eating light, exercise and sleep remains their best bet for a long life.

Science is mimicking the natural phenomenon of ageing by speeding up some and slowing down other processes in our bodies. Identified old-age cells can either be



destroyed or replaced by younger cells. There are, however, ethical controversies over cell replacement. Pseudo-science transfuses blood or plasma from a younger person to an older one. It works in mice. We don't know whether it works on humans. Or why. Dietary research is trying to come up with

chemicals that replicate longevity-enhancing low-calorie food. Yet, naturally occurring food doesn't yield to easy synthesis. Most of the available anti-ageing treatments are being beta-tested and can't be dismissed as snake oil.

Commerce is driving both our effort to reach the stars and to conquer mortality. Resources are drawing prospectors to other planets. Advances in anti-ageing offer a way out for a world that has, by some indications, already begun depopulating. Extending longevity is, in fact, extending youth. This makes for a more productive species after it reaches peak population. Billionaires shopping for antiageing genes are essentially extending their shelf-life, which when applied to the population at large could have a profound socioeconomic impact. What we know already is the wealth of nations resides in the health of their citizens.

Crumbling Roofs are Very Far From Viksit

Delhi airport is the busiest in India. One would have thought that superior design, technology and materials had gone into building this 'Gateway to India', and that its maintenance would be — what's the word everyone loves? — 'world-class'. Turns out that it isn't. On Friday, after Delhi was lashed by over 148 mm of rain in 3 hours, the highest in June since 2009, a portion of the canopy at the old departure forecourt of terminal1collapsed. One person was killed, eight injured. This happened hours after a portion of the canopy of the new terminal building at Jabalpur airport in Madhya Pradesh collapsed.

India has a long way to go before it's 'viksit'. There is ample evidence to show heavy rains in a short period are becoming



the norm. So, infrastructure such as airports, railways and bridges need to be built or retrofitted, factoring in that reality. It's the responsibility of stakeholders airport operator GMR and overseer GoI in the case of the Delhi mishap - to ensure that infra is resilient. Blaming previous dispensations won't do. Maintenance is a responsibility of the here and now.

After the first day of monsoon, the state of Delhi/NCR was equally appalling, with even the toniest of areas waterlogged. The showpiece Pragati Maidan tunnel, built before last year's G20 summit, was also waist-deep in water and closed. This is what happens when construction occurs in the river recharge zone and a wetland without caring two hoots about science, topography and hydrology. The calamitous situation of India's capital city shows that pumping money into infra without proper planning, execution and maintenance is a waste of precious public resources, and a danger to lives. Let's tackle life in 2024 India first. 2047 can follow.



Monsoonspotting, We're All Playing It

Every summer, we Indians, not the most sporty or sporting bunch, indulge in a seasonal sport known for its glorious uncertainties. Nope, not cricket. It's Monsoonspotting. And everyone plays it with dead seriousness and lively enthusiasm. It even has a referee sitting at Mausam Bhavan tracking the game's progress. As soon as summer puts us on a spit roast, it's game on. Think two people on opposite sides of the country, chatting on the phone, and you can bet their opening lines will be about comparing temperatures and whether the monsoon has RSVP'd yet. But it's all very serious, with each one pouring out the information they have gathered on the surreptitious movement of the rainbearing clouds people have been tracking since the time of Kalidas. While much will be from IMD's monsoon outlook for the year, there will also be dollops of personal assessment on how things may pan out based on 'experience'.

'I saw the IMD map. It's gone northeast now,' can be one comment. 'Nope. I saw it lounging in the Bay of Bengal, not moving an inch, ya...' can be the reply, despair dripping from every word. Elsewhere on an office chat: 'Did it rain on your side?' 'No, but it will soon,' is the chat-back, half unsure about the evaluation but not wanting to sound defeated. The monsoon isn't just a season. Like that other sport, it's a national obsession.

The first Joe-Don presidential debate tells us more about the state of the US than the next POTUS

What America's Thrown Up



Indrajit Hazra

eally? As in, seriously, really? These are the top two contenders for a job that, with rapidly enhanced irony, is still described as 'Leader of the free world'?

For many-especially those unburdened from having to play the American voter's part of having thrown up Joe Biden and Donald Trump as the only two dishes on the November US presidential election buffet menu it's not so much a reflection on the two candidates themselves, as much as on 2024 America itself. Sure, a 90-min televised debate is hardly a decider of capability or electoral popularity (or the lack thereof). But it sure is a representative trailer of the moving picture already playing in theatres not near China, Russia or West Asia.

CNN, hosting the Biden-Trump show, had taken special precautions not to make Thursday night's first presidential debate turn into a 'MAGA bhakts vs Trump-haters' slugfest. Like in the good old Covid restriction days, there was no live audience (or canned cheers or boos), making it a relatively sedated, sedative affair. Also, by muting the mic after each participant's allotted time per issue — a request from the Biden team — Trump wasn't able to butt in and tear away. This, ironically, led to the Orange One actually coming across as a far less potent agent

Viewers were, indeed, spared yet another display of 'polarised America'. But, instead, they were privy to full-US' pu-'fractured



On the house: Customer at a Seattle bar while watching the debate

ped lips from behind two lecterns.

This was the first time a Potus and an XPotus were trading shots—at one point, golfing shots. 'I'm happy to play golf with you if you carry your own bag,' 81-yr-old Biden said to 78-yr-old Trump. 'Think you can do it?'

But a TV debate like this overturns the old WYSIWYG jungle proverb. Instead, it was WYGIWYS - What You Got Is What You Saw. America having to choose between two has-beens running on spare fossil-fuel.

From the very start, Biden looked as if he had been pulled out of bed for his great-grandson's convocation ceremony — eyes darting, speech sliding, swaying from an incredulous look to a smirk. And that rasp. Ex-Delaware Senator Biden became Senator Palpatine straight out of The Phantom Menace from the Star Wars franchise. He could well have been a hologram, with a hood covering most of his face, scraping out the words, 'Viceroy, I don't want this stunted slime in my sight again.' If CNN moderators Jake Tapper

Viewers were privy to full-blown 'fractured US' puckering its very chapped lips from behind two lecterns



and Dana Bash were less chatty than ChatGPT, that was the plan. With these two meeting for the first time since the 2020 presidential debates, resentment between incumbent and challenger could be felt in front of viewing screens even before the issues-as-meat were tossed into the two cages.

With his usual style of not being held hostage to silly things like facts, Trump kept riffing on three-chords: 'How Joe Biden/ Was the worst president/This country has ever had.' Not the most sophisticated of conclusions aimed at a president who he was accusing of destroying the economy and demolishing the country's border harbingers of the end of the American civilisation. But he was blowing his own Trump as usual. Nothing surprising there.

Stonewalling questions several times on his policy to tackle the West Asia and Ukraine crises, not to mention whether he would accept the results of the November election, Trump was literally all over the place. Dodging direct answers more than once, his responses came as side punches: '[Biden's] become like a Palestinian... a very bad Palestinian. A weak one,' Putin was pretty much invited to invade Ukraine by Biden. And that he would certainly accept the November verdict-if the election was fair. Even though Trump has already insisted all over his campaign trail that 'Democrats will cheat'. And, yet, even with Trump all over the place, it was Biden who seemed literally out of place.

Frankly, the way the two responded on issues in their scruffy, boomer battle - Biden accusing Trump of having sex with a porn star and Trump channelling his inner Bill Clinton with the meme-worthy response, 'I didn't have sex with a porn star' — doesn't matter one jot. Sticking points from the debate were the novel name-callings - a challenge, considering the two have been exchanging sweet-nothings for a while now. Don called Joe a 'Manchurian

candidate' in Beijing's pay (even as Chinese social media Trump

commentators supporters came responded to away more chuffed Trump's shoby their restrained wing as that of Man in the Studio a 'nation-builthan Biden der' — China supporters with being the natheir strained Older tion). Joe called Man at Sea Don a 'whiner', adding, 'Something snapped in you last time you lost.'

> In all the 90 minutes of low burn and slow TV. we witnessed one meandering man with almost four years of presidency under his rapidly loosening belt, responding to a fabricating man with four years of presidency under his unbuckled and brandishing belt. It can be safely said that Trump supporters came away more chuffed by their restrained Man in the Studio than Biden supporters with their strained Older Man at Sea.

And it can be said even more safely that America, if it does retain its geopolitical, economic and innovative dominance, it will do so despite the next occupant of the Oval Office, not because of him.

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Hamara Gaon, Hamara Digital Push



Kuntal Sensarma

Digital payments are no longer restricted to urban India. Rural India is catching up fast, backed by GoI's investment of nearly ₹650 mn to promote digital financial services in rural areas. However, of the 954 mn registered smartphone users in 2022, only 300-350 mn — primarily young and urban users—use UPI for P2P or

P2M payments and transfers. While smartphone adoption among low- and moderate-income (LMI) communities is growing, usage is limited to social media and messaging apps. This indicates that critical challenges continue to hinder the use of digital payments for close to 1 bn LMI people, especially women and people

from marginalised communities. Their participation is, however, important to driving the country's future growth of digital payments. Micro-Save Consulting recently identified the challenges through an assessment in its 'Impact of DIGIDHAN Mission on India's digital payments ecosystem' report.

Know-your-finance Financial literacy empowers individuals to make informed financial decisions and achieve long-term financial security. Yet, only 27% of Indians are financially literate. The rest are vulnerable to debt traps, poor investment choices, scams and predatory financial practices. The predicament is more acute for vulnerable groups, such as semiliterate and innumerate segments, who fail to achieve financial independence due to poor financial literacy.

► Urban skew India's digital payments infra continues to skew toward urban regions. Even with 336 mn PoS machines (July 2023), 1.4 mn BHIM Aadhaar Pay (BAP) PoS machines and more than 5 mn Bharat QR codes, 77% of merchants don't use digital payments. 65% of respondents still face issues when they accept payments through UPI, BAP and cards,

mainly in rural areas. ▶ Tech tics Transaction failures due to business or technical declines lead to a lack of trust in digital payments, which impedes their adoption. This issue is exacerbated for assisted payment modes, such as AePS and BAP. followed by card payments through



Did the payment go through?

PoS machines, and is more prominent in rural and semi-urban areas. Further, users also face issues with grievance resolution because they do not know the proper channels to register and resolve their grievances.

Fraud fear Increased use of formal financial services and the reliance on digital rails have led to a rise in fraud. This problem affects newer users, especially those who lack digital awareness. RBI's data reported instances of fraud worth ₹604 bn in 2021 Microsoft's 2021 Global Tech Support Scam Research report showed that in India:

Consumers experienced a relatively high scam encounter rate of 69% in the last 12 months, similar to 70% in 2018. In contrast, there was an overall 5-point drop in scam encounters globally with a rate of 59% over the same period.

▶ Millennials (24-37-year-olds) were the most susceptible to such scams in 2021, with 58% of those who continued with the scam incurring monetary loss. 73% of male users who proceeded to interact with a scammer were likely to lose money. Consumers were much more likely

to continue with scams, regardless of type, as compared with global figures Incidences of unsolicited call scams increased from 23% to 31% between 2018 and 2021. This continues to be the scam type that consumers respond to most often, with 45% of those surveyed continuing and taking recommended actions from a scamster. In contrast, global scam encounter rates for unsolicited calls fell two points during the same period, from 27% in 2018 to 25% in 2021.

These challenges need careful consideration and strategic thinking to build a more robust ecosystem that can handle the demands posed by the growing digital payments ecosystem. The time is ripe for players in the ecosystem to undertake concerted efforts and build secure, safe and interoperable digital platforms across the

> The writer is former economic adviser, MeitY, Gol

Good Designs Need a Human Touch



Nick Talbot

We humans are, in great part, driven by our emotions. This is a fundamental truth that shapes many of our daily decisions, and it's a critical element that designers need to harness. Even when we aim for logic, emotions often guide our decisions, especially in the world of design. This is evident not only in physical products but also in the media and entertainment

From the curve of a car to the sleek design of a smartphone, emotional responses guide consumer behaviours more than we might think. It starts with an immediate, visceral reaction. You see something, and you want it. This desire comes even before the 'I like it', or the logical questioning of 'What is it?', and 'How much does it cost?' It's this emotional first impression that can make or break a product.

Consider how this plays out in fashion. We've all had moments in a store when a piece of clothing speaks to us from across the room. Maybe

it's the cut, the fabric or the colour. We're drawn to it, emotionally engaged before we even consider the price tag. This is emotional design at its most potent, where an item doesn't just meet a need — it sparks a desire. One thing I've always carried with me is that the passion and emotion a designer pours into their work are communicated through the final product. A design that lacks emotional depth feels flat to the consumer. But when there's genuine passion behind the design process, it shows and it sells. This emotional engagement doesn't just influence the immediate buying decision, it extends to the



The rest is functional: Copenhagen Chair, 1936, designed by Mogens Voltelen

entire user experience. Products that evoke a strong emotional response tend to build a deeper; more enduring relationship with their users, often translating into brand loyalty and repeated interactions.

In our increasingly digital world, where we interact increasingly with interfaces and screens, the principle remains the same. The emotional design of an app can make the difference between an engaging experience and a forgettable one. A well-designed app that provides a seamless, intuitive and delightful user experience can foster a strong emotional connection, leading users to return again and again.

For example, think about your favourite mobile app. What draws you to it? Is it the ease of use, the aesthetic appeal or the way it anticipates your needs? These elements are all part of emotional design. They create a sense of fulfilment and joy that keeps users engaged.

As AI continues to shape the future of design, the human touch remains crucial. AI can generate solutions, but it's humar designers who infuse them with emotion and empathy. A human in the loop is essential to assess the positive or negative emotions a solution may evoke. This overresonates on an emotional level, balancing AI efficiency with human creativity. The powerful combination of AI and humans can develop emotionally intelligent designs, which eventually help a brand stand out in the competitive market. Ultimately, it is the emotional

sight ensures that the final product

connection with a product or service that brings out the drive to keep going back to the same brand. Take automobiles, for instance. A consumer will pause and admire their car after a memorable experience. Successful products and services build emotional energy to retain customers, and this is visible in the design. It is also crucial that designers remember what human beings are about while designing any product. It's essential to bring out the good feelings and the delightful experiences rather than just having the technology for its own sake. Thus, several aspects and elements go into making a design, and the emotional factor cannot be ignored. In the end, we are emotional creatures, and these powerful emotions are a critical part of what we do and why we do it. Once we get this right, the final design ticks all the boxes for a successful product.

> The writer is head of design and innovation, Tata Elxsi



THE SPEAKING TREE

Finding

Compassion

SUDHA DEVI NAYAK

The saying, 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle,' often attributed to Plato, reminds us that no one is immune to life's vagaries in a world beset with tears, tragedy, misfortunes and accidents. In the randomness of life, everybody is vulnerable and equally susceptible to hurt and suffering. If someone is mourning the loss of a loved one, the other may be on the brink of financial ruin, and still another may be living in failing health.

We must look at one another with an understanding heart through all our vulnerabilities and weaknesses. That is humanity's essence; humanness is acting in a moment of compassion. Realise with a humbling insight that therein lies our redemption and, perhaps, one day, we might need the love and assistance of

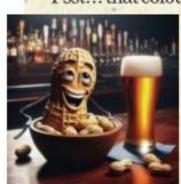
By helping others, we become closer to the creator. It is not merely a physical act but an intellectual greatness that must inform our thoughts and ideas. In understanding the pain and trauma of others, we understand ourselves. We open ourselves, understand our limitations and realise the nobility present in us. Deeply flawed humans but capable of astounding grace, we must resolve our conflicts through a single act or words of compassion.

Ren is a Chinese word that means humanity or humanness; according to a Confucian virtue, 'wishing to establish oneself, one also seeks to establish others; wishing to be enlarged oneself, one seeks to enlarge others. He who seeks it has already found it.'



Don't Be Nuts!

A man walks into a bar. It's empty, except for the barten der. He sits down and orders a drink. He hears someone whisper, 'Psst... I like your tie.' The man looks around but doesn't see anyone. 'Psst... that colour looks



you.' Heasks the bartender; 'Excuse me, but speaking

nice on

to me?' The bartender rolls his eyes and says, 'No, sorry about that. It's the peanuts. They're complimentary.'

Make Light Of Work

Two factory workers in a public sector company are talking. The woman says, 'I can make the boss give me the day off." The man replies, 'And how would you do that?" 'Just wait

and see. She then hangs upside down from the ceiling. The boss comes in and says, 'What are you doing?' The woman replies, 'I'm a light bulb.'

'You've been working so much that you've gone crazy. I think you need to take the day off,' says the boss. The man starts to follow her and the boss stops him and says, 'Where do you think you're going?"

The man replies, 'I'm going home, too. I can't work in the

Chat Room

Losing By the Skin of Our Teeth

Apropos the feature, 'Skin is the

Game' by Sagar Malviya (Jun 28), I am not game. We the brownish keep struggling for identity with our skin, being more racist than our former white masters. Black is a solid colour, so is white. We are caught with the riddle of the middle that is dangerously not gaining any moss. What is our problem in being identified as brownish badgers that is not going to reduce us to low wagers? In fact, the skincare syndrome is pushing us deeper into inferiority complex by complexion to an extent that we spend a sizeable amount on unnecessary evil skincare. While white and black can be as easily demarcated as day and night, being brown, we are like the middle of the day, levelling both white and black. By not accepting our original self, we are victims of self-deception.

SULTAN AKHTAR PATEL

By email



A thought for today

People say accidents are due to human error, which is like saying falls are due to gravity

TREVOR KLETZ

In For A Stricture

India's building lots of infra. Who's checking quality?

tragedy like the collapse of foyer roof at Delhi airport's domestic terminal that killed at least one, will likely happen ▲ Again – in some airport, or bridge, hospital or commercial building. It sounds doomy, but it must be said. Hours before the Delhi accident, visuals from Jabalpur airport showed a car crushed by a roof section that caved in.

Missing link | It's a laundry list of accidents from what most certainly is shoddy construction and maintenance, for decades a missing link in India's infra boom. And it shows up everywhere - in the collapse of Majerhat bridge and Vivekananda flyover in Kolkata, Morbi bridge in Gujarat, seepage in Mumbai's undersea tunnel,



flooding in Delhi's new underpasses. We don't even count deaths from potholes whether Mumbai or Delhi, or drownings in overflowing drains.

Sector in pain | Delhi's GMR-run airport is the jewel in India's airports' crown. Its three terminals make it the

world's second busiest by seating capacity. GOI's civil aviation push had a capex of over ₹98k cr (2019-24) for development, upgradation and modernisation. India has 149 airports, including 75 added over the last decade. But the sector is struggling, in every manner. Passengers shell out big money even, purportedly, for airport upkeep. Where is it all going?

Red flags | India's rapid infra boom has been handicapped by scant oversight of contractors, irregular inspections, even shortage of qualified inspectors. Inconsistent standards and poor quality of materials worsen impacts of outdated inspection techniques, limited budgets and staff shortage. There's corruption and conflict of interest. Heavy rain and extreme weather is the new normal; it is no excuse. The fast pace of development has outpaced inspection and maintenance capabilities. That's a man-made disaster. GOI will review all airports. Is that nearly enough? The answer's obvious.

Kvaratskhelianism

What a football hero from a tiny country tells us

Tootball is nothing without its fairytale moments. Georgia's → spectacular victory over Portugal to qualify for the last 16 stage of the ongoing Euro 2024 adds to the collection. A country of 3.7mn, this was Georgia's first major tournament. Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, who scored the opening goal against Cristiano Ronaldo's side, was a random 12-year-old in the crowd when the Portuguese star came for the inauguration of a football academy in Georgia in 2013. Without a doubt, this is Georgia's greatest sporting moment.



Past to present | Sure, Georgia did have a strong footballing culture in Soviet times, and Dinamo Tbilisi was a powerhouse in the Soviet championships. Fun fact, Stalin was Georgian. But post-independence, Georgian football saw a steep decline. It's only in recent years with help from Uefa that Georgian football revived, developing infra and establishing training centres. This led to emergence of players like

Kvaratskhelia, who now plays for Italian club Napoli. Indian football's moment? | When will Indian football achieve similar results? Note that in 2015 Georgia's Fifa ranking was 154, India's was 156. Today, Georgia is ranked 74 while India is at 124. It's not that a nation of 1.4bn people doesn't have footballing talent. But as the mess with the sacking of men's team head coach Igor Stimac shows, bureaucratic inefficiencies persist in the system. We have the players, but we don't have the administrative system for a Georgian fairy tale yet.

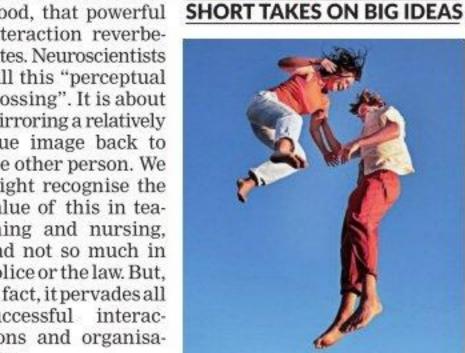
Here's A Vital Thing That AI Can't Do

Good work needs connecting with others, a human speciality

hat counts as work today? What about the invisible labour that underlies tasks that can be seen and measured? There is a connective tissue between ourselves and our societies. which we fail to recognise. The Last Human Job: The Work of Connecting in a Disconnected World by Allison JPugh is about the importance of this 'connective labour'.

Seeing the other and reflecting that understanding back is how humans help each other be human. This work is ubiquitous but there is no name for it. It is only partially understood. It is not recognised or reimbursed. As data analytics and automation push systems to be efficient and reproducible, we are in the middle of a full-blown depersonalisation crisis.

When someone feels seen and understood, that powerful interaction reverberates. Neuroscientists call this "perceptual crossing". It is about mirroring a relatively true image back to the other person. We might recognise the value of this in teaching and nursing, and not so much in police or the law. But, in fact, it pervades all successful interactions and organisations.



Automation and depersonalisation - a kind of machine logic - has set in across fields. Those who push these solutions say that it is to 'scale up' operations, or expand access, be more efficient, or take over tasks so that humans can be freed to focus on what matters.

But the primacy we give to data tends to edge out connective work, which is really an artisanal practice. It's something we do with our bodies and expressions, our 'spider sense', that creates rapport and enables collaboration. We make helpful mistakes, our interactions are spontaneous and unpredictable. Machines can customise, they can offer a thin veneer of sociality, but cannot reproduce this capacity for connection.

that such work provided. Working in these environments is often alienating, with little solidarity to be found. Connective labour is shot through with questions of social inequality.



In workplaces, excessive standardi-

sation not only hinders relationships,

it makes humans feel like automatons.

Centring checklists, protocols and info

can affect the quality of work, as the

process becomes its own point, distrac-

ting from the actual work. In the West,

after electronic records supplanted

personal attention, doctors reported

labour becomes a consumer service,

counted, shaped and surveilled through

technology. Ratings and reviews do

not replicate the quality of relationship

In the gig economy, connective

higher rates of burnout.

interactions are not always for the best, obviously. Shame and judgment can rear up. For those from marginalised or stigmatised back-

grounds, it might be easier to rely on an impersonal system than a person who might condescend to them. Social intimacy is not just a

lubricant for transactions. It makes the world go round. Leaders who centre relationships motivate others, but they must also allow others to connect. This is seen in education, where research suggests a good principal can affect 25% of a school's outcomes by affecting teachers' emotions and consequently, a school culture of care, which boosts morale and learning.

Grocery shops, playgrounds, classrooms, clinics are all venues of interaction and belonging. They make a community out of individuals. Our social health depends on them.

JOE, BYE THEN?

Given how the first presidential debate went, should Democrats replace Biden by the next debate in Sep? But no matter which Democrat runs against Trump, it's going to be a close contest

Michael Wasiura



substantial responses.

Millions of Americans have now seen a former president debate a sitting president, and few would care to witness such a thing ever again. For more than two hours, one of the old men on stage brazenly answered questions the moderators were not asking him, and the other old man on stage uncomfortably stumbled over several of his more

Watching the debate in Michigan – a key swing state in the Nov election – two historical analogies came to mind.

First, compare Biden's debate performance against Trump to the late, great Muhammad Ali's final professional fight. In 1980, a retired Ali wanted one last shot at a heavyweight title. Up-and-coming Larry Holmes demolished the past-his-prime former champ in a manner that made viewers fear for the older man's health.

 But there was also the 1960 presidential debate. Americans who had listened to the presidential debate on radio thought Nixon had won, and those who had watched it on TV thought Kennedy had won. On substance vs style point, let's note

this: almost immediately after the debate ended, both Democratic leaning CNN and Republican supporting Fox News were admitting - or, in Fox's case, celebrating - the fact that Biden not only looked awful, but sounded awful. He often stuttered mid-sentence, mumbled

constantly, and his answers contained far more factual info than many ordinary voters can comprehend. Biden lost, no matter how many outright lies Trump told in his confident, hypnotising style of delivery. This meant that there was no debate: Biden really

the big stage opposite Trump on Sep 10, when the next contest is scheduled, actually sounds cruel. But unlike in the case of the disastrous final fight of The Greatest, Biden's end may not come quite so suddenly. He might even end up outlasting the brute

did look like an aging Ali, and sending him back out onto

who just spent two hours rhetorically punching him in the face. Right around an hour after the debate itself

mercifully ended, CNN checked in with a focus group

of Michigan voters. After five minutes of discussion about what it was they had just seen, this was the tally in the room CNN was polling:

- For Trump: 7

- For Biden: 6

- Undecided: 1 There are going to be a whole lot of people arguing today that Thursday night's events have determined the fate of America for decades to come. And yes, the political equivalent of Ali vs Holmes really was incredibly ugly.

But for tens of millions of voters, Biden's stuttering and vacant stares still appear less ugly than Trump's attempt to overthrow the 2020 election, his failure to prevent the spread of Covid, his used-car-salesman demagoguery, and that time he was exposed bragging on video about committing sexual assault.

True, Trump's poll numbers will go up by a few points over the next few days. Quite possibly, Biden really will end up watching a different Democratic candidate take on Trump in the next presidential debate in Sep. It's also entirely possible that both Biden and Kamala will get replaced on the Democratic ticket. But that won't end anything either.

Around an hour after the debate, when CNN published the results of a larger poll, it showed that only 5% of likely voters who watched the event had changed their minds about the candidates - a figure far from sufficient to

signal the end of the Biden campaign. Yes, many Michigan Democrats will 100% support the Democratic candidate in Nov so long as Trump is the opponent on the other side. It does not matter if a three-day-old slice of pineapple pizza calcifying in the refrigerator ends up being the country's most promising competitor against Trump, they would vote for the pizza.

> Even if it ends up being Kamala, they would vote for Kamala.

Trump won Michigan in 2016, and lost it in 2020. As goes Michigan this Nov, so goes America's future, and there is literally nothing Biden or Trump could do to substantially change the number of Democrats or Republicans who are willing to support one candidate over the other.

This means that, no matter how insanely eventful the four months end up being, the results of this election are going to be painfully close. Biden voters have made up their mind. Trump voters have made up their mind. The only question that remains is, which side will convince a slightly higher percentage of its electorate to take the trouble of casting a ballot this fall?

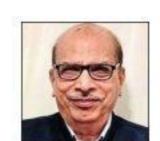
Asking for a prediction? You're as likely to get the correct answer by flipping a coin. All that's certain is, if you really believe that things cannot possibly get any uglier than Thursday night's debate, then you are in for four more months of shocking disappointment. There will be many more unappealing plot twists before we reach the unpredictable end of this deadly serious reality show.

The writer contributes to Newsweek and other American news outlets

How To Tackle Our Cities' Monsoon Mess

- Restructure stormwater drains
 Remove encroachments from pavements, streets
- Make all agencies answerable to the urban local body
 Train more town planners

KK Pandey



Monsoon arrived in Delhi yesterday – so did waterlogged streets, traffic chaos and massive disruption of regular life. This happens every year, and in every major Indian city. Why?

Because our approach to dealing with the problem is not preventive. Every year, we deal with it after the city has been brought to a grinding halt. Issues like regular repair, replacement of drainage/ sewerage system, keeping public spaces (roads, streets, footpaths) free of encroachments are

put on the back burner while there is still time for planning and management. India's urban population of 461mn

(2019) will go up by 416mn by 2047. This means, without timely and concerted action by all stakeholders, the problem will get worse in coming years.

What's behind the mess? | Waterlogging in our cities is caused by expansion of planned and unplanned urban areas without regard for space for circulation; drying up and destruction of lakes, tanks and water bodies due to dumping of construction and demolition waste; and inclusion of areas occupied by lakes and other water bodies in habitation zones. For instance, half of the 519 water bodies in Gurugram have disappeared over 40 years. The story is quite similar for Bengaluru.

Who is responsible? | Water management is the

responsibility of three stakeholders: planning agencies, urban local bodies and exclusive agencies for water and sewage. The three rarely work in tandem, with issues of jurisdiction marring their efforts. While solid wastes fall in the domain of urban local bodies, water and sewage quite often don't.

This bits-and-pieces planning does not allow for holistic management of huge urban spaces like NCR. You

cannot deal with water issues, sewage or drains by working in silos, which is what urban bodies like NDMC and MCD, or even satellite cities like Gurugram and Noida represent.

Town planners have a vital role to play in how urban systems are run. But we don't have even one per lakh population. Compare that with 38 in UK and 23 in Australia. Even in our larger cities, the number is well below the norm for modern global cities.

If planning is bad, implementation is worse. It is quite common for our cities to not have stormwater drains in place. Most Indian cities do not even have an

exclusive drainage plan. So, a spell of heavy rain is all it

takes to disrupt the flow of existing drains and lead to

waterlogging. Matters are made worse because of solid

waste that municipal bodies are derelict in collecting.

India, on the other hand, planning starts when an area

is already under habitation. Even when there is advance

planning, things move so slowly that by the time action

is taken, the planning is obsolete. To take one example,

past Delhi Master Plans were notified after 8-10 years of

preparation. While the 2041 one was prepared on time, it

Urban planning is all about foreseeing the future. In

This waste chokes drains in our cities.

is being processed for the last four years.

But just as responsible are citizens, cutting across income groups. Is it not common to see educated people in high- and middle-income colonies illegally occupying footpaths outside their houses? Or parking their vehicles on roads, leaving little space for traffic movement? As for low-income areas, they are totally choked with little space for circulation.

What's the way forward? | One, how plans are implemented needs a complete relook. MPD-2041, for example, makes a provision for blue-green development

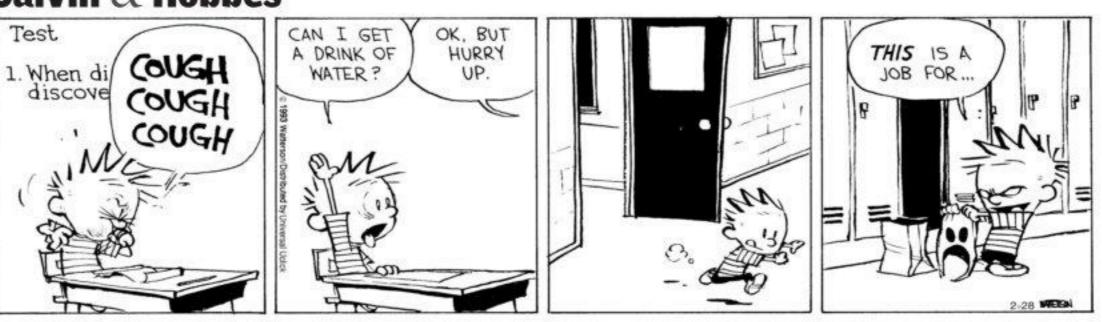
> and use of dhalaos for segregation of waste. That must be implemented rigorously. Two, we must prepare proper drainage plans, or revisit them in case they have proven inadequate. Take waterlogging at Delhi's ITO. The only way it can be resolved is by detailed restructuring of the sewage network that aligns it with water level of Yamuna.

Three, water and sanitation plans must be prepared as per 15th finance commission's devolution package for 44 urban agglomerations covering 1,115 urban local bodies. Four, safety audit of roads/streets and footpaths must be done regularly. Such an audit should identify barriers/encroachments for follow-up action to free up space for movement of water, goods and people.

Five, authorities need to engage with communities for removal of encroachments from footpaths and roads. At the same time, spaces occupied by govt departments for their use should be cleared. Six, agencies handling water and sanitation should be made accountable to ULBs. Most important, ULBs should have overarching authority over all agencies responsible for urban upkeep. Finally, there must be regular maintenance of drainage and sewage network to minimise the chances of an unforeseen event throwing urban life out of gear.

The writer is professor, Indian Institute of Public Administration. Views are personal

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Before you start some work, always ask yourself three questions - Why am I doing it,

What the results might be and Will I be successful. Only when you think deeply and find satisfactory answers to these questions, go ahead.

Kautilya

Finding Joy In Little Things Is A Game-Changer

Jaya Row

ife can be tough. It throws challenges at us, but even in the darkest of isn't reserved for rare, monumental occasions. It's constantly present. You just have to recognise it.

Today, let's enjoy the magic and joy in our everyday lives. Finding joy in the little things can be a game-changer. A smile from a stranger, a beautiful sunrise, the laughter of children, and scores of other little things bring joy to life.

However, we are often too busy chasing after external objects to enjoy the many things that nature provides. The essential prerequisite to finding joy is a calm mind. The mind is often preoccupied with worry and anxiety

about the future. You miss the beauty and grandeur that the present moment

The mind is full of desires for various things. It goes out into the world to fulfil them. It is constantly in a state of agitation and is in no mood to enjoy anything. You may have a delicious meal before you, but

if the mind is worried about a bad day at work or anxious about the following day, you cannot even taste the food. The same applies to any enjoyment. You focus THE SPEAKING TREE on earning money to acquire a fancy home, luxurious car, or

exotic vacation. Are you in the right frame of mind to enjoy it? The Bhagwad Gita says that people

in long hours to earn wealth. In the end, you only get stress and mental agitation. Who enjoys the world? The person who eats the remnants of sacrifice. You gain prosperity and happiness when you work in a spirit of service and

sacrifice for a higher cause. Your mind

gentle breeze.

is calm, and you can enjoy even the simplest things-the chirping of a bird, a gorgeous sunset, a simple meal or the

> The mind has the habit of focusing on one little thing you do not have. Thus, by your own volition, you

miss the millions of things you have been blessed with - for free and in abundance. Even when you get what you seek, you are not happy. Your mind

miserable. When your happiness is pegged on a

you are always unhappy, agitated, and

future achievement, you do not enjoy what you have. When you get what you want, your mind immediately shifts to something else. This goes on endlessly. Swami Rama Tirtha said, "If you are not happy as you are, where you are, you will never be happy."

It is a myth to believe that you need to possess a thing to enjoy it. Learn the art of enjoying a ride in the neighbour's new car. Celebrate a colleague's promotion. You are then free of the stress to earn the money to afford all this. You no longer suffer from the disease of more.

A calm mind thinks of higher, more fulfilling avenues. As you get anchored in the higher, you become free from cook but eat sin. You work hard and put shifts to something else you lack. Thus, lower desires. You evolve spiritually.

OPINION

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Biden stumbles

Debate performance amplifies age concerns

"OE Biden is 81, his challenger Donald Trump 78. In the first debate between the US presidential candidates, the age gap seemed much larger. The most important job for President Biden was to put to rest concerns about his biggest vulnerability - his fitmess for office, given his age. He failed, and badly at that. Trump pressed his case for a second term with limited resistance as Biden meandered and mumbled through answers. For someone who regularly attacks Biden on his age, Trump was restrained, as if allowing own goals. At one point, after Biden trailed off while defending his record on border security, Trump said, 'I really don't know what he said at the end of that sentence. I don't think he knows what he said, either.' The debate was a setback for the Democrats, who expected Biden to turn the election into a referendum on Trump, reminding voters of the chaotic nature of the latter's presidency.

It was the first time a sitting US President and his predecessor had debated. Analysts were quick to point out the contrast from their meeting four years ago. At that time, Biden had put Trump's record under the microscope and offered a hopeful vision for the country. This time round, he was largely unable to corner the Republican challenger on his repeated assertions that weren't supported by facts. The President's dismal show is sure to lead to a blame game within the party over whether handing him a second nomination with only nominal opposition was the right move. Some may be thinking about how they still could put up a different nominee.

The Biden campaign has two months to calm the waters before the second debate in September. For now, more people will be talking about Biden's performance in the debate than Trump's as President.

Bad loans

Drop in NPA ratio augurs well for banks

RESIDENT Droupadi Murmu's address to Parliament on Thursday coincided with the release of the Reserve Bank of India's Financial Stability Report (FSR). The President mentioned that the government had carried out reforms over the past decade to save India's banking sector, enacting laws such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). She stated that the nonperforming assets (NPA) of public sector banks were continuously decreasing. This is borne out by the FSR, which says that the gross NPA ratio of scheduled commercial banks fell to 2.8 per cent and the net NPA ratio decreased to 0.6 per cent at the end of March this year. As per the RBI, the gross bad loan ratio of banks has reached a 12-year low. This significant drop indicates that banks are managing their bad loans in a better way, reducing the risks of defaults.

Non-performing assets are an impediment to the longterm growth and stability of the Indian banking sector; their impact on the overall health of the economy cannot be overemphasised. Since its enactment in 2016, the IBC has helped many banks and financial lenders realise their dues by streamlining the process of resolving insolvency cases. This is very important for the world's fastest-growing major economy, which aims to become the go-to destination for global investors. Doubts and apprehensions about India's legal and regulatory framework can be detrimental to the confidence of investors.

The RBI has noted that with healthier balance sheets, banks and financial institutions are actively supporting economic activities through consistent credit expansion, while the President has claimed that India's banking sector is one of the strongest in the world. These observations should be reassuring for domestic investors, even as there is room for improvement in terms of making banks more robust and profitable. Every customer is concerned about the safety of his or her deposits and investments; the banks' ability to handle financial shocks and minimise risks can make a huge difference to their fiscal health.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JUNE 29, 1924

The Cattle Protection Bill

THE Cattle and Milk Protection Bill of which Pandit Sham Lal Nehru, MLA(Swarajist), has given notice will, if passed by the Assembly, go a long way to ameliorate the condition of small peasant proprietors and effectually reduce the rate of infant mortality in India. The importance of such a measure in a country like ours cannot be exaggerated. As the preamble to the Bill states, the prices of agriculturist cattle and milk have gone up abnormally on account of shortage of cattle due in no small measure to the overseas trade in dry meat, as a result of which the agriculturist has to undergo hardships and sufferings and babies have to go without milk, suffer pangs of hunger and agonies of premature death. According to the figures collected by Nehru, as many as 42 lakh head of cattle are slaughtered every year in India, of which no less than 32 lakh are put to death simply to supply dry meat to foreign countries. The prevalence of the dry meat trade in this country, it will thus be seen, is depriving children of their proper share of milk and the poor peasant of a cheap factor of cultivation and is consequently reducing the vitality of the Indian people and the productivity of the Indian soil. The problem of cow slaughter in India is unfortunately mixed up with the real or supposed religious duties of an important section of the people. The result is that all resolutions so far brought forward by non-Mahomedans in various local bodies for restricting the slaughter of cows have been vehemently opposed by representatives of the Mahomedan community.

Why Moscow matters to Modi

Be it Biden, Trump or Putin, Delhi should listen to them all and welcome them



A FINE BALANCE: Limiting PM Modi's Moscow trip to one day is, perhaps, a good compromise — India doesn't want to antagonise the Americans too much. ANI

sands of people still dying on both sides are worth the cause they claim to be fighting for.

across the river is lit up like a

fairytale castle at night, while

the bridge over the river, Kuznet-

sky Most, is a memory trigger to

those dark days in October 1993

when Russian tanks parked

themselves on the bridge and

trained their guns at their own

Parliament nearby, a building

also known as the White House.

White House leaps up next door,

now shinily painted in white-

and-gold. Elsewhere, too, the

city is both spick and span. You

would never guess that there's a

new crisis in town, although

missing hoardings to Western

goods like Mercedes-Benz cars,

McDonald's burgers and Max-

im's pastries superficially give

the game away. So much has

changed since Russia's war in

Ukraine began just over two

years ago, but what is remark-

able is that Moscow is not just far

more affluent than it was during

the chaos of the 1990s; it is also

Nor is it anyone's case, howev-

er, as Prime Minister Modi travels

to Moscow for a day-long summit

with Russian President Vladimir

Putin a week or so from now, that

the war hasn't affected people.

Anti-war sentiment is significant,

if subdued. The fact that Ukraini-

ans and Russians share many

important things-including the

Orthodox Church, Slav ethnicity,

marriage and family ties, which

basically mean they are part of

one, large cross-border family —

makes one wonder if the thou-

far more resilient and united.

Rub your eyes, again, and the

Probably not. Few ideas are worth a bullet inside your body. The truth is that the battle for Ukraine is no longer just a fight between Ukrainians and Russians, but a proxy for someone else's argument. Right from the start in February 2022, the Ukrainians never had the sophisticated weaponry to fight the Russians — Putin probably thought he would walk all over Ukraine within days, declare victory and move on.

It hasn't quite worked out like that because the West is getting more and more deeply involved. For the past two years, the US has continued to supply Ukraine sophisticated weaponry to fight the Russians. In the past year, US-made drones have launched attacks deep within Russia, even reaching the outskirts of Moscow. Western mercenaries of more than one NATO country the US, Canada, the UK, France, Poland and Romania — have been fighting alongside Ukrainian soldiers. Clearly, it's too soon after Afghanistan to put American boots on the ground, but NATO mercenaries are also obviously operating the more

Putin is winning at home because he has successfully framed the Ukraine war in terms people understand.

sophisticated weaponry that Ukrainians may not be able to.

It is in the middle of this chaotic situation that PM Modi is going to Moscow. Western diplomats are already wondering why he wants to embrace the Russian leader at a time like this - especially when US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was in Delhi less than a fortnight ago to promise the transfer of critical technologies, a gesture India has widely appreciated.

On the other hand, India-Russia trade has zoomed from a mere \$10 billion before the Ukraine war to around \$70 billion today, primarily because of the large quantities of oil India is buying

from Russia, refining it at a smallish profit and re-exporting the refined product to European refineries - the Europeans, as we know by now, have been sanctioned from trading with Russia since the start of the war, which is what explains the missing hoardings on Moscow's streets.

Certainly, Russia's cheap, discounted oil has helped India minimise the damage to its own economy, especially as India came off the Covid pandemic. Imagine the impact on the elections, especially on the ruling BJP, if oil prices had gone through the roof - for a price-sensitive country which imports more than 80 per cent of its energy, stabilising the domestic oil market would have taken much dexterity.

Certainly, Modi is keenly aware that his visit to Moscow will be keenly watched all around. Limiting his trip to one day is, perhaps, a good compromise -India doesn't want to antagonise the Americans too much; the US remains a hugely powerful nation, leverages a significant diaspora that substantially supports Modi and remains the largest source of FDI.

But the big change in Russia compared to the deep, national crisis it underwent in the 1990s is

that today's Russians are no longer shving away from asserting themselves as a big power in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, then President Boris Yeltsin had joined hands with the West in the hope that Russia would be accepted as an equal partner, all it got was the public humiliation associated with being told it was a second-rate power.

At the Primakov Readings think-tank dialogue in Moscow earlier this week — in which I was a participant - the irony was that not one Western scholar physically showed up for fear of being sanctioned by their own organisation back home, but only participated online; everyone else, including Russians, debated everything from culture to the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war.

Understand, then, why Putin was elected for the fifth time this March, although he's been in the top job for more than 20 years. Putin has effectively erased those memories of the 1990s by leveraging Russia's vast mineral resources to maintain a certain level of affluence, kept pensions for the elderly and poor, sacked corrupt ministers and invited nations like China and India to replace Western companies which have left after the Ukraine war; in reality, most have not left but simply rebranded themselves as Russian companies because the Russian market is so tempting. Putin is winning at home because he has successfully framed the Ukraine war in terms people understand — that the West is fighting on behalf of Ukraine and

So, what is the moral of the story for India as Modi prepares to travel to Moscow? Most importantly, India must continue to straddle the Middle Path as it has always done, since the time of the Buddha, bending neither left nor right. Biden, Thump or Putin, India must listen to them all and welcome them - remember, they only add to the panoply of alternatives with which India can be built for its own better tomorrow.

wants to keep Russia down.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The key to effective leadership is pragmatic idealism. - Richard MNixon

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SAD reduced to fief of Badals

With reference to the editorial 'SAD crisis'; the Panthic party, which has represented Sikhs in Indian politics for around 100 years, has lost its credibility. The party has been reduced to the Badal family's fief. Voters have sent out a clear message to the Badal family: Hand over the reins of the party to a competent leader who can revive it. But emerging Akali leaders have long been sidelined by loyalists of the Badal clan. The Panthic party, which once had massive sway in Punjab, has seen an ignominious drop in its vote share. SAD may be wiped out soon if the party leadership does not change tack.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Speaker must have no bias

Refer to the news report 'Om re-elected Speaker, his words on Emergency trigger Congress protest'; a Speaker must be unanimously elected by the House. The chair of the Speaker in the august House is sacrosanct. It is unfortunate that soon after taking on the mantle of Speaker for the second time, Om Birla raked up the contentious issue of Emergency imposed by the Indira Gandhi government. His remark came on the heels of a blistering criticism of Emergency delivered by PM Narendra Modi. Om has set a bad precedent by acting as someone aligned with the ruling regime on the very first day of his second term. It may give rise to the apprehension that he may not perform his duties as the Speaker without bias.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Credibility of exams under a cloud

This year's NEET-UG exam, held on May 5, had over 23 lakh candidates. Thanks to the alleged irregularities and the use of unfair means in the exam, their future hangs in the balance. Prompt action by the CBI in the matter is essential, given the alleged involvement of politicians in the scam. The investigation underscores the gravity of the allegations and the urgent need to address them. The CBI should conduct an investigation that encompasses all alleged malpractices, including conspiracy, cheating, impersonation, breach of trust and destruction of evidence. Further, the probe must scrutinise the role of public servants in conducting the exam to uncover any larger conspiracies. A thorough investigation is crucial not only to address immediate concerns but also to restore

trust in the examination system. VIJAYKUMAR HK, RAICHUR

"

Another life lost in rat race

Apropos of the report NEET aspirant hangs himself in Kota, 12th suicide since Jan'; the news of yet another student dying by suicide is upsetting. Kota, a place famous for its coaching institutes, has now gained notoriety for the suicides of young learners. What is more disturbing is that nobody, not even government authorities, raises eyebrows when a student ends his life. The parents of these aspirants cannot shrug off responsibility for the deaths. After all, it is the high expectations of parents that push youngsters to take the extreme step. Besides, it is the faulty pattern of entrance exams that is compelling students to ditch their regular classes at school for coaching centres that rely heavily on rote learning. It only adds to the burden on them.

YOGINDER SINGHAL, LADWA

When a selfie costs dear

Apropos of 'Haryana tourist swept away in Parbati river in Manikaran valley while clicking photo'; there was a time when landline phones were the fastest means of communication. Then came cordless telephones. Smartphones and tablets are now the order of the day. These modern-day gadgets come with a lot of benefits, including quick access to the Internet and a host of features. The surge in the popularity of smartphones has corresponded with a rise in the trend of clicking selfies. Many users often post their selfies and videos on social networking sites to garner 'Likes'. But the craze over selfies has reached such an extent that people often don't hesitate to put themselves in harm's way while clicking pictures. This is the third incident of tourists drowning while clicking photographs in Kullu district in the past month. People need to be sensible and understandthat a selfie is not more precious than life. BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

The reality of real numbers

RS DALAL

77

was summoned by my elder daughter to Panchkula from Gurugram to take care of her two daughters study-Ling in classes IV and V during the first two weeks of their summer vacation. She had made plans to be with her husband, who was posted away on deputation.

'Why don't you take them along?' I argued as I was in no mood to upset my early-morning golf schedule. 'Oh no! They have so much homework to do and there are tuition classes as well,' she shot back. 'And please, don't give in to their demands for junk food. Rather, remove their doubts in mathematics,' she said, giving me a terse order. I could sense the effect of working in the high court on her, as I wasn't pleased with the matter-of-fact directive. And she left the very day I reached Panchkula.

'Nana, you help us finish mathematics homework first,' the girls said impatiently. 'Let me first find out where I can play golf,' I replied in a bid to shrug them off. 'No, mama told us not to let you play golf,' both said. I stood with my eyes wide open. I couldn't believe that my daughter had done this to me.

'Okay! Let me first take a test. Let me check what you know about real numbers, integers and prime numbers,' I said with authority, though I was clueless about the whole thing. You are the one who has to explain the concepts of mathematics to us, nana,' the girls insisted as I pulled a long face.

But then, in a flash, I remembered Master HS Bedi, who was the mathematics teacher at my school in Ludhiana. After retirement, I have been in touch with him on the phone. He is 90 but still going strong. He was hero-worshipped by students. Wearing a crisp-white kurta-pyjama and holding a piece of chalk, he made an iconic figure in the school. He continues to be revered and loved.

'Come on! Before we start with mathematics, you must get blessings from my guru,' I said, trying to shake off my embarrassment. I made a video call to him. There he was on the screen. 'Masterji, here are my granddaughters. I have to teach them mathematics. Kindly bless them to be better than me in this subject,' I said. The girls were stumped by my promptness as I coaxed them to greet him.

'Do you remember the difference between natural numbers, whole numbers and prime numbers?' he quizzed me. 'Sirji, that's the problem we are grappling with,' I said in a meek tone.

'First, I have to brush up your knowledge of the fundamentals of mathematics. By the way, when can you come to Ludhiana?' he asked. My granddaughters, seeing and hearing all this on the video call, burst into a laughing fit at my predicament and ran away to their room.

Punjab must address root causes of drug abuse



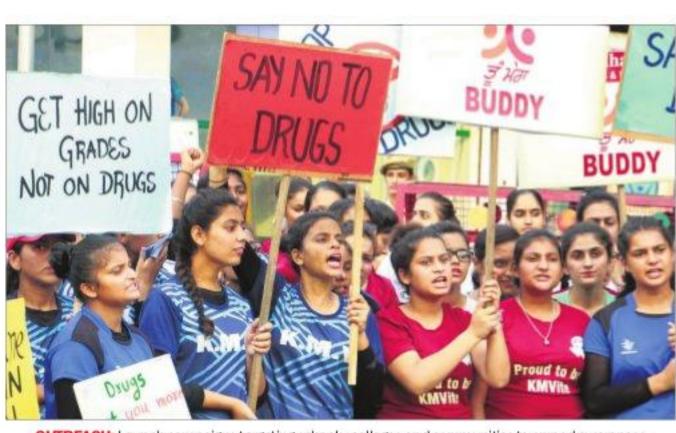
RANJIT SINGH GHUMAN FORMER PROFESSOR & HEAD. ECONOMICS, PUNIABI UNIVERSITY

UNJAB has been grappling with a severe drug addiction crisis that has claimed many young lives. Unfortunately, the state lacks comprehensive data on drug addicts and related deaths, their socio-economic profiles, reasons for addiction and its socio-economic costs. A recent report in The Tribune, 'Punjab drug overdose: 14 deaths in 14 days', highlighted the government's failure to curb this menace, indicating that the issue extends beyond overdose; it includes the threat of addiction and premature deaths among the youth. Alarmingly, adolescents are also falling prey to drug addiction. This necessitates a multi-pronged strategy that addresses the root causes of addiction, curbs drug supply and demand, promotes de-addiction and rehabilitation and prevents a rise in the number of drug users.

A recent study conducted by my colleagues Gurinder Kaur and Jatinder Singh and me at the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh, and commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science

Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, titled 'Dynamics of Drug Addiction and Abuse in India, with a Major Focus on Punjab' (Routledge, 2024), delves into the socio-cultural and politicoeconomic reasons behind drug addiction. The study underlines the need to address the underlying causes comprehensively, in the absence of which sustainable solutions to Punjab's drug menace will remain unattainable. It also reveals an unholy nexus among smugglers, police and politicians (SPP), as evidenced by the indictment of senior police officers and CM Bhagwant Mann's reported admission of some cops' involvement with smugglers, leading to the transfer of 10,000 personnel.

The distribution of intoxicants and drugs during elections further undermines the political will to combat the drug crisis. Successive governments have downplayed the issue. In 2009, an affidavit submitted to the Punjab and Haryana High Court wrongly claimed that 70 per cent of the state's youth were addicted to drugs. The 2016 Hindi movie Udta Punjab magnified the issue, bringing national attention to it. The arrest of dismissed Punjab Police DSP Jagdish Singh Bhola in a multimillion-dollar drug racket in 2013 exposed the extent of the problem. Despite being a key election issue for over a decade, there has been little progress. Even the special task force (STF) reports on drugs, submitted to the high court in 2018, faced administrative and legal challenges,



OUTREACH: Launch campaigns targeting schools, colleges and communities to spread awareness about the dangers of drug use and the importance of seeking help. TRIBUNE PHOTO

It needs to be

acknowledged that

hinting at the SPP nexus.

Following The Tribune's report, the Punjab Government declared another war on drugs. But such declarations have been made before, with little success. Measures like the constitution of the STF under the ADGP in 2017, the arrest of Bhola and a former Cabinet minister and the apprehension of thousands of peddlers and addicts were notable steps. The government also introduced outpatient opioidassisted treatment, drug abuse prevention officers and buddy programmes. However, despite these efforts, the drug menace persists.

Our study also highlights the severe socio-economic ramifications of drug addiction, which burdens the health infrastructure and lawenforcement while consuming the most productive years of

drug addicts are victims of underemployment, deep-rooted socio-cultural and politico-economic distortions.

human capital, leading to premature deaths from ailments like HIV/AIDS.

Punjab's drug supply comes from international and domestic sources. The Golden Crescent (Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) are major international sources, with Punjab situated on the transit route of the Golden Crescent. Additionally, opioid-based and synthetic drugs are manufactured and supplied domestically.

Economic factors contributing to drug use and peddling include high unemployment, wages and the lure of quick money from drug peddling. Among affluent households, easy access to money is a factor. Social factors include the consumption of intoxicants by elders, peer pressure,

tions, unfulfilled aspirations, frustration, failure, the rise of nuclear families, shrinking community interaction and rising individualism and loneliness. Additionally, a lack of awareness about the harmful effects of drugs and an indifferent civil society exacerbate the problem. Politically, the SPP nexus remains a significant barrier.

disharmonious family rela-

Addressing the drug menace requires acknowledging that drug addicts are victims of deep-rooted socio-cultural and politico-economic distortions and should be treated as patients, not culprits. Along with the government's threepronged strategy of enforcement, de-addiction and prevention, emphasis must also be laid on rehabilitation and preventing relapse.

A holistic approach to tackling drug addiction in Punjab should include the following strategies:

(i) Establish a robust data collection system to gather comprehensive information on drug addiction, including socio-economic profiles, reasons for addiction and the socio-economic costs of addiction. This data will help targeted interventions.

(ii) Intensify efforts to dismantle the SPP nexus. Ensure strict enforcement of laws against drug trafficking and distribution, coupled with swift judicial action against offenders.

(iii) Expand and improve deaddiction and rehabilitation centres, ensuring that they are accessible and adequate-

ating progress toward a sus-

tainable and equitable world.

ly staffed. Implement evidence-based treatment protocols and provide psychological and social support to recovering addicts.

(iv) Launch comprehensive campaigns targeting schools, colleges and communities to spread awareness about the dangers of drug use and the importance of seeking help. (v) Address unemployment and underemployment by creating job opportunities and skill development programmes. Strengthen social support systems to mitigate the socio-economic factors contributing todrug addiction. (vi) Encourage community involvement in combating drug addiction through local initiatives and support groups. Mobilise civil society organisations to advocate for policy changes and provide support to the affected families.

(vii) Collaborate with neighbouring countries to curb cross-border drug trafficking. Strengthen border security and intelligencesharing mechanisms to intercept drug supplies. (viii) Ensure inter-state cooperation, which would provide

a real-time exchange of information and data, leading to an effective intervention.

By addressing the drug problem with a comprehencoordinated and approach, Punjab can make significant strides in curbing drug addiction and its associated socio-economic costs. The war on drugs must be fought with determination, compassion and a commitment to systemic change.

Quantum science & technology need a proactive push



SS SEKHON FORMER PROFESSOR, PHYSICS, GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

HE United Nations recently declared 2025 as the International Year of Quantum Science and Technology (IYQ 2025). This declaration followed a draft resolution moved by Ghana, co-sponsored by six other countries, and supported by more than 70 nations. Next year marks the centenary of the development of quantum mechanics, which explains the behaviour of matter and energy at atomic and subatomic levels. Quantum science and technology have enabled innovations like MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), lasers, solar cells and computer chips, fundamentally transforming physics and technology. The UN aims to acknowledge these contributions, raise awareness about their role in sustainable development and ensure equal access to quantum science education and its benefits. Numerous global events and initiatives are being planned at the regional, national and global levels

throughout 2025. The development of quan-

tum science made extraordinary scientific advances possible, upturning centuries-old notions about nature. It revealed that particles can be treated as point-like or wavelike, depending on observation, and their behaviour is inherently probabilistic. Quantum mechanics, which began as a purely theoretical field a century ago, is now a central theory governing our universe. It explains virtually everything, from the behaviour of subatomic particles to the distribution of galaxies. For example, it elucidates how the sun shines and how solar panels capture its energy on earth. Understanding the universe's building blocks enables us to uncover underground structures, map the sea floor and detect bodily changes beyond existing medical scanners. Quantum science has led to breakthroughs like integrated circuits, lasers, modern batteries and LEDs, which have revolutionised communication, medicine and lighting efficiency. Recent advancements in quantum information processing and computing are critical for modelling complex systems and mitigating climate change.

Quantum science and technology is set to become a pivotal field in this century, significantly impacting the UN's 2030 Sustainable Develop-



PIVOTAL FIELD: Quantum science and technology are set to significantly impact the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals . ISTOCK

ment Goals (SDGs) across energy, climate, environment, agriculture, health, food security and safety, clean drinking water and industrial develop-Thus, quantum mechanics is a prime example of the practical impact that an abstract physical theory can have on human life. It can play a key role in advancing the SDGs through improved medical imaging and diagnostics, vaccine and drug development, environmonitoring and mental enhanced climate models. Additionally, quantum advancements contribute to developing new materials, energy-efficient technologies, economic growth and secure infrastructure, while promoting societal equity and accessibility through open access and gender equity in education

Advancements in quantum information processingand computing are critical for modelling complex systems and mitigating climate change.

Quantum theory has revolutionised physics, chemistry, biology, engineering, electronics and communications, leading to inventions like transistors, lasers, LEDs and MRI. While conventional computers use binary 'bits' (1 and 0), quantum computing uses qubits that exist in the superposition of states to process information and promises to transform electronics, clean energy and pharmaceuticals by enabling faster computations for cryptography, logistics optimisation and drug discovery. Additionally, quantum communication offers uniquely secure information transmission. Future quantum research can revolutionise computing, communications, materials, drugs and cybersecurity, crucial for global challenges like renewable energy, health and UN SDGs, acceler-

An important aspect of the IYQ 2025 is to motivate young people in developing nations as well as students from across the globe to become the next-generation torchbearers in this field and use quantum science to make a positive impact on the lives of others. It also provides a golden opportunity for young students and inquisitive people of all ages to learn and understand this science, which can drive technological innovation, influence government policies, impact the global economy and enrich art and culture. The declaration provides a forum for educational institutions, research bodies, organisations and governments to promote quantum science

Sensing the importance of this new technology, India launched the National Quantum Mission in April 2023, with a budget of around Rs 6,000 crore for eight years (2023-31). India has become the seventh country in the world to have a dedicated quantum mission, which aims to advance research related to quantum technologies in communication, sensing, metrology, materials, devices and quantum computing. Under this mission, four hubs in the domains of quantum computing, quantum communication, quan-

and technology awareness.

and quantum materials and devices are being set up with the aim to generate knowledge and promote R&D in these areas. The mission aims to develop quantum computers with 50-1,000 physical qubits within eight years, alongside establishing quantum communications between ground stations spanning distances of up to 2000 km. However, there is a lack of awareness about quantum science and technology in the northern region, including Punjab. The exception is the involvement of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IIS-ER), Mohali, where Prof Arvind is leading a workforce underthis mission. More efforts are needed, and

tum science and metrology,

the lawmakers, technical experts, people involved in science and technology, and universities across various states should take proactive steps in raising awareness about IYQ 2025. Extension lectures, exhibitions, workshops and conferences should be organised in educational institutions to inspire young minds and raise awareness about this scientific field. Similar to initiatives in universities abroad, urgent steps should be taken to establish a quantum institute in this region by involving stakeholders and preparing a roadmap for IYQ 2025 to ensure that the region benefits from quantum advancements.

FORECAST

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SATURDAY

OUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

A duplicate (6,4) 6 Destructive garden pest (4) 2

and research.

10 To rise (5)

11 Even-handed (9) 12 Soldier on guard (8)

13 Riddle (5) 15 State of lawlessness (7)

17 Inveterate bitterness (7) 19 Similar in character (7)

21 Cautious (7) 22 Domain (5)

24 Explicit approval (8) 27 Impossible to maintain (9) 28 Home (5) 29 Calamitous (4) 30 Have an overdraft

8 Basic principle of action (6,4) 9 Captive (8) 14 An inconspicuous position (10) 16 Prescribed formalities (8) 18 Out of sorts (3,6) 20 Put out of action (7) 21 Relate to (7) 23 Become different (5) 25 Rubbish (5)

26 Take notice of (4)

DOWN

3 To circle (5)

4 Smokestack (7)

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5 Of the general public (7)

7 River of west central

Yesterday's solution

(2,2,3,3)

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Down: 1 Fishy, 2 Air, 3 Gape, 4 Trivia, 5 Put-up job, 6 Undermine, 7 Bigotry, 11 Lithuania, 13 Baccarat, 14 Tabloid, 16 Wisdom, 19 Motor, 20 Vain, 23 Pit.

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V EASY

7 2 9 4 1 8 5 CITY MAX 8 3 1 5 6 9 4 Chandigarh 35 4 6 5 2 3 7 31 New Delhi 9 1 5 7 8 2 4 Amritsar 36 8 7 9 4 2 3 5 6 35 Bathinda 6 8 3 7 9 1 Jalandhar 34 6 5 7 8 9 4 3 Ludhiana 34 3 2 9 6 1 7 5 Bhiwani 34 3 1 4 6 8 2 9 5 7 Hisar 35 36 Sirsa CALENDAR Dharamsala 32 JUNE 29, 2024, SATURDAY 27 Manali ■ Shaka Samvat 1946 23 Shimla Aashadh Shaka 8 33 Srinagar Aashadh Parvishte 16 Jammu 38 ■ Hijari 31 Kargil ■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 8, up to 2.21 pm Leh 27 ■ Sobhana Yoga up to 6.54 pm ■ Uttrabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 8.49 am 33 Dehradun ■ Moon in Pisces sign 23 Mussoorie ■ Gandmoola start 8.49 am

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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PAPER WITH PASSION-

Presidential address

President's address, while highlighting various Govt achievements, fell short of raising some serious concerns

s the inaugural session of the 18th Lok Sabha progresses, it is evident that this Lok Sabha would be way livelier and more eventful than the previous one. Thanks to a more evenly distributed treasury and opposition benches. This was evident from the day one and in the address by President Droupadi Murmu to both houses of Parliament. Her address and drawn significant attention and controversy. In the customary joint address, President Murmu made a mention of the various achievements of the government, including its pervasive welfare schemes and the resilience of the Indian economy. The address, while highlighting various achievements of the Government was silent on various issues of national importance. For this the Opposition was vocal in criticising for its content and omissions, especially the exclusion of the ongoing violence in Manipur. The Opposition response was not ill founded but rooted in deeper political and social tensions prevailing in the State. The address, intended to set the tone for the



parliamentary session, included references to several critical issues and achievements. Notably, it highlighted irregularities in examinations and touched upon the historical context of the Emergency imposed in 1975. The reference to the Emergency was frowned upon by the Congress which dubbed it as an effort to deflect attention from the current political scenario. However, the glaring omission of the escalating violence in Manipur stood out starkly. President Murmu addressed the troubling trend of examination paper leaks, acknowledging the impact on the credibility of academic processes. She emphasised the government's commitment to transparency and reform in

examination systems, underscoring the need for stringent measures to ensure fairness and integrity. The mention of the Emergency, referred to as the 'biggest and darkest chapter of direct attack on the Constitution,' was a strategic move that dug up the historical blunder. This reference, while aimed at highlighting the Government's commitment to democracy, struck a nerve with the Congress, reminding them of a period they would prefer to distance themselves from. The most contentious aspect of President Murmu's speech was the omission of any direct mention of the violence in Manipur. The President's speech did acknowledge the government's broader efforts in the Northeast, citing increased allocations for development and initiatives under the Act East Policy, but this was seen as insufficient by many. The exclusion of the Manipur violence from the President's speech was perceived by the Opposition as an attempt to downplay the crisis and avoid accountability. The speech did not adequately address the concerns of the day and call for action from the Opposition regarding various pressing issues. Engaging with these concerns and outlining a collaborative approach to resolve the crisis could have fostered a more constructive political dialogue and demonstrated Govt's willingness to work across party



Sadhus shout slogans as the first batch of pilgrims leaves for the Amarnath Yatra, in Jammu

Suu Kyi spends another birthday in jail



Despite the Junta's desperate measures, including heightened repression and forced conscription, the resistance continues to gain ground

Aung San Suu Kyi spent yet another birthday in prison, as she completed 79 and stepped into her 80th year. No one knows where she is. Even her son, Kim Aris, has not heard from her since receiving a thank-you note from her in January this year for a package he had sent her. Yet not a squeak was heard from leaders of Western democracies who were, not so long ago, condemning her incarceration and Myanmar's ruling junta which had usurped power through a coup on February 1, 2021, and unleashed savage repression as protests surged throughout the country. Clearly, Myanmar is no longer visible on the radar of the democratic world's concerns.

There are doubtless possible explanations. Member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) are engrossed with the war in Ukraine and the possibility of the latter turning into a wider European War, if not World War III. Liberal elements in several European countries are alarmed by the gains made by right-wing forces in the recent elections to the European Parliament. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom and President Emmanuel Macron of France are facing elections. Growing popular anger over Israel's continuing offensive in Gaza, which has caused around 40,000 deaths, a large part of whom are women and children, is worrying governments that continue to support the Netanyahu regime.

President Joe Biden's worries range from Israel's war, the conflict in Ukraine, immigration, and fending off the challenge posed by Donald Trump in the November presidential elections in the US. Whatever the reasons, the fact is that Myanmar is no longer the global concern it was.

Such things have happened before. Public and governmental spans of attention are proverbialthat mostly sustains autocracies. There is a perceptible process. The Brotherhood Alliance (henceinitial response to a coup is condemnation by democracies and, current offensive, codenamed

often, the imposition of sanctions. Not all countries, however, react this way. Given the dynamics of global power play, some countries, mainly autocracies themselves, do not join the chorus of outrage

Rather, they rally behind the usurper. Mostly thanks to them, the sanctions do not work. The junta that had staged the coup carries on. New developments on the global scene consume the attention of countries condemning the coup. The junta is replaced by another entity as the principal target of outrage. Slowly, opposition towards it declines and there is a gradual trudge towards normalization of ties, particularly if the uniformed dictators relax their tyranny a little while retaining their grip on power.

Is this what is going to happen in Myanmar? One does not know. It will, however, be of no credit to the world's democracies if this does not happen and the people of Myanmar are able to overthrow the junta forcibly, which, by the look of things, is by no means a remote possibility. The Sit-Tat (which, and not Tatmadaw, is the real name of the junta's army), has been suffering forth the Alliance) launched its



THE JUNTA'S

GROWING DESPERATION IS REFLECTED IN THE STERN MEASURES IT HAS BEEN TAKING AGAINST THOSE IT **REGARDS AS** SURRENDERING OR DESERTING, THE KILLING OF ALL SUSPECTED **OPPONENTS AND** HEIGHTENED **EFFORTS AT** CONSCRIPTION **GIVEN THE REFUSAL**

Operation 1027, on October 27, 2023. Comprising the Myanmar National Démocratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) operating in the Kokang Special Region of Northern Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), also active in Shan State, and the Arakan Army, based in the Rakhine State in the country's western part, it has been acting in close cooperation with the National Unity Government's military arm, the People's Democratic Force (PDF), and other ethnic armies like the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karen Liberation Army (KNA), the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), and one of the country's most powerful armed ethnic organisations, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

According to an analysis in the website *The Irrawaddy*, datelined June 22, 2024, the junta has lost, since its coup on February, 2024, to the resistance forces one Military Regional Command, three Military Operational Commands, seven headquarters of the Border Guard Police Battalions, and 63 of the 545 military dattailons desides more than 2,500 frontline bases including tactical and frontline bases of military

Among the latest gains by the resistance forces, Mohinga Matters lists the Chin Brotherhood Force's capture of the junta's battalion station 304 in Chin State's Matupi township on June 17, 2024, and the KNLA's capture of Sukali military station, south of Myawaddy city, on June 18. The Junta's growing desperation is reflected in the stern measures it has been taking against those it regards as surrendering or deserting, the killing of all suspected opponents and heightened efforts at conscription given the refusal of people to serve in its forces. Indeed, those sentenced to death include Brigadier-General Zao Myo Win for surrendering to the MNDAA. The junta has also killed a highly respected Buddhist monk, Bhaddanta Manindabhivamsa, who has been strongly critical of it by shooting at his car on June 19, Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday. Given its faltering conscription scheme, the junta has reportedly been planning to conscript women in some parts. Needless to say, all this only serves to swell the tide of anger against it sweeping the country. Time is running out for Myanmar's uniformed

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

tyrants.

THE EDITOR

IN ITS FORCES

Directive on doctor's fees sparks controversy in Bihar-



rupees, with no standardiza-

tion or oversight. The Indian

The debate over how much doctors should charge for consultations has heated up in Bihar after Pappu Yadav capped fees in his constituency

appu Yadav, an independent Member of Parliament from Purnia in Bihar, has sparked a heated debate by instructing doctors in his constituency to cap their consultation fees at 500 rupees. This directive has not only caused an uproar in medical and political circles but has also highlighted a long-ignored issue: the regulation of doctors' fees for patient consultations.Amid the political backlash and ongoing arguments, several critical questions arise: Who sets the consultation fees for doctors?

Is there any mechanism to control the exorbitant fees that doctors often charge? What roles do the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and the Medical Council of India (MCI) play in regulating these fees?Unfortunately, the answers appear bleak for patients. The IMA has distanced itself from the responsibility of setting doctor's fees, citing the "Clinical citing Establishments Act" as a reason for their inaction. In reality, doctors charge consultation fees ranging from 500 to 2,000 rupees per visit, with no standardization or over-



is the unethical practice of tice for government doctors, the medical community has government doctors running private clinics, sometimes reacted with strong opposieven during official hospital tion, organizing protests and hours. In Bihar, it is common strikes, which have left many patients without care. This knowledge that government doctors often skip their hosongoing struggle highlights pital duties to treat patients the urgent need for regulatoprivately. Many of these ry reform in the medical secpatients had initially visited tor to ensure fair and ethical them at government hospitreatment for all patients. tals. Despite this rampant The controversy ignited by issue, the IMA has not imple-Pappu Yadav's directive to cap mented any regulations to consultation fees at 500 curb this behavior, instead rupees underscores the urgent need for regulatory reform in deferring the matter to state governments, stating they India's medical sector. The will follow any rules set by the outcry from both political and

er a state government has range from 500 to 2,000

medical circles highlights the

long-standing issue of unchecked and exorbitant

consultation fees, which often

states regarding private prac-

tice.In Bihar, however, such

rules are frequently disre-

garded. Historically, whenev-

Medical Association (IMA) and the Medical Council of India (MCI) have largely abdicated responsibility, citing the "Clinical Establishments Act" as a reason for their inac-Meanwhile, unethical prac-

tices persist, such as government doctors running private clinics during official hours, exacerbating the problem.In Bihar, the issue is particularly severe, with government doctors often neglecting their duties in public hospitals to treat patients privately. Attempts by state governments to regulate this practice have faced fierce opposition from the medical community, leading to protests and strikes that disrupt patient care. This situation reveals a critical need for comprehensive reforms to ensure fair and ethical medical practices. By addressing these challenges, regulatory bodies can create a more equitable healthcare system that prioritizes patient welfare over profit, ultimately fostering a more just and efficient medical landscape.

(The author is a columnist, views are personal)

THE PLIGHT OF GIG WORKERS

Madam —The alarming unemployment rate and the availability of cheap labor in India enable multinational companies to dictate terms and exploit poor gig workers with low wages. Over the years, there has been significant outcry in the U.S. and Europe about companies like Amazon, which have been fined and investigated for poor working conditions for non-permanent employees. These commercially driven giants often prioritize profit over worker welfare. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has taken cognizance of the dire working conditions in Amazon warehouses, where workers are forced to endure inhumane conditions without breaks, often in extreme heat. Despite regulations like

The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, which aims to ensure the safety, health, and social security of contract laborers, the situation remains dire. To meet unrealistic and dangerous targets, unemployed youths are compelled to work under miserable and unhealthy conditions. Consumer indifference further exacerbates the situation, allowing such exploitation to continue unchecked. Regulatory agencies and consumer awareness can make a significant difference. It's crucial to recognize that the gig economy relies on underpaid employees, whose rights and well-being should be central to national development.

Vijay Singh Adhikari | Nainital

PRESERVING DEMOCRACY IN INDIA Madam — This refers to the article, "The Dark Days of India's Emergency" (27-6-24). When India achieved independence, many doubted its ability to sustain a democratic republic for long. However, the Indian people have consistently demonstrated their wisdom, commitment to democracy, and their ability to resurrect it whenever it has been threatened. Indira Gandhi's declaration of the Emergency, despite being an act that stifled democracy,

required considerable boldness. The hardships endured during that peri-

Integrity of India's education system daunting task of preparing for re-examinations,



acams and the Integrity of India's Education SystemThe National Testing Agency (NTA) is under immense pressure following irregularities in this year's NEET-UG (medical), NET (teaching), and JEE (engineering) exams. The plight of the affected candidates, who prepared for months and traveled long distances to their exam centers, is heartbreaking. They now face the

od remain grim reminders for many. Nevertheless, the citizens, under the leadership of selfless figures like Jayaprakash Narayan, acted decisively to restore democracy. Similarly, when N.T. Rama Rao's elected government was toppled in Andhra Pradesh, the people again rose to action and restored it

In the last decade, India has been experiencing an undeclared emergency, characterized by a subdued press, with the country ranking 161st out of 180 in the Global Press Freedom Index, the killing of five journalists in a year, and over 200 injured. Numerous individuals have been imprisoned for extended periods without charges simply for expressing dissent. Arbitrary manipulation of election results, such as in the Chandigarh mayoral election, and the use of central agencies to silence opposition voices are reminiscent of the Emergency era. While MISA was used by Indira Gandhi, UAPA serves a similar purpose today. The people possess the power to protect democracy as evidenced by the results of the recent election.

AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

which could have a detrimental effect on their morale and undermine their faith in the system. These candidates come from diverse backgrounds, including corporate employees, housewives, and educators, making it difficult to balance their jobs and studies, let alone prepare for re-exams. There are significant flaws in the examination system, necessitating stringent legal actions and severe punishments for those responsible for these scams. Re-examinations only delay the admission process without addressing the root causes of the problem. Political parties should focus on addressing the underlying issues rather than exploiting the situation for political gain. They need to cooperate and propose constructive solutions to tackle this urgent matter. The

THE SPEAKER'S ELECTION

Madam — The election of Om Birla as Speaker was a foregone conclusion, serving merely as a formality to placate opposition parties. The tradition of allotting the Speaker's post to the ruling party and the Deputy Speaker's post to the opposition has oeen abandoned

states must collaborate with the central govt to

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

restore the integrity of the education system.

Although AICC President asserted the INDIA. bloc would not withdraw its candidate, Jairam Ramesh admitted they did not seek a division. Consequently, the opposition has forfeited its right to demand the Deputy Speakership.

The trust deficit between the treasury benches and the opposition necessitated the election. Ideally, an agreement could have been reached where the opposition conceded the Speaker's post to the ruling party in exchange for the Deputy Speakership. This trust, if honoured, would have exposed any ruling party's

KV Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

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FIRST COLUMN

DISCOVERING WISDOM THROUGH A ZEN TALE

The truth is that the world around us is often a reflection of our inner world



RAVI VALLURI

There was a man who stumbled upon a Zen story which in several ways typified his state of mind, thought process, attitudes and his reactions and responses to various adverse situations in life.

Zen Story

Aeon's ago two men visit a Zen Master. The first man says, "I am thinking of moving into this town. What is it like to inhabit this place?" The Zen Master pondered for a while and then questioned the man, "What was your old town like?"

The first man responds, "It was dreadful living in the town. Everyone was hateful. I loathed staying in the town. This therefore is the reason why I am looking for a fresh place to dwell."

The Zen Master replied instantly, "This town is very much the same. I do not think you should move here. You will discover the place to be resentful and you would end up hating and disliking everyone." This left the first man flummoxed and speechless.

The first man left in a disarray and the second one entered the room of the bearded Zen Master. The room was dimly lit but the virtuous one was incandescent with radiance, sitting silently.

The second man posed the same question, "Master I am thinking of moving to this town. What is it like?" The Zen Master was once again thoughtful and asked the second man, "What was your old town like?"

This man blessed with a cheery disposition exclaimed, "Oh, Master! It was wonderful. Everyone was brimming with confidence and zest; people were friendly and I was jollity personified. Right now, I am interested in a change of place though I am comfortable in the old place of

The Zen Master nodded his head and with a twinkle in his eye replied, "This town is very much similar to your old one and I am positive that



you would feel at home in the new township. Welcome aboard." Life is full of vicissitudes. There are high points and low ones. The first man faced constant misadventure in his old township. He squabbled with his wife, snarled at his children and was at odds with his superiors, juniors, and peers. He was not at peace with himself, with his energy/prana/chi levels at a low ebb.

While the second person, accepted all situations and people as they were. This resonates with one of sutras of the Art of Living, "Accept people and situations as they are." Such people do not find fault with any situation and are at peace with themselves. This becomes the state of their

This Zen story pivots on the idea of karma. Whatever happens to anyone is the result of their own actions. We may travel around the world in the hope of escaping a life we condemned. What we will find instead is that we continue to carry our baggage with us wherever we go. Verily it applies to a positive mindset too, in that happiness is a matter of one's

Upon reading the Zen story the man whose life was like that of the first individual decided to make a metamorphosis in his life and opted to be positive like the second man. He made a 360 degree turn in his thought process and broke the glass ceiling of negativity and accepted all challenges in life. "Invoke the valour in you. Just say, 'Okay, whatever comes, I am going to take it as a challenge.' When you invoke this energy, fear vanishes," says the spiritual master Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

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

Challenges ahead for RaGa as Leader of the Opposition



Rahul Gandhi's new avatar enhances his ability to foster the Opposition unity and effectively counter the BJP's influence within Parliament

ahul Gandhi's decision to accept the Congress Working Committee's (CWC) offer to become the new Leader of the Opposition in Parliament may serve a dual purpose. Firstly, it will provide him with a statutory position under the law, positioning him as a direct rival to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the 2029 elections, compelling Modi to take him seriously, unlike in the past. Secondly, despite being the strongest critic of the Prime Minister both inside and outside Parliament, Gandhi's voice has often been drowned out by the BJP's "shouting brigade" over the past decade. However, this scenario is poised to change as the BJP enters the Lok Sabha with a reduced strength of 240 MPs, down from 303 in the previous Lok Sabha.In contrast, the Congress has almost doubled its strength, increasing from 52 to 102 MPs, including three independents.

This bolstered presence will enable the Congress to counter the BJP's tactics more effectively. A tit-for-tat dynamic may emerge in Parliament: if the BJP's "shouting brigade" attempts to silence Rahul Gandhi, Congress MPs may respond by disrupting the Prime Minister's speeches. The overall parliamentary balance of power has shifted as well. The combined strength of the NDA (BJP and its allies) will be reduced to 294, down from 336 in the previous term. Meanwhile, the Congress-led UPA has increased its seats from 90 to 234, including several new additions, posing a significant challenge for the ruling

party.
Challenges as Leader of the Opposition (LoP) As the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in Parliament, Rahul Gandhi will face numerous challenges requiring a dedicated and full-time commitment. The role cannot be managed on an ad hoc basis as it demands continuous effort and strategic planning. Key responsibilities and strategies include:

Regular Interaction with Allies: Gandhi must engage regularly with leaders of allied parties to formulate strategies aimed at cornering the weakened BJPled alliance in Parliament. Building and maintaining strong relationships with diverse political groups will be

aggressive yet Mature Approach: It will be crucial for Gandhi to demonstrate aggression balanced with maturity, particularly when highlighting issues of public importance. His ability to address these issues effectively in Parliament will be key to his success.

Unifying a Fragmented Opposition: One of the most significant challenges will be unifying a fragmented opposition. The diverse political ideologies and regional interests create a complex landscape, making consensus-building a critical yet difficult task.

Countering the Ruling Party's Narrative: Despite the BJP's reduced majority, countering its dominant narrative remains a formidable challenge. The ruling party's stronghold on media and public perception necessitates a strategic and compelling opposition narrative.

Scrutiny of Leadership Style: Gandhi's leadership style and communication skills will be under constant scrutiny. Establishing his credibility and demon-





RAHUL GANDHI MAY ALSO GAIN AN IMPORTANT POSITION AS THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMMITTEE, WHICH PRIMARILY **EXAMINES** REPORTS FROM

COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR **GENERAL**

strating robust leadership in parliamentary debates and public forums are crucial for gaining public trust and support.

Responsibilities as LoP

Holding the Government Accountable: Gandhi will lead the opposition's efforts in holding the government accountable. This involves articulating the opposition's stance on various issues, participating in debates, and ensuring effective representa-

Rallying Opposition Parties: He will need to rally opposition parties, build consensus, and coordinate their efforts. This can be challenging given the diverse ideologies and interests of differparties.

Effective Communication: Gandhi must communicate effectively within and outside Parliament. His speeches, statements, and interactions with the media will shape public perception and influence political dis-

Strategic Decision-Making: Making strategic decisions regarding when to cooperate with the ruling party and when to oppose them requires astute political judgment. Balancing these choices will be crucial.

Mastery of Parliamentary Procedures: Understanding parliamentary rules, procedures, and tactics is crucial. Gandhi will need to master these to effectively challenge the government.

Raising Critical Issues: People expect the LoP to raise critical issues, propose alternatives, and offer constructive solutions.

Meeting these expectations will be key to Gandhi's effectiveness as LoP.

Rahul Gandhi may also gain an important position as the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which primarily examines reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAĜ). The PAC has a majority of government nominees and typically decides issues by vote. Additionally, as LoP, Gandhi would be part of various collegiums alongside the Prime Minister and Chief Justice of India (or government nominees), responsible for selecting the heads of key investigative and transparency agencies including Central Bureau Investigation (CBI), Lokpal, to the BJP's undoing in the 2024 Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), Chief Election Commissioner/Election Commissioners, and Chief

Historical Parallels: Indira Gandhi and Rahul GandhiAn amended version of Karl Marx's quote suggests that history repeats itself first as tragedy and not necessarily as farce; hence its recurrence has ended up enhancing Rahul Gandhi's prestige as LoP. Political observers note two stark similarities between the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi's comeback in 1980 and Rahul Gandhi's recent resurgence.Indira Gandhi earned the title "Bechari" in the eyes of the people due to the excesses and humiliation inflicted on her by the Janata Party after losing power, a fallout of the

Information Commissioner

Emergency's dark era. In the late 1960s, she was derisively called "Goongi Gudiya" (Dumb Doll) by her detractors, which ultimately helped her emerge strong and bounce back to power in 1980. Similarly, Rahul Gandhi's rejuvenation as a credible LoP in 2024 comes after being dubbed 'Pappu" by the BJP.

At this juncture, experts suggest that the common people witnessed a privileged member of the Gandhi family walking in scorching heat and biting cold, highlighting their problems. This might have changed their opinion about him, leading them to perceive him as a "Bechara Shehzada" (Poor Prince), earning tneir s patny and contributin

polls.
The NDA government's focus on Hindutva, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and tall promises failed to address people's real issues. Prime Minister Modi can be credited for popularizing the term "Shehzada" (Scion) for Rahul Gandhi, but this campaign ultimately transformed his image from "Pappu" to a credible national leader.Overall, Rahul Gandhi's leadership as LoP will significantly impact India's political landscape. To effectively represent the opposition in Parliament, he will need to rise to these challenges, demonstrating strong leadership and a commitment to addressing the concerns of the Indian people.

(The writer is a senior journalist and a policy analyst; views expressed are personal)

Union budget needs to adopt all-inclusive approach to health

India needs to spend more on infrastructure development, innovation, and accessibility for universal health coverage by 2030

As India anticipates the unveiling of the first comprehensive Union Budget under the Modi 3.0 government, the healthcare sector finds itself at a crucial crossroads. The interim budget has set a preliminary roadmap, yet achieving a transformative overhaul of the healthcare ecosystem requires a robust and unified effort.

It is imperative to prioritize increased funding for healthcare infrastructure, innovation, and accessibility to create a new ecosystem that can support India's ambitious healthcare objectives. One of the primary expectations from the forthcoming budget is the reclassification of hospitals as infrastructure investments. This reclassification has the potential to attract substantial



healthcare facilities across the

Additionally, extending interest rate subventions for medical equipment could alleviate the financial strain on hospitals, facilitating the modernization of technology and improvement in service delivery.A significant step forward for India's healthcare system and insurance barriers, neces-

would be the formulation of a roadmap to boost public healthcare expenditure to 3% of the GDP. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Reserve Bank of India estimates, healthcare expenditure needs to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18.9%. The current goal is to achieve 2.5% public expenditure on healthcare by 2025-26 and 3% by 2030-31.

While these targets are ambitious, they require meticulous planning and strategic execution to be realized. The economic burden of healthcare costs is a major concern for the lower and middle-income groups in India. High out-ofpocket expenditures, coupled with escalating healthcare costs sitate immediate government intervention. Incorporating advanced treatment methods into the Avushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) and encouraging private health insurance companies to adopt similar practices can significantly enhance healthcare accessibility for these groups. The government must also place a strong emphasis on rural healthcare in its budget allocations. Direct investments in health-

care infrastructure and medical personnel, along with targeted incentives to attract doctors and hospitals to underserved areas, are critical. This approach will expand healthcare coverage and spur innovation in insurance products, making comprehensive healthcare accessible to all, especially in rural regions where the need is most pressing. Physical infrastructure along with the human resources is essential for delivering quality health-

Rational regulations and policies are critical to supporting India's aspiration to achieve UHC by 2030. Such regulations should enable seamless collaboration among all stakeholders, ensuring that quality healthcare services are accessible to all citizens, regardless of socio-economic status.

This approach will help address health disparities and improve overall health outcomes in the country. The private sector has a pivotal role in delivering quality healthcare services. Bridging the critical

essential for achieving UHC, particularly in addressing the dual burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases. Health insurance is a vital component in the journey toward "Health for All." With low insurance coverage, many individuals face substantial out-of-pocket expenses when seeking healthcare services. Implementing mandatory health insurance and gradually expanding coverage to include self-employed professionals and other currently excluded groups can pave the way for a more equitable healthcare system.

This strategy would ensure that all citizens have access to essential health services without financial hardship.Access to quality healthcare is fundagaps in service delivery is mental for everyone, and UHC ity healthcare. Developing a

is key in this regard. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), UHC means access to essential health services, including affordable medicines and vaccines, without financial difficulty. Strengthening health systems and essential infrastructure is vital for achieving

The private sector's investments in healthcare infrastructure and training health workers are significant contributions toward this goal.

Achieving the goal of Healthcare for All by 2030 in India presents numerous opportunities but also requires overcoming significant barriers. A multi-faceted approach is essential for increasing access to and delivery of qual-

ness model that integrates primary, secondary, and tertiary care systems is crucial. Such a model should empha-

size affordability and high quality, enhancing the reputaof tion healthcare.Substantial support for the hospital sector is also necessary, including a combination of investments and tax reliefs, to build infrastructure assets and provide top-tier healthcare services across the country. Bridging the ruralurban divide in critical care facilities is imperative to reaching the goal of Healthcare for

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All by 2030.