

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

India-Canada friction

Ottawa must rein in separatists

DAYS after the Canadian police arrested three Indian nationals in the Hardeep Singh Nijjar murder case, India's High Commissioner to Canada Sanjay Kumar Verma has stated that Sikh separatist groups in that country are crossing 'a big red line'. He said this matter was a cause for concern for New Delhi as it pertained to its territorial integrity and national security. The India-Canada relations have been facing rough weather ever since Canadian PM Justin Trudeau announced in September last year that the alleged role of Indian government agents in the Nijjar case was being probed.

The two countries are trying to resolve the current issue, Verma said, but he hastened to add that Canada's misunderstanding of 'decades-old issues' was to blame for the deeper problems underlying the recent 'negative' developments. The latest provocation was the chanting of anti-India slogans by Khalistan supporters during a Sikh parade in Ontario last week. Late last month, pro-Khalistan slogans had been raised at a public event attended by Trudeau and other leaders in Toronto, prompting India to reiterate that Canada was giving political space to 'separatism, extremism and violence'.

New Delhi is worried not only about the use of Canadian territory for anti-India propaganda but also the security of its diplomatic representatives in the Maple Country. The Ministry of External Affairs has stated that it expects the Trudeau government to ensure that the diplomats are able to carry out their responsibilities without fear. The ball is in Canada's court. Being a democratic country which respects the rule of law, Ottawa needs to crack down on rabble-rousers who glorify and incite violence. It should not allow itself to be intimidated by radical elements which are misusing freedom of expression. Antagonising an old ally like India, the fastest-growing major economy in the world, will be detrimental to Canada's geopolitical and economic interests.

India's dietary crisis

Disease burden linked to unhealthy habits

INDIA is facing a health crisis, with 56.4 per cent of the total disease burden attributed to unhealthy dietary practices, according to the latest report of the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN). Unhealthy eating habits, including the consumption of processed foods high in salt, sugar and fats, have become alarmingly prevalent, with the proliferation of fast food chains and the easy availability of packaged snacks enabling a culture of convenience at the expense of health. A sedentary lifestyle, along with excessive mobile phone use, has exacerbated the problem, leading to a rise in obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The consequences of these dietary trends are staggering. Obesity rates are soaring, with about 25 per cent of the Indians now classified as overweight or obese; children and adolescents are also increasingly falling victim to unhealthy eating habits. The ICMR-NIN guidelines call for a return to traditional, nutrient-rich foods and emphasise the importance of regular physical activity. Consuming fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains while shunning the intake of processed foods is essential to reshaping dietary behaviour.

However, concerted efforts are a must to facilitate access to nutritious foods. Policies that promote food security, regulate food advertising and incentivise the production and consumption of healthy foods are needed. Nutrition literacy programmes should be integrated into school curricula so that children focus on their health from an early age. A collective effort from policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators and communities can help combat the problem. By prioritising the promotion of healthy eating habits and addressing the socioeconomic factors driving poor dietary choices, we can stem the tide of NCDs and build a healthier future for all Indians. The time to act is now.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MAY 10, 1924

Mrs Naidu in South Africa

MRS Sarojini Naidu's visit to South Africa and the work she has done there have not altogether been without some effect. The prejudice in that country against Indians has been so strong that even Mahatma Gandhi has not been able to remove it, with all his unrivalled ability and persuasiveness. The Gandhi-Smuts Agreement of 1914 was expected to ensure to the Indians a definite position which they could enjoy without being disturbed by anybody. But obviously there is no relying upon such an agreement in a country where self-interest and colour prejudice move men to action. Recently, the South African Government has made the position of Indians absolutely unendurable and the Class Areas Bill, which was designed to segregate Indians and sap their very life, would have become law and been in force by now, but for an accidental dissension arising among the two parties there. Even now, the danger to Indians is not averted and the Bill, which has temporarily been withheld, may yet be introduced after the elections. But what is gratifying to India at this juncture is the effect of Mrs Naidu's tour to South Africa and the numerous addresses she delivered there, explaining the claims of Indians and interviewing public men of all shades of opinion. Her magnetic personality and charming eloquence have compelled the White population to give her a patient hearing and to some extent admire the power of her eloquence and the force of her moral appeal. It is a different thing, however, if self-interest has been so strong and deep-rooted in them that her work could not produce any radical change in their attitude towards Indians.

OPINION

Taking potshots at 'infiltrators'

The entire Muslim community should not be tarred with the same brush



TRYSTS AND TURNS

JULIO RIBEIRO

ADDRESSING an election rally in Banswara (Rajasthan) recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi forgot that he had to adhere to the model code of conduct laid down by the Election Commission of India (ECI). Without naming them, he implied that Muslims were 'infiltrators' who had at some time or the other sneaked into India. He also hinted that they had many children.

What set him off? My guess is that he has come to realise that his own popularity, which was more than double that enjoyed by Rahul Gandhi in quantitative terms, has slid and that of Rahul has risen. There is still a gap in Modi's favour, but it is nowhere as comfortable as it was earlier. This knowledge is making him fretful and nervous.

Instead of maintaining dignified control over his biases, he blurted out in a moment of distress and anger that the Congress was scheming to take away the gold ornaments squirrelled away by the wives of the affluent and distribute them among the 'infiltrators' and those who birthed many children! The gaffe having been realised, the official version of his speech, put out by his propaganda team the next day, omitted references to infiltrators and large families.

The ECI of yore, which had built a formidable reputation for conducting elections with justice and fairness, would have intervened swiftly if such extreme transgressions of the model code were brought to its notice. It is a shame that today's ECI has not thought it fit to act more swiftly and decisively in the PM's case. This



CONTROVERSY: The ECI has received several complaints against PM Modi's Banswara speech. PH

sign of weakness will be exploited by those who are convinced that all institutions of governance are under an unwritten obligation to uphold the sole authority of the head of the ruling dispensation by bypassing the Constitution, which has guaranteed the independence of the ECI and expects it to function without fear or favour.

Let us analyse the charge hurled at the Muslim community of being infiltrators. In a huge and populous country like ours, there will not be many who have crossed borders. On the militarised western border, the number is small. They sneak in to create mayhem in Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir. India has been attending to the problem. These particularly 'unwanted guests' are not interested in gold ornaments. They have come to keep our security forces on their toes 24x7.

Infiltration was a live problem on our eastern borders. It was more of an economic problem of the kind faced by the US, Canada and the UK, which our boys from Punjab or even Gujarat try to enter illegally in search of greener pastures.

Bangladeshis crossing over into West Bengal or Assam was

Having many children is a common trait in poorly educated families mired in poverty, both Muslim and Hindu.

a major problem that has eased in the last decade or two as the Bangladeshi economy improved, riding on the back of textile manufacture and exports. Bangladeshis, both Hindu and Muslim, had crossed over into Assam even before the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistani domination. That influx caused a massive economic and social problem in Assam, leading to the implementation of the National Register of Citizens in that state. That matter has not been resolved as yet because more Hindus than Muslims were declared infiltrators in the count that fol-

lowed. The expulsion of Hindu infiltrators went against the Hindutva ideology and led to the formulation of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

If the PM was referring to all Muslims, his frustration had no legal or moral ground to stand on. The Mughals and the Afghans who invaded India left behind descendants of mixed lineage, but so did Alexander, whose Macedonian army reached the shores of the Indus after conquering the Persians.

There is hardly any country in the world which can say that it is free of 'infiltrators'. All civilisations have experienced the movement of aliens. In India, the Aryans followed the Dravidians and the indigenous tribes we call Adivasis. The Mongoloid races that populate the North-East add another dimension to the scenario. And talking of Aryans, Adolf Hitler got rid of Jews and Gypsies because he wanted to ensure the purity of the Aryan race! One of the titles assumed by the Shah of Iran before the Ayatollahs took charge of the country was Aryamehr (I have no intention of belittling the Aryans because my own ancestors were of that lineage, hav-

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Religious wars are not caused by the fact that there is more than one religion, but by the spirit of intolerance. —Montesquieu

Burma's mythical ruby mine & jade mountain

KC VERMA

IN the 1970s, areas of Myanmar (then Burma) adjoining Manipur were poorly governed, and the very mention of the Somra Tract or Kachin conjured up images of armed rebels sneaking through jungles. Naga and Mizo insurgent groups were using a route through these sparsely populated areas to reach China. Militant Meitei groups also set up camps across the border. Collecting trans-border information was important, and every villager living in the border area was a potential informer. Many of them made good money from different intelligence agencies by peddling information they possessed. Fabricated stories often gained currency because there was no way of verifying information emanating from Myanmar, and security agencies were sometimes misled by concocted yarns.

Understandably, therefore, I disbelieved the story of the discovery of a mountain of jade when I first heard about it. But as the local head of a Central intelligence agency, I couldn't just disregard the persistent rumours, even if they varied in detail. There were reports that a huge ruby mine had been discovered near Myitkyina, that the Burmese army was guarding a mountain of jade in Layshi and that valuable gemstones had been discovered in Homalin. A trans-border informer claimed to me that there was a significant movement of the Burmese army because of geological finds near Hkamti. I discounted his claims, but I became curious when he asserted that a magical substance had been found — it never caught fire, and it could be uranium ore! He promised to provide me a sample of the mineral on the condition that he be paid a handsome amount, which happened to be higher than my monthly salary. I told him to first get some evidence of the magical discovery.

Several weeks later, the informer slunk into my office late in the evening and, with a flourish, took out a cricket ball-sized rock from a bag and placed it on my table.

'Uranium, sir,' he said. I jumped out of my chair. I did not know what uranium ore looked like, but I had no desire to die of radioactive poisoning. I yelled at the informer, but he assured me that I was safe; after all, he had been carrying the rock around for more than two weeks. Nevertheless, I told him to replace it in the bag, which I then got him to hang on a tree in the office compound. Reluctantly, I paid him a portion of the amount he had demanded.

But I was in a quandary. I could not send the rock to my superiors in Delhi if it were indeed radioactive, nor could I send a report that it was uranium without confirmation, and thus the rock continued to hang on the tree till, fortuitously, a geologist friend visited Imphal a month later. I showed him the 'uranium ore' and he burst out laughing. He declared that it was asbestos ore, large deposits of which had been found in Myanmar. The discovery was quite pointless because asbestos use was banned. I had no option but to write off the money that I had paid as the cost of buying experience, and, sheepishly, I threw the rock away.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Withdrawal of vaccine not enough

Apropos of the editorial 'Vaccine withdrawal', pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca cannot evade responsibility for the serious adverse events and deaths caused by its Covid jab by simply pulling it from the market. The damage has already been done. Notably, several state and local authorities had mandated residents and government employees to get inoculated during the pandemic. The Punjab Government, for example, had made it compulsory for its employees to take the shot. Some authorities had even made taking the booster dose compulsory. Who will be held responsible for the side effects? Besides, the alleged link between vaccine manufacturer Serum Institute of India and the BJP needs to be looked into. The need of the hour is to study the long-term safety risks of Covishield and address the concerns of the recipients.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Sudden deaths of vax recipients

Refer to the editorial 'Vaccine withdrawal'; AstraZeneca's Covid vaccine, marketed as Covishield in India, caused thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome in some cases. The jab resulted in deaths and serious injuries. The suspected link between the vaccine and a surge in sudden deaths of recipients — especially those who were young and healthy — needs to be probed afresh. It is clear now that the regulatory authorities, who were responsible for ensuring that the Covid vaccines were safe, not only failed to do their job but also abdicated their duty. This serious lapse on their part should be investigated, and those at fault must get stringent punishment.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Don't overlook vax side effects

With reference to the editorial 'Vaccine withdrawal', it is good to know that UK-based pharmaceutical major AstraZeneca is withdrawing the Covid vaccine amid safety concerns. More than 50 victims and their relatives have moved the High Court of Justice in London, seeking relief. Here in India, the Supreme Court has agreed to hear a petition praying for compensation for vaccine injuries and the setting up of a panel to study the side effects of the shot. The health problems caused by the vaccine cannot be overlooked. The pharmaceutical firm's admission about side

effects and its decision to withdraw the vaccine globally call for a thorough inquiry.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

Pitroda was a liability for Congress

Apropos of the news report 'Pitroda again, raises storm with racist remarks, quits Cong post', the telecom entrepreneur's divisive remarks on what Indians living in different parts of the country look like have rightly drawn criticism for reducing the nation's cultural richness to racial stereotypes. But this is not the first time he has sparked a controversy. From underplaying the 1984 anti-Sikh riots to his borrowed idea on inheritance tax, he has landed the party in trouble many times. His comments inject divisiveness into an already vitiated poll atmosphere that reflects the polarised times we live in. The controversial statements made by the Gandhi family loyalist have caused more harm than good to the Congress.

N SADHASIVA REDDY, BENGALURU

Voters want inclusive growth

With reference to the news report 'Pitroda again, raises storm with racist remarks, quits Cong post', Overseas Congress chief's decision to step down points to the down fall of the party. This is another step towards the end of the grand old party. The Congress is almost over, and people are going to vote for PM Narendra Modi's BJP and its policies. Most citizens are satisfied with the performance of the Modi government and its development model. Once again, voters are going to choose inclusive growth and sustainability over the Congress' divisive politics.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Rein in use of unfair means

Refer to the middle 'Stem the rot in exam system'; students cheat because their grades are given the most importance. Cheating in exams is academic dishonesty; it is unethical. Teachers need to play a proactive role in curbing the menace. Good teachers can be distinguished by their commitment to the profession, their teaching methodology, moral sense and compassion. To rein in the use of unfair means in exams, frisking, the installation of CCTV cameras in examination halls and strict punishment for culprits are necessary.

ANITA KATARIA, PATIALA

Inadequate budgetary support plagues farming



DEVINDER SHARMA
FOOD & AGRICULTURE SPECIALIST

An elderly woman living alone in a village didn't have any viable livelihood option. She finally decided to buy a goat for a living. Since nationalised banks do not provide small loans, she approached a micro-finance institute (MFI) for a loan in the range of Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000. She got a loan at an interest rate of 20-24 per cent, to be paid back at monthly intervals.

On the other hand, when Tata Motors decided to shift the manufacturing of its Nano cars from West Bengal to Gujarat, the then BJP government in Gujarat extended a soft loan of Rs584.82 crore at an interest rate of 0.1 per cent. As per the lending provisions, this loan was to be repaid back in monthly instalments 20 years after the first Nano car was rolled out.

If only the elderly woman had got the small loan at an interest rate as low as 1 per cent (forget 0.1 per cent that Tata Motors got), I am sure

she would have been driving a Nano car by the year-end. I have narrated the story to explain how inequality is woven into the economic system. Whether we like it or not, wealth has traditionally been very conveniently sucked from the bottom to the top. And we have no qualms about it.

Although many academics laud the MFIs for extending small loans that help in capacity-building of the people living at the margins, they go conspicuously quiet when big businesses are extended huge loans at almost negligible interest rates. This makes me wonder why abnormally high rates of interest for a meagre loan only help in capacity-building of the poor. Why is it that the rich, who have the capacity to pay back, end up receiving massive loans virtually as a grant? Add to it the numerous tax breaks, bank write-offs at the drop of a hat, generous economic stimulus packages, government contracts and the other incentives for growth; in reality we have socialism for the corporate.

It is only the average citizen and the poor who are left to face the vagaries of the markets. This is because the rich design the markets, and the markets work for them. A recent media advisory by Oxfam illustrates this anomaly. The world's



IRONY: Despite bumper harvests year after year, Indian farmers have been suffering losses. PTI

biggest chocolate manufacturers — Ferrero and Mars families — have more wealth than even the combined GDP of Ghana and Ivory Coast, which supply 60 per cent of the cocoa beans. And instead of paying an economic and profitable price to farmers, the world's top four chocolate giants (including the two mentioned above) have in 2023 paid out 97 per cent of their net profits to shareholders. Ghana and Ivory Coast receive only 6 per cent of the total revenue of \$160 billion that the industry makes. Ask for a

Without appropriate redistribution of resources, *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* will remain an empty slogan.

Minimum Support Price (MSP) for these growers, and an uproar will happen, warning how it will distort markets.

That's how rigged the economic design is. In other words, the financial system actually helps provide wealth on a platter to the so-called wealth creators. In the digital age, we don't even realise that algorithms are designed to ensure that wealth flows sustainably to the top.

Former US Secretary for Labour Robert Reich says that the combined wealth of the world's billionaires at \$14.2 tril-

lion now exceeds the GDP of every country in the world, except America and China. In America, 400 billionaires collectively hold \$5.8 trillion, which exceeds the entire wealth of the 65 million people in the bottom half. And still worse, billionaires have a lower effective tax rate than what the average working American pays. Giving massive tax breaks to the rich hasn't trickled down to the poor, as we were told. While the tax sops haven't created additional employment nor has it boosted industrial output as was envisaged, it has certainly boosted the pay packets of CEOs and other high-paid workers by several times. In addition, corporations have used the profits generated to buy back stocks. For instance, Apple has announced \$110-billion stock buyback, the largest ever.

The World Inequality Lab, in a working paper titled 'Income and Inequality in India, 1992-2023: The Rise of Billionaire Raj', had conclusively shown how inequality had worsened over the decades and is presently among the highest in the world. A report by the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy shows how personal tax collections now exceed corporate taxes percentage of the GDP. This is at a time when the top 1 per cent holds more than 40 per cent wealth.

The bottom 50 per cent collectively owns only 3 per cent. What has to be understood is that it is not as if the poor don't work hard but they are denied the right kind of financial support and investment.

Take the case of agriculture. Despite bumper harvests year after year, if Indian farmers have been cultivating losses since 2000 (as per an OECD report), it only shows how inadequate the budgetary support has been for farming. If you don't make the right kind of investment, you can't expect a miracle to happen. Of the Rs 48 lakh crore Budget expenditure spent out for 2024-25, agriculture gets only Rs 1.25 lakh crore, which is less than 3 per cent. With roughly 50 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture, and without appropriate redistribution of resources, *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* will remain an empty slogan.

Economist Jean Dreze recently summed it up neatly: "If a hundred workers were to work day after day at the minimum wage and save their entire earnings, how long do you think it would take for them to accumulate as much wealth as India's richest business leader already has? Answers rarely cross a thousand years. The correct answer, however, is close to a million years. If you do not believe it, do the math."

Overarching Indianness transcends differences among groups



M RAJIVLOCHAN
HISTORIAN

As electioneering in India becomes more strident and voters are wooed by a focus on the faultlines in society, it would do us good to recall the nature of our nationhood. Countries come into existence because we focus on what is common among us rather than what is different. The 'moral spirit of combination' holds a nation together, wrote Rabindranath Tagore in 1917, when he was worried about the war that was going on in Europe and soldiers being pulled from all over the world into the battleground. In an essay on India's nationhood, he said it was quite evident that this was a war of nations rather than that of tribes or religions. After all, Tagore wondered, being a nation was a much more evolved state for a society, since it enabled a much larger number of people to come together and harmonise their actions for the common good. Then, he penned down his thoughts on how different nations had been formed and the positive and negative consequences of it. The most visible negative consequence

was that since 1914, European nations had been at war with one another, and millions of young men from India and Africa had been sent to Europe to fight. On the positive side, nations had ensured that people from diverse backgrounds — different from each other in language, religion and ethnicity — had come together and created a society and polity that benefited everyone.

Tagore noted that nations were the highest form of social evolution. Thereby lies a very important insight for us to understand our own existence in the present times.

Overcoming the natural differences of ethnicity, language and religion, nations came into being when their people wished to live together. Diversity, faultlines due to ethnicity, religion and language — all these come with birth. The desire to live together does not; it is crafted by human beings. What makes India unique in the comity of nations is the perpetual desire of people to live together, which is manifested in the fact that not only do we survive, we also make constant efforts to stay together.

This has been so throughout history. There are ancient texts in which we referred to ourselves as the people of Jambudwipa, the land of the *jambun* tree. In the *Kusa Jataka* from the fourth century BC, Sakra, the king of the gods, gave the ugly



UNITY: What makes India unique is the desire of people to live together, which is manifested in the fact that not only do we survive but also make constant efforts to stay together. ISTOCK

Prince Kusha a necklace of pearls and told him to wear it, saying, "Tie this on you, then there will not be your equal for beauty in all Jambudwipa." In later times, with an increasing contact with the outside world, those across the Sindhu river were referred to as Al-hind. Later, various East India companies came into being, not 'South Asia companies'. India has been a singular civilisation in history.

This continues to be the case even today. Statements made by leaders of various groups that have taken up arms against the Indian state in modern times are interesting.

Eno Rh Raising, the self-styled 'home minister of the Government of the People's Republic of Nagalim', said in

India is one of the few nations in the world that has resolved the problem of separatism in so many states.

2015 that the Nagas were a separate people with a history different from that of Indians. The occasion was the signing of a peace accord with the Indian Union. On August 3, 2015, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), the largest of the seven Naga insurgent groups, announced a historic peace agreement with the Centre, agreeing to create mechanisms for greater autonomy for Naga tribes living in Manipur and decommissioning of arms held by the NSCN (IM). Neither the Nagas nor the media reporting these twin statements saw anything contradictory in the spectacle of the leader of a people with a history different from that of India signing a peace accord with the very entity they were fighting against, while at the

same time asserting their separate identity.

Over the decades, Gorkhas, Sikhs, Nagas, Manipuris and Kashmiris — to name only the most well-known — have declared their disaffection with the Indian state to be such as to merit breaking away. No one ever followed up on this intention. India is one of the few nations in the world that has successfully resolved the problem of separatism in so many states.

Speaking at a public forum last year, Bipul Kalita, an ex-member of the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom), said they laid down arms when they realised that 98 per cent of the people of Assam did not support militancy.

The more simple-minded among intellectuals writing on India take these assertions of separatism literally to be a sign that the Indian Union barely exists, that it was brought into existence by the British; the presumption being that there was no entity called India before that.

For Westerners to see us like that makes sense to them. Perhaps they see nations as monolithic entities. For Indians to imbibe and regurgitate this merely shows a people unaware of their own strengths and their long civilisational memories. Abrahamic benchmarks of nation and religion are of little use to us. Unlike Europe — which was troubled by religious wars from the times of the Crusades right up to the

19th century, marked by mass killings every few years — Indians did not carry out large-scale slayings.

Exceptions prove the rule. The one fault line that resulted in the partition of the country expressed the one conflict that Indians were unable to resolve amicably. About this, the Congress Report on Communalism, published in 1931, mentioned that the so-called Muslim problem in India was entirely the creation of the British administration trying to divide India and Indians in ways that were not natural to the country. Subsequent events only substantiated the findings of the report. Even after Pakistan had been created as a country for Muslims, millions of them continued to live in India of their own volition. As a recent study by economist Shamika Ravi says, Muslims flourished in India. Their numbers went up from about 8 per cent in 1950 to around 14 per cent in the present times, even as the number of Hindus in Pakistan went down from 25 per cent to about 2 per cent in the same period.

Indians call themselves — and quite assertively — Bengali, Tamil, Punjabi, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, etc. But from this, it does not follow that there is no such thing as India. Those are ascriptive identities that do not rule out the overarching identity of being Indian.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 A venomous snake (5)

4 Diabolical (7)

8 Close friend (3)

9 Type of waterproof hat (9)

10 Worked up (7)

11 An enticement (5)

13 Secretly follow and watch (6)

15 To moderate (6)

18 Serenity (5)

19 Make a spectacular profit (5,2)

21 Wide-brimmed soft felt hat (9)

23 In the past (3)

24 Beat off (7)

25 Artful trick (5)

DOWN

1 An evergreen tree (7)

2 Knitted hood for head and neck (9)

3 A useful attribute (5)

4 Strongly built (6)

5 Foot-operated lever (7)

6 Hard-shelled dry fruit (3)

7 Hot-tasting Indian dish (5)

12 Humbly (3,2,4)

14 Viewed as a whole (7)

16 Hide (7)

17 An abrasion (6)

18 Political control (5)

20 Edit to remove errors (5)

22 Brief bathe in sea (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Off the cuff, 8 Beset, 9 Gorilla, 10 Imperil, 11 Venus, 12 Potage, 14 Clutch, 17 Chain, 19 Publish, 21 Enlarge, 22 Faint, 23 To cap it all.

Down: 2 Fusspot, 3 Tutor, 4 Engulf, 5 Unravel, 6 Felon, 7 Pass the hat, 8 Be in pocket, 13 Generic, 15 Trivial, 16 Upkeep, 18 Allot, 20 Befit.

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V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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CALENDAR

MAY 10TH 2024, FRIDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Vaishakh Shaka 20

■ Vaishakh Purnimite 28

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 3, up to 2.51 am

■ Atiganda Yoga up to 12.06 pm

■ Rohini Nakshatra up to 10.47 am

■ Moon enters Gemini sign 10.26 pm

■ Bhagyan Purnasuram Janti

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:06 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:32 HRS

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

CITY

MAX

MIN

Chandigarh 38 26

New Delhi 40 27

Amritsar 38 26

Bathinda 43 28

Jalandhar 37 26

Ludhiana 39 27

Bhiwani 41 28

Hisar 42 27

Sirsa 43 28

Dharamsala 31 19

Manali 25 08

Shimla 20 13

Srinagar 30 12

Jammu 39 26

Kargil 23 11

Leh 21 06

Dehradun 35 24

Mussoorie 23 15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Jharkhand equations

As the political landscape unfolds in Jharkhand, with the first of four rounds of voting in the state scheduled on Monday, a fascinating spectacle of shifting allegiances, strategic manoeuvres, and the enduring influence of tribal politics is in store. With five Lok Sabha seats in the state up for grabs in the fourth phase of the general election on May 13, Jharkhand finds itself at the centre of a dynamic electoral narrative, poised between continuity and change. The BJP's impressive performance in the 2019 elections, sweeping 12 out of 14 seats in Jharkhand, underscored its dominance. However, a closer examination reveals cracks in the seemingly invincible façade. Despite securing victories, the margins of triumph in certain constituencies were notably slim, signalling a potential vulnerability to shifting voter sentiments. One significant factor contributing to this vulnerability is the intricate web of tribal dynamics woven into the state's political fabric. Jharkhand, with its diverse tribal communities, presents a unique challenge for political parties vying for supremacy.

The multipolar nature of its politics necessitates deft manoeuvring and strategic alliances, as evidenced by past electoral outcomes. The incarceration of Hemant Soren, a prominent tribal leader and former chief minister, on graft charges has sparked outrage among tribal rights organisations and communities. The perceived assault on tribal representation has galvanised support against the BJP, and is likely to have an impact on voting. Moreover, the BJP's decision to experiment with non-tribal leadership in a predominantly tribal state like Jharkhand has met with mixed results. The appointment of a non-tribal chief minister after the 2014 assembly elections yielded disappointing outcomes, highlighting the importance of tribal representation in the state's governance structure.

In contrast, the recent appointment of a tribal chief minister in Chhattisgarh following the 2023 assembly elections signifies a strategic shift in the BJP's approach. By aligning with tribal sentiments and leveraging local leadership, the party aims to consolidate its support base and navigate the complex terrain of tribal politics more effectively. However, electoral success in Jharkhand hinges not only on strategic manoeuvring but also on the ability to forge alliances and field candidates capable of resonating with the electorate. With alliances playing a pivotal role in the state's multipolar politics, the BJP must tread cautiously and cultivate partnerships that complement its electoral strategy.

As Jharkhand braces itself for the upcoming general election, the political landscape remains fluid and unpredictable. While the BJP's past successes underscore its formidable presence in the state, the emergence of new alliances, the mobilisation of tribal communities, and the shifting sands of public opinion portend a closely contested electoral battle. In the crucible of Jharkhand's politics, where tribal identity intersects with electoral aspirations, the outcome of the election will not only shape the state's political trajectory but also resonate far beyond its borders. As voters prepare to cast their ballots, the stage is set for a compelling saga of democracy in action.

Macron's Vision

In the labyrinth of Europe's geopolitical landscape, French President Emmanuel Macron's oratory at the Sorbonne emerges as a beacon of hope amid the fog of uncertainty. His speech, a symphony of urgency and foresight, strikes at the heart of Europe's existential challenges: the relentless grip of geopolitical insecurity, economic fragility, and the looming spectre of climate change. President Macron's call to arms resonates with the gravity of a statesman acutely aware of the stakes. With the precision of a surgeon, he dissects Europe's vulnerabilities, exposing the frailty of its dependence on external forces for energy, economic prosperity, and security. No longer can Europe afford the luxury of complacency, tethered to the whims of distant powers. The days of passivity are over; the time for action is now.

Yet, amid Mr Macron's impassioned plea for a new dawn, shadows of scepticism loom. The spectre of the reverse Midas curse haunts his every move, tarnishing his noble intentions with the stain of controversy. While his proposals for a European missile defence initiative and a revitalised industrial policy offer glimmers of hope, doubts linger over his ability to navigate the treacherous waters of European politics. Indeed, Mr Macron's Achilles heel lies in his penchant for grandiosity, his belief in his own messianic role as the saviour of Europe. His Jupiterian tendency to cast himself as the central protagonist in Europe's drama risks alienating potential allies and exacerbating divisions within the European Union. The road to European unity is fraught with obstacles, and Mr Macron must tread carefully lest he stumble into the abyss of irrelevance. And yet, for all his flaws, Mr Macron remains a singular figure on the European stage. His ability to articulate the anxieties of Eastern European states, once divided between fear of Russian aggression and reliance on American protection, marks him as a rare bridge-builder in an era of division. His vision of a Europe united in purpose, fortified by common defence and shared prosperity, offers a tantalising glimpse of what could be.

As the spectre of a resurgent Donald Trump looms large on the horizon, Mr Macron's nuclear deterrent emerges as a bulwark against the uncertainty of American commitment to European security. In a world where alliances shift like sand, Mr Macron's steadfastness offers stability in a sea of chaos. Ultimately, the fate of Mr Macron's vision rests not in the hands of a single man, but in the collective will of a continent. Europe stands at a crossroads, poised between the darkness of division and the promise of unity. Mr Macron's moment may be fleeting, but the echoes of his words will reverberate long after he has left the stage. It is up to Europe to seize the opportunity, to embrace the future with courage and conviction, and to forge a path towards a brighter tomorrow.

Scams Unplugged

Ideally, a standard operating procedure should be devised to deal with scams with a view to (a) punish the guilty, (b) recover the money earned illegally, and (c) prevent the recurrence of similar scams. Once a crime is classified as a scam, an inter-departmental Special Investigation Team having people from all enforcement agencies and the banking sector should be constituted. The SIT alone should have jurisdiction to investigate the scam, with a mandate to complete its investigations within a definite time-frame, and file a charge-sheet simultaneously



While Indians love scams so much that the word 'scam' is now part of all Indian languages, though the meaning is not the same as given in the Oxford dictionary; in India 'scam' is understood as not any run-of-the-mill dishonest scheme, but a big-ticket swindle, involving top people. Scams typically manifest themselves before major elections, to the extent that if no juicy scam is on the horizon, politicians make one up. Even otherwise, the frequency of scams has increased over the years.

Tellingly, a scam for one political party can be a pathbreaking initiative for the other. A look at the Congress party manifesto reveals that it has promised investigation into various 'scams' like Electoral Bonds, Pegasus, PM Cares etc. Not surprisingly, according to the BJP they were not scams but well-thought out, forward-looking initiatives.

The Bofors scam of 1987 vintage exemplifies the lifecycle of a scam. Massive publicity given to the scam led to the downfall of the Rajiv Gandhi government, which had come to power with an unprecedented majority. Having won on the Bofors plank, VP Singh, the next Prime Minister, promised that the Bofors culprits would be behind bars within fifteen days.

However, the first charge-sheet in the Bofors case was filed in October 1999, only to be quashed by the Delhi High Court in 2004. Today, the main dramatis personae are dead. No part of the alleged illegal commission of Rs.64 crore has been recovered, and no one has gone to jail for perpetrating the 'scam'.

The Bofors scam had a very interesting sequel. Once the scandal broke out, Bofors was blacklisted and no further purchases were made from the company. At the time of the Kargil war, we had the Bofors gun but no ammunition to feed it. In desperation, we purchased ammunition at the rate of \$10,000 per round from South Africa.

The entire cost was never officially revealed, but given the fact that the Bofors gun fires three rounds per minute, the cost must have been astronomical. It is a matter of record that the Bofors gun proved itself in battle and turned the tide of the Kargil war decisively in our favour.

However, after blacklisting Bofors, we could not get the benefit of the second part of the contract with Bofors, which would have allowed us to manufac-

ture the Bofors gun indigenously. More damagingly, the infamy associated with the Bofors deal made the Government devise a convoluted defence acquisition procedure, which ensures that defence purchases drag on endlessly. In the final analysis, the Bofors gun was the best in its class; bribes were paid because politicians never do anything without 'Vitamin M' and arms dealers always pay money, to whoever buys their outrageously priced goods.

The Tehelka sting (2001), which showed that everyone from clerks to ministers were willing to sell the security of the country for ridiculously small sums, proved that no steps had been taken to prevent recurrence of a scam of the Bofors type. The only distinguishing feature from Bofors was that some Tehelka journalists and investors were jailed, after they reported on the scam.

The 2G 'scam' (2009), had its genesis in a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report that estimated a 'presumptive loss' of Rs 1.76 lakh crore to Government on account of the low price at which the Government allocated the 2G spectrum. Along with the Coalgate and Commonwealth Games (CWG) scams, it was fashioned into one of the major issues for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections by the Opposition, which led to the UPA Government losing the elections. Looking at the 2G scam with the benefit of hindsight, we find that the decision to allot airwaves on 'first come first served' basis ensured that mobile telephony rates in India are the cheapest in the world. Today, even the poorest Indian has a mobile phone enabling his participation in the digital revolution.

A few days ago, D Subbarao, who was the Finance Secretary and RBI Governor during the UPA time, validated the above view, stating in a newspaper interview that the premise on which the CAG had estimated the 'presumptive loss' of Rs 1.76 lakh crore was flawed. Rather, there could have been a 'presumptive gain' to the Government, in terms of the recurring revenue on increased spectrum usage, and almost universal mobile coverage.

Significantly, Subbarao had opposed allocating 2G spectrum at 2001 prices, but had come around later on. The CAG under whose watch the CWG, Coalgate and 2G 'scams' had been 'unearthed' is active even today as the Chairman of United Nations Panel of External Auditors; he was appointed as Chairman, Committee of Administrators of BCCI by the Supreme Court in 2017, at a remuneration of Rs 3.62 crore, for three years. An analysis of the Coalgate scam leads to a similar conclusion viz. not auctioning coal mines was a sound policy decision. Otherwise, coal would have been much more expensive, pushing up prices of electricity and other manufactured goods. Thus, in



defalcated cash has been recovered.

A question arises as to why all major scams, which clearly caused huge loss to the Government, could not reach their logical conclusion? Firstly, once a scam breaks out, all investigating agencies run helter-skelter after the scamsters, which derails the investigation, because all agencies pursue different goals and zealously guard, and never share, any information they possess.

Thus, the CBI would try to prove that the scamsters did not follow proper procedures, the Income-tax Department would try to prove that the scamsters did not pay Income-tax properly, while the Enforcement Directorate would play on the money-laundering angle.

Consequently, when presented in court, the case becomes a jigsaw puzzle – too complicated to be resolved in a finite time-frame. Secondly, investigating agencies prosecute scam cases selectively. Once the government changes; investigating agencies change their tune. Thirdly, and most importantly, the Government under whose watch the scam took place puts

all its might in defending the scamsters. No wonder, most scamsters go unpunished, and once the spotlight leaves them, enjoy proceeds of their crime.

Ideally, a standard operating procedure should be devised to deal with scams with a view to (a) punish the guilty, (b) recover the money earned illegally, and (c) prevent the recurrence of similar scams. Once a crime is classified as a scam, an inter-departmental Special Investigation Team (SIT) having people from all enforcement agencies and the banking sector should be constituted. The SIT alone should have jurisdiction to investigate the scam, with a mandate to complete its investigations within a definite time-frame, and file a charge-sheet simultaneously. The SIT should also be obliged to suggest ways to recover the money lost in the scam.

Of course, all instances of corruption in high places lower public confidence irretrievably. People begin to think that if their rulers are engaged in massive corruption they would be justified in being corrupt in their small ways. Thus, the moral fabric of the country suffers. Moreover, after being perceived as corrupt, the moral authority of all leaders, not necessarily the ones involved, diminishes, and fringe elements peddling communalism and casteism assume leadership roles.

Finally, we may contrast what happens to investigations in India with the suo-motu police investigation into Partygate – a number of parties that were held by the British Prime Minister at the official residence of the PM, during the Covid lockdown. No politician, including the PM, had the courage to question the police enquiry.

Obviously, London Police has set the bar very high. A former Chief Commissioner of London Police, Sir Robert Mark, had laid down his vision for the police in the following words: "... it is important for you to understand that the police are not the servants of the Government at any level.

We do not act at the behest of a minister or any political party, not even the party in government. We act on behalf of the people as a whole and the powers we exercise cannot be restricted or widened by anyone, save Parliament alone."

Scams, in India can be avoided only if our investigating agencies achieve this high level of independence, integrity and professionalism.

Intransigence blocks progress on cease-fire

There were reports recently quoting an Egyptian official as claiming "significant progress" had been made in negotiations between Israel and Hamas. Hamas negotiators later confirmed "in-depth discussions" had been held in Cairo.

Even Ismail Haniyeh, its most senior political leader, declared on Sunday that Hamas was "keen" to reach a comprehensive cease-fire agreement.

But the negotiations have yet to show signs of a breakthrough as the two sides have continued to exchange fire and Israel threatens to launch an offensive push into Rafah.

The latest development is only additional proof that the Gaza conflict is far from ending, and a permanent solution will be out of the question without all stakeholders coming to terms with the truth of the matter that so long as Israel and Hamas perceive each other to be existential threats, no cease-fire will hold for long. No solution will prove permanent.

Both have made no secret about their goal of erasing the other from the map. For all the negotiations on prisoner-for-hostage swaps or on a cease-fire, no progress has been made in this regard. But the world is overwhelmingly focusing on the humanitarian tragedy resulting from Israel's military onslaught.

The head of the World Food Program just appealed for an end to the fighting, warning of a "full-blown famine" in northern Gaza. The head of



the World Health Organization has also warned that "a full-scale military operation in Rafah ... could lead to a bloodbath". And Rafah happens to be a major logistics hub for humanitarian aid. Even US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said that without a credible plan to protect civilians, the United States could not support "a major military operation going into Rafah because the damage it would do is beyond what's acceptable".

Hamas' latest pro-cessa-fire stance following its recent talks with Fatah in Beijing has led many to assume the ball is now in Israel's court.

Hamas' conditions for a cease-fire are that Israel end its "aggression", guarantee the withdrawal of its forces from Gaza, and a hostage-swap deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his war Cabinet, however, are determined to press ahead with the planned elimination of Hamas, whatever it takes. To them, Hamas' present interest in a cease-fire is only buying time for it to regroup, and that is the last thing Israel wants.

Netanyahu has refused to bow to the international pressure to halt the war, dismissing the key Hamas demand of the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza as being equal to surrender. While claiming that Israel has shown it is willing to make concessions, the Israeli leader stressed that its military operations will continue until it has achieved its goal of eradicating Hamas.

So despite the earlier signs of progress toward a cease-fire, it seems any hopes that one would be forthcoming were just wishful thinking.

According to Arab media, the talks between Hamas and Fatah in late April, hosted by Beijing, successfully bridged their differences and they are expected to hold another round of talks in Beijing in mid-June, with the aim of forming an interim, non-factional, national Palestinian government.

As Beijing has stressed, it is the perpetual denial of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people that is the root cause of the conflict. The establishment of an independent State of Palestine that peacefully coexists with Israel is the only way to end the long cycle of violence between the Israelis and Palestinians.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Pitroda's exit

SIR, Sam Pitroda resigned from the post of Chairman of the Indian Overseas Congress after his controversial racist remarks in a podcast interview with *The Statesman* last week was termed by the Congress party as unfortunate and unacceptable and also invited strong condemnation from the ruling BJP. Last month Mr Pitroda had advocated for introduction of inheritance tax referring to American laws which he claimed empowered the American government. Then also Congress, as a very natural reaction, disowned Mr Pitroda's proposal as his personal opinion. Both issues, raised by Mr Pitroda, could emerge as weapons against the already sick grand old party amid the frenzy of the current parliamentary elections. The

irony is that it was the BJP's late leader Arun Jaitley who had talked in favour of introduction of wealth/ inheritance tax in 2017. The issue of introduction of inheritance tax needs a crucial discussion for a country like India where the top 10 per cent of the population owns 65 per cent of the country's total wealth and the bottom 10 per cent owns only 6 per cent.

A threshold limit might be set, crossing which could bring the inheritor(s) or heir(s) of the deceased under the ambit of inheritance tax. Such a reform could reduce the inequality in the wealth of the citizens. Many eminent economists are often found to speak in favour of inheritance tax. Of course, the move will be vehemently opposed by the rich.

Yours etc.,
Sukhendu Bhattacharjee,

ILL-ADVISED

SIR, Rahul Gandhi contesting from Rae Bareilly after voting in Wayanad had ended reflects poorly on the team advising him. It's in public domain that Rahul Gandhi, personally, was not interested to contest either from Amethi or Rae Bareilly. Declaring the decision of Rahul to contest from a second constituency should not have been done after voting in Wayanad was over. The mature decision could have been to make Priyanka contest from Rae Bareilly.

Yours, etc., Satya Pal Ashta, New Delhi, 7 May.

JUVENILE MINDSET

SIR, Apropos 'Pitroda steps down as Congress Overseas chief' (May 9), the development may have come too late in the day for the grand old party. After making light of the 1984 Sikh massacres and suggesting that India should levy inheritance tax like some states in the US, Sam Pitroda has lauded this country for

surviving for over 75 years 'though the people of East India look like Chinese, those of the South look like Africans and those of the North and West look like whites and Arabs respectively'. India's unity in diversity is a proven fact and can do without such offensive comparisons. Whatever may be the intent, the analogy uses comes across as condescending, as though it is a wonder how India has survived despite such stark, rep-

ugnant contradictions. "What's in a name, the rose flower would smell just as sweet even if called by a different name," said Shakespeare. Likewise, what we achieve in life has little to do with our appearance, except perhaps in glamorous fields.

We have no control over our features or complexion, the advancements in plastic surgery and the tall claims made by the cosmetic giants notwithstanding. Commenting on these reveals a narrow, even juvenile mindset, which ill behoves one who is the acknowledged mentor of some Congress leaders.

If a party spokesperson, far from being diplomatic, repeatedly sets the cat among pigeons with his pearls of wisdom, it is better late than never to gag the gentleman!

Yours etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 9 May.



Issues that ought to figure in manifestos

P. MADHAVA RAO

Political parties have a history of promising a slew of benefits to voters during elections and then forgetting about them afterwards. The competing parties devote a significant amount of time, money, intelligence, and energy to developing and disseminating manifestos with persuasive language and appealing individual-centric programmes.

The manifestos designed and distributed for the Eighteenth Lok Sabha elections by all major contesting political parties have also made appealing offers to the electorate, touching on political, economic, social, cultural, and religious sentiments and aspects of their lives. All political parties, however, conveniently forgot to include many issues that voters have long wished to have resolved, either through bureaucratic or political intervention.

Public needs such as the exclusion of the employed class and pensioners from income tax purview, social protection pensions to the working class without a wage ceiling, cardless and cashless medical treatment to every citizen, phased nationalisation of healthcare services, and basic package of health services at every village, free education to anyone at any place, application of the compulsory provident fund act to the informal sector workers and abolition of toll-tax when life time road tax has already been paid by the motor vehicle owners (for they believe that failing to pay tolls restricts a citizen's right to free



movement as guaranteed by the Indian constitution).

Other expectations from the manifestos include a uniform and rationalised GST rate on all goods and services, including previously excluded goods and services such as petrol, diesel, and spirits; integrating MGNREGA with agricultural activities to generate year-round guaranteed employment in rural areas; citizen-friendly law and order, and rural road development with Central support are among the demands made by everyone in the country.

Increasing the number of members of parliament from the current 543 to at least 2200, taking into account the growth of voters from 17 crore in the first general elections in



1951-52 to nearly 97 crore in the 18th general elections in 2024 is another issue. None of the manifestos mentioned these public requirements and instead began mudslinging at the other party.

There is a long-standing argument that salary does not meet the actual definition of income. It is a wage paid by the employer for services provided. The earner has no control over the amount of wage; it is the price paid for the service. On the other hand, income is defined as the rent on an investment, whereas pension is defined as the provision of care for individuals until their death. Nonetheless, the income tax collected, according to the income tax department data, from salaried individuals and pensioners is not more

than four per cent of total budgetary revenues of Rs 42 lakh crore during the fiscal year 2022-2023, wherein the income tax collected from the individuals stands at Rs 8.33 lakh crore, amounting to roughly 19 per cent of total revenues. The tax from pensioners and salaried individuals does not exceed a meagre four percent of total revenue. People do not understand why the government is chasing these peanuts while providing sleepless nights to salaried workers and pensioners. This issue has not been addressed by any political party.

The second most sought-after assurance in the manifestos was the elimination of the wage ceiling for provident fund and pension contributions. The current salary limit for

contribution is Rs. 15,000 per month and plunges a person into poverty after retirement, as evidenced by data showing that as of 30 June 2019, there are approximately 6.5 million pensioners receiving an average monthly pension of Rs 1,170 from the Employees PF Organisation. This is due to the wage cap for contributions. Employees demand the removal of the wage ceiling.

Universal healthcare is another major expectation in the manifestos of political parties seeking to win and serve the public. Despite learning a bitter lesson from Covid-19, our governments, whether at the state or national level, have failed to recognise the importance of ensuring trouble-free access to public health. Hospitals are more commercialised in post-Covid India than they were previously, and the issue of deaths due to a lack of access to health care should not be overemphasised. Public expectations, such as converting the nation to a full federation through constitutional amendments, increasing the number of MP seats, and so on, may have political consequences for both the winning and losing parties. However, excluding pensioners and the salaried class from the income tax net, removing the wage ceiling on PF contributions, eliminating the toll tax, integrating MGNREGA with agricultural activities, and reviving India's Planning Commission may not have political implications and can be included in manifestos at least now - better late than never.

(The writer is a former International Senior Advisor, United Nations Development Programme.)

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THOSE who are accustomed to study Indian crop reports and estimates may have noticed that of recent years what was known as the "anna notation" has disappeared, so that we no longer read of "sixteen anna" or "twelve anna" crops. It appears that this characteristically Anglo-Indian system of estimating quantities often led to mistakes. In some districts sixteen annas was considered to mean a bumper crop. In others it meant only a normal crop. So far back as 1897 the Imperial Government tried to get the anna notation discarded, but local administrations objected that the village officers entrusted with the duty of collecting data for crop reports did not understand the percentage system. It was finally decided that village officers could send in their returns in any form they liked, but in all published forecasts the percentage notation should be employed. The racing world should follow suit. A sixteen anna gallop in Poona is styled a twelve anna gallop in Calcutta.

NEWS ITEMS

CENTURY OF MEMORIES

PRINCESS VICTORIA'S SLIDING ESCAPADE

PRINCESS (afterwards Queen) Victoria sliding down the staircase on a teatray - her last escapade before coronation. This is one of the reminiscences of Miss Elizabeth Underwood Lisle, of Georgestreet, London, W., who has just celebrated her 103rd birthday. She is able to recall many incidents of early Victorian times, and even before.

Presented at Court eighty years ago, she retired from society life in the seventies. Among other outstanding Victorian figures she knew Dickens, Tennyson, Disraeli and Newman, Miss Lisle had a good voice and was often asked by Tennyson and Browning to read their finished works to them, "Even now" she told an interviewer "I can recite the whole of Hamlet, although I sometimes have to think a little more than I did."

Miss Lisle has not a great deal of sympathy with the young folks of to-day.

She reads all about them in the papers, and wishes the girls would wear more clothes. She does not consider herself competent to judge the men.

Miss Lisle spent many hours in the company of Lord Tennyson when he was Poet Laureate. The poet, who, she says, drank a bottle of the finest port every day, was invited to dinner, and the host had port wine fetched from his cellar.

Tennyson took a sip, and then protested against being served with such vile stuff. In a few moments he had the table in a state of concern, and the host, unable to satisfy the taste of his distinguished visitor from his own cellar, was compelled to send for a bottle of Tennyson's favourite port.

MURREE SEASON

OPENS LATE WITH COLD WEATHER

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

THE season in Murree has opened rather later than usual this year, owing to the inclemency of the weather. Those people who were persuaded to leave the plains last month must be regretting that they did so, as the last week has been unusually cold and unsettled with continual rains.

The rink, which has for some years past been under the capable management of Mr. Lintott, has changed hands. Old Murree residents will be sorry to learn of this change, as Mr. Lintott organized many successful carnivals and dances to which pleasure-seekers went, confident that they would have a jolly time.

As far as amusements go, there has been nothing much to record except a private dance given by the students of the Chelmsford Training College, Ghora Gali. This dance struck a gay note in Easter Week; it was well organized, the prizes were good and everything was done to render the evening pleasant for the guests who had been invited. The Chelmsford Training College was up to this year at Sanawar but from the month of March it has opened up here instead.

The Metropole Hotel which most Murree people are familiar with under the name of Rowbury's Hotel has opened under the new management of A. A. Demengghetti.

CHROME ORE MINING

CONSEQUENT upon the cancellation of the restrictions placed upon the mining of chrome ore, applications for prospecting licences for that mineral have been received.

The Government agree with the Director of Geology that applications from persons holding valid certificates of approval at the time of their application, should be given precedence, and accordingly direct that applications for prospecting licences should not be entertained until certificates of approval are obtained by the applicant.

With Kishida in the cross-hairs

SHUHEI KUROMI

When you run for office, you are encouraged by many people. But when you quit, you have to make your decision alone.

On March 25, House of Representatives member Toshihiro Nikai spoke these words to Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida when Kishida visited his office at the headquarters of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in Tokyo. Kishida is the president of the LDP, and Nikai is a former LDP secretary general. Before their meeting, Nikai had announced his decision not to run in the next lower house election.

Nikai's career as a politician spans nearly half a century, including his time as a member of the Wakayama Prefectural Assembly. The 85-year-old veteran's words left Kishida tense and nervous. The prime minister bowed his head and said, "I am truly indebted to you."

At the time, the focus was on certain LDP factions' alleged violations of the Political Funds Control Law and how the lawmakers involved would be punished. The amount of money that Nikai failed to report in his political funds reports was ¥35.26 million, the highest among incumbent LDP lawmakers.

Both Nikai's secretary and the former treasurer of the Nikai faction, which Nikai chaired, have been charged by the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office. Therefore, the general view within the LDP was that Nikai would not be able to escape disciplinary action.

But on April 4, Nikai's name was not on the list of 39 persons to be punished. In fact, it had already been decided before March 25 that Nikai would not be punished.



"If Nikai announces his de facto retirement, he will not be punished."

This secret deal between Kishida and Nikai had been worked out behind the scenes through LDP General Council Chairman Hiroshi Moriyama, who is close to Nikai.

Although Nikai is old and has health concerns, he has not yet decided on a successor, expecting that his son may inherit his turf. He wanted to avoid being punished to maintain his own prestige and influence until the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

As of late March, some of the 82 lawmakers whose political funds reports contained irregularities, such as Abe faction member Ryu Shionoya, a former education minister, seemed to receive punishments even more severe than the party withholding its election support from them, as they had been in positions of authority but failed to put an end to the practice of

kickbacks of money from the sale of tickets to fundraising events. On March 26, as dissatisfaction and doubts about the punishment swirled within the party, Kishida held hearings with Shionoya and three other former senior officials in preparation for the punishment.

By announcing his decision not to run just before the hearings, Nikai demonstrated that the political responsibility for the incident was heavy. This created an atmosphere that made it easier for Kishida to take disciplinary action. Kishida's associates recognized that if even Nikai could not continue as a member of the Diet, it was only natural that the former Abe faction leaders should be punished.

The relationship between Kishida and Nikai is complicated. During the administration of past Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Nikai served as LDP secretary general for more than five

years, the longest anyone has held the post. He wielded significant power in the party, and Kishida often suffered setbacks at Nikai's hands.

In 2020, Kishida, who was then chairman of the LDP Policy Research Council, worked hard to put together a cash handout of ¥300,000 to financially assist struggling households, aimed at cushioning the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the proposal was changed to give ¥100,000 per person to virtually everyone, without setting an income limit, at the behest of Nikai and the LDP's junior coalition partner Komeito.

In the party's presidential election that year, Nikai quickly announced his support for Yoshihide Suga, thereby setting the trend of the vote. Kishida was helplessly defeated.

But Kishida fought back in the 2021 presidential election. At the press conference announcing his candida-

cy, he declared that he would limit the number of terms served by LDP executives — clearly with Nikai in mind — stressing that it would prevent inertia and the concentration of power. Nikai had no choice but to step down.

Did Nikai surrender to Kishida at the end of his political career by speaking of his own retirement?

Some LDP members think otherwise.

"Because the former treasurer of our faction and my secretary are facing criminal charges, it is a matter of course that the political responsibility for that lies entirely with myself as their supervisor." At the press conference at which he announced his decision not to run, Nikai read these words from a paper he had prepared, with a blank expression on his face.

The case drew attention to Kishida's own political responsibility, as the former treasurer of the Kishida faction had been indicted. In a nationwide poll conducted by The Yomiuri Shimbun in April, 64 per cent of respondents did not think it was appropriate that Kishida was exempted from punishment. This is believed to have been one of the factors behind the slump in his approval rating.

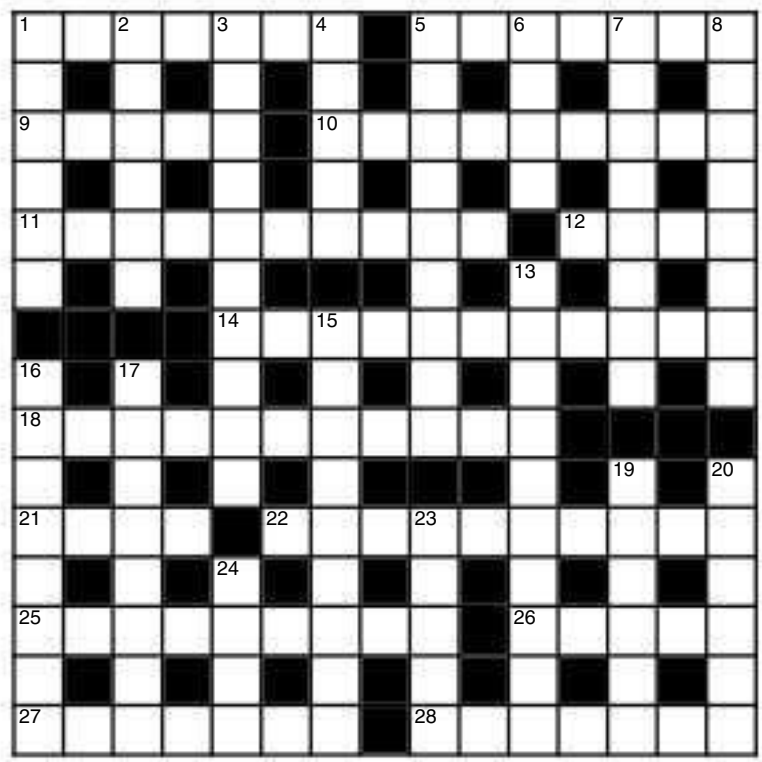
When I asked a former cabinet member of the LDP what he thought of Nikai's announcement, he offered an interesting analysis. He pointed out that Nikai's moves and words contained a harsh sarcastic subtext directed at Kishida: "I have decided to retire. Are you sure you don't have to take any responsibility?"

The LDP lost all three lower house by-elections in April, making Kishida's administration even more difficult to manage. I am curious as to how Kishida is taking Nikai's message.

The Japan News/Yomiuri Shimbun/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292775



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

C A G S S D B
S A N S K R I T P R E F A B
M H E E I T R
R E M O R A W A T E R S K I
L R T A T I E
F L O E D E R O G A T O R Y
I A D U U
V A I C I N E B L U S T E R
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L S E T U R
C A P S I C U M T R U S T I C
I B O I E T T
J I C L O T H S H A M R O C K
E W O H M E H

ACROSS

- Reduce consumption? That's futile (7)
- Man turned right in Bath, finding trouble (7)
- French footballer in Post Office misplaced bag (5)
- Lunatic Pope stood against (7,2)
- Giving report about company in recession on the move? (10)
- Hike starts in The Rip and ends in the outback (4)
- Draft right-winger seen prior to joining airborne regiment? (11)

- Mean drunk getting punched (5-6)
- Before leaving reclusive sort makes widow's contribution (4)
- One suggesting secure area round port (10)
- Belligerent destroying mortars and guns here and there (6-3)
- Four getting stuck into the drink — bubbly? (5)
- Sappers permitted to enter gym that's full (7)
- Get expert to contain buzzing hive (7)

DOWN

- Member brought to anger by posh Lord's official? (6)
- Becomes hard to follow case of Etonian political theorist (6)
- Free issue includes image from the bottom (10)
- Prisoner's baccy in tin with refill needed (5)
- Client wants some foreign jewellery item (9)
- Elite soldiers bashing in middle window-frame (4)

- Make rare gaffe initially being an outsider (8)
- Girl under water in populous borough (8)
- Norse god to frustrate stupid talk (10)
- How heat might knock one out? (9)
- Storm in Timor Sea that generates spray (8)
- Article by twerp to support subversive literature (8)
- One's seen in valley in this case (6)
- Bond one plugging away? On the contrary (6)
- Monkey caught in an American city (5)
- Stake — not post (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

Air turbulence

Air India Express cabin crew’s moody ‘sick leave’ hits operations, leaves fliers high and dry

In the realm of air travel, few situations are as frustrating as flight cancellations. The anticipation of reaching a destination is replaced by uncertainty and inconvenience. Such was the case recently when Air India Express, the low-cost subsidiary of Air India, found itself in a crisis, leading to a wave of flight cancellations. The flag carrier of India has long been grappling with financial woes and operational challenges. Despite various restructuring efforts, the airline has struggled to stay afloat in a fiercely competitive industry. The latest crisis began when over 300 senior cabin crew members of Express flights reported sick at the last minute, resulting in the cancellation of more than 90 flights since Tuesday night, leaving airports in disarray and passengers seething with frustration. Of course, Air India has now lent a helping hand to its subsidiary, deciding to operate 20 flights against 74 Express cancellations on Thursday, and sacking 30 crew members over “sick leave”. The root cause of this crisis stems from longstanding grievances articulated by Air India Express Employees Union (AIXEU). They have voiced concerns about unfair treatment, citing instances where internal job postings were filled with external candidates, bypassing qualified internal staff. The owners, on their part, do not recognise AIXEU. The Regional Labour Commissioner in New Delhi has also criticised the management for alleged violations of labour laws, highlighting a lack of responsible decision-making. Adding to the turbulence is Air India’s ongoing financial struggles and operational challenges.



Air India Express, despite its parent company’s losses, remained profitable. In 2021, it was sold to the Tata Group, which merged it with AirAsia India. It aimed to capture the budget aviation market with a focus on non-trunk routes and ancillary services. It is the only profitable airline with the Tatas. In 2023, the airline made a profit of Rs 116.84 crore, while the other airlines in the Tata Group’s aviation stable — AirAsia India, Vistara and Air India — incurred a combined loss of Rs 15,530 crores. The fallout from these cancellations has been significant, with passengers expressing their frustration on social media platforms. Long queues, missed connections and inadequate communication have characterised the scenes at airports. In response, Air India Express has issued apologies and promises of improved services, but the damage to passenger trust has been done. The Indian aviation sector has huge potential but the issues of mismanagement are galore. The Govt must proactively ensure that the fliers are not taken for a ride and the airlines also do not incur losses. Besides, the pandemic years were very traumatic for the industry and it is slowly recovering. The Govt must resolve the crisis before it snowballs into a crisis and takes down the whole sector. Looking ahead, the fate of Air India and its subsidiaries remains uncertain. Only time will tell whether Air India Express and its counterparts can rise above the chaos and emerge with flying colours.



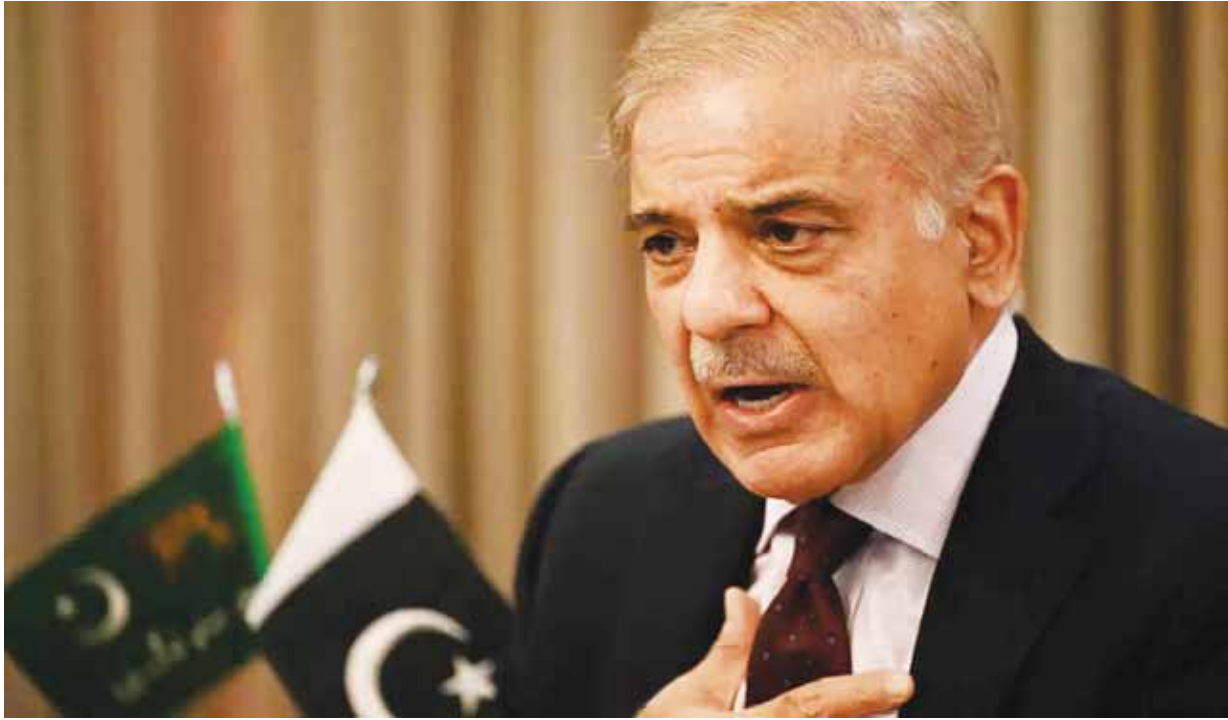
Students perform during the celebration of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's birth anniversary, in Nadia

An open letter to Shehbaz Sharif

We tolerated terrorist violence for many years but when we could no longer tolerate it, we went to Parliament to do away with Article 370. But we did not resort to violence

Dear Vazir-e-Azam Shehbaz Sharif Sahab, I have taken the privilege of writing to the Prime Minister of our neighbouring country, which, till 76 years ago, was part of us, but separated in acrimonious circumstances. I’m sure that you’re aware, as a lot of in India are, that this separation and the aftermath it gave rise to continues to not only cast its shadow over the subcontinent but also torment relations between various communities. This open letter to you is a humble attempt, not to hark back to the events of those decades and apportion blame, but to address the contentiousness of modern-day issues that continue to trail in their wake.

Whenever the issue of Ayodhya, the Gyan Vapi temple (Varanasi) or the Krishna Janmabhoomi (Mathura) comes up, my mind travels to Lahore and the Gurudwara Shaheed Gunj at the Naulakha Bazar locality of your splendid city. The ownership of the place was disputed by the local Muslims who claimed that the place had originally been a mosque. It had been converted into a gurudwara by the local Sikhs during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. When opportune in the 19th century, the people of the city, led by some Muslim Leaguers, went to court over this. They did not win their case for the re-conversion of the gurudwara into a mosque. Legal counsel argued that an appeal could be filed if necessary, right up to the Privy Council. However, the then premier of Punjab Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan advised against any further action as it might open a Pandora’s Box across the subcontinent, which was then undivided. Sikandar Hayat also advised against any further litigation. Any use of the argument of adverse possession might cause the return of many of the temples that had come into Muslim possession. What was then perhaps overlooked was that a Hindu temple is a residence of the divine and not merely a prayer hall. The pratimas (icons) are the first step in the quest for spirituality. Ultimately, spirituality can be



PRAFULL GORADIA

active by having a darshan of the avatar of the divine. In Sikhism, they do not have an icon nor the scope of spirituality in the same way as in a Hindu temple. Prophet Moses, the founding prophet of Judaism, the first of the three Semitic religions-also called Religions of the Book-known in Islam as Hazrat Moosa, had expressly forbidden any idol worship by the second of his Ten Commandments; “Thou shalt not make any graven image of thy lord the god”. Your faith has rigidly adhered to this particular Commandment. However, it does pain me no end to state that you have carried this adherence way too far. In your country, over 75 temples have been desecrated or pulled down after independence in 1947, a sordid trend that is continuing. From my Urdu teacher who was a scholar, I have learnt that it is your bounden duty as a momin (believer) to desecrate butts (idols) installed by kafirs (infidels). But for the sake of friendly relations between us two neighbours, your people should desist from such desecrations. I am saying this after

POLITICAL LEADERS OF YOUR GENERATION MIGHT STILL FIND COMFORT IN THE NOTION THAT INDIANS ARE A PEACEFUL AND DORMANT LOT AND THEREFORE WON’T REACT MUCH. THAT MIGHT INDEED HAVE BEEN THE CASE A COUPLE OF DECADES AGO, BUT IT IS NO LONGER SO

accepting the fact that Islam detests parasti (idol worship) and insists on majahab parasti (adherence to the faith) alone. But we live in a world where adherents of other religions too have equal rights to profess and practice their faith, without hurting others. I appeal to you to care for our sentiments and not target the temples and idols that still survive. Political leaders of your generation might still find comfort in the notion that Indians are a peaceful, and also dormant, lot and therefore won’t react much. That might indeed have been the case till a couple of decades ago but is no longer so. India and Indians are changing. Real change in our civilizational journey was heralded in December 1992, of which I was fortunate to be a humble part. In India, we have begun a movement to restore the temples that were casualties of the medieval age. I shall shortly be writing to Madam Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of our eastern neighbouring country. Dozens of temples continue to be desecrated in her country every year. You would agree that good neigh-

bours do not hurt each other. Kindly, remember that there are thousands upon thousands of mosques built upon the ruins of ancient temples. So far, we have preferred to approach the courts of law and minimize unilateral action. I appeal to you to also eschew violence. In Kashmir too, over 130 temples were attacked and desecrated even as India continued to hold control over the state’s territory. I am aware that Pakistan took great umbrage when we abrogated Article 370, but is it any wonder that we had to do so? We tolerated terrorist violence for many years, but when we could tolerate it no longer, we went to Parliament to do away with Article 370. But you would certainly appreciate that we did not resort to violence even on this issue. Our Muslim compatriots are cooperating to a moderate degree, even in the state of Kashmir. This is a trend which we hope continues. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

Enigma of copyright in the digital world

Policymakers face the formidable challenge of revising copyright laws effectively to tackle the complexities presented by AI

People often say that in this digital world, nothing remains secret. Even personal details can be accessed through the Internet. The quantum of information on the Internet is so vast that, despite the security measures, it is not cent per cent foolproof. In such a scenario, one must critically examine copyright’s relevance in the digital world. Copyright rules and laws traditionally protect every creation or innovation, so the original creator retains credit for their work and is aptly rewarded through monetary benefits. When an author creates a book, they automatically own the copyright. This gives them the exclusive right to reproduce, distribute, perform, and display the book and create derivative works based on it. In most countries, copyright protection for a book typically lasts for the author’s lifetime plus 50-70 years. During this time, others generally cannot reproduce or distribute the book without the author’s permission unless their use falls under a specific exception, such as fair use or fair dealing. Within the realm of music,



this signifies that the individual responsible for creating a song, the writer of the lyrics, the composer, or the performer, possesses the sole entitlement to utilise, disseminate, and capitalise on that song. In India, organisations such as the Indian Performing Right Society (IPRS) and Phonographic Performance Limited (PPL) administer the rights of copyright owners and collect royalties on their behalf for the public performance and broadcast of songs. Copyright also extends to research works, protecting and monetising one’s creations through patents. Unfortunately, journal publishers own the copyright for research publications. The publishers amass massive amounts through subscriptions and advertisements without providing any monetary benefit to the authors. Most of the reputed journals

do peer reviews free of cost, take processing charges from authors, and get subscription fees and advertisements as revenue. What does the poor researcher get? A mental satisfaction of getting published in a high-impact journal? In a way, it’s not fair. A few magazines, of course, practice giving honorariums to the authors. Despite having stringent copyright rules and regulations, its efficacy is questionable in the rapidly evolving digital age landscape. The widespread availability of digital content and the simplicity of sharing information on the Internet have presented unprecedented difficulties and intricacies for existing copyright rules. Today, one can easily copy content from online resources without crediting the original creator. Content available on social media sites, including photographs, is widely reproduced. Identifying the original content creator, be it literary or artistic works, is often difficult. Even stringent protective measures like user authentication mechanisms such as passwords, multi-factor authentication (MFA),

and role-based access controls (RBAC) to restrict access to authorised individuals or groups and watermarking techniques often fail to prevent the infringement of copyrights. The advent of AI in digital platforms has complicated the situation. As AI systems become more sophisticated, their ability to create, replicate, and modify content raises intricate legal questions regarding ownership and authorship. Though AI can do any role, it lacks the human touch in its creation that connects human minds. While individuals are accountable for creating and instructing these algorithms, the AI system autonomously produces the outcome, erasing the distinction between human and machine authorship. The current necessity lies in incorporating ethical, cultural, and economic considerations while crafting a new policy that effectively balances the rights of creators and AI developers.

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



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

EVOLUTION OF MONETARY POLICY

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Evolution of Monetary Policymaking in India,” published on May 8, this is my response. The journey of India’s monetary policy from its inception to the present day is a saga of adaptation and evolution. From the establishment of the Reserve Bank of India to the modern era of inflation targeting, each phase has been marked by its unique challenges and responses. The nationalisation of banks in 1969 marked a pivotal moment, transitioning monetary policy towards a more centralised, planned approach. However, external shocks like the oil crises of the 1970s tested the resilience of this system, necessitating revisions and reforms. The introduction of the Multiple Indicator Approach in 1998 reflected a shift towards a more holistic understanding of economic dynamics. Yet, the global financial crisis of 2008 exposed vulnerabilities, prompting a recalibration towards inflation targeting. While inflation targeting has its merits, recent disruptions such as demonetization and the pandemic have highlighted its limitations in addressing supply-side pressures. As the landscape of inflation evolves, a nuanced and comprehensive policy framework is imperative, one that combines the principles of inflation targeting with proactive measures to mitigate supply-side disruptions. In essence, the history of India’s monetary policy underscores the need for continual adaptation in the face of evolving economic realities.

Vihaan Reddy | Bengaluru

REFLECTIONS ON ELECTIONS

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Elected leaders need to rethink,” published on May 8, this is my response. Election times unveil a complex tapestry of our democracy, woven with threads of hope, disappointment, and societal reflection. As citizens, we witness the ritual dance of power, where promises collide with reality, and ideals meet the harsh edges of pragmatism. The model code of conduct, ostensibly a guardian of fair play, often feels like

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Political manoeuvring



Apropos the news article, “Modi, Lalu in a tug of war on Muslim quota,” published on May 8, this is my response. The recent political discourse surrounding reservations in India has taken a contentious turn, with various parties embroiled in a heated debate over extending reservation benefits to Muslims. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has vehemently opposed such a

mere whisper against the cacophony of electoral fervor. Expenditure limits crumble under the weight of unchecked spending, leaving us disillusioned with the integrity of the process. The impact of elections extends beyond just voting, as they can turn schools into battlegrounds, with political theatre taking centre stage and the future suffering while the eloquence of our founding luminaries seems lost amidst the mudslinging and vitriol of contemporary discourse. Yet, amidst the chaos, there is a glimmer of hope embodied by figures like APJ Abdul Kalam, whose legacy reminds us of the transformative power of leadership rooted in humility and service.

Arya Kapoor | Kolkata

BEGGING IS AN EPIDEMIC

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Benevolent hearts: Dynamics of begging and household donations,” published on May 8, this is my response. Begging has been ingrained in the roots of Indian society for ages. This sickening culture has become a fashion, a compulsion, a profes-

sion and even a kind of recreation in our country. Beggars in India easily outnumber their ilk in other big countries. To the Westerners, India is a land of mendicants. Beggars are found everywhere—on roads, crossings, footpaths, etc. But their favourite hangouts are bathing ghats, temples, religious fairs, railway stations, trains and bus stands. It is a real nuisance to be confronted by street beggars in all places. Like the Almighty, they seem to be omnipresent. You are waiting for a bus or walking down a road with your friend, and beggars suddenly appear from nowhere and start an endless volley of supplications until you give them a few coins out of sheer disgust and helplessness. The monstrous practice of begging cannot be eradicated from our society because millions are living ‘below the poverty line’, yearning for a morsel of food. Unfortunately very little has been done by our past and present governments to obliterate the social illness of begging.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

Kiara Sharma | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

EU-CHINA RELATIONS
AT A CROSSROADS

Xi embarks on a strategic journey across Europe, a move laden with symbolism



Geo-political adjustments are getting done, bilaterally and plurilateral, even as the world's largest democracies are busy calming their domestic constituencies, where a key rallying agenda is China. The two largest democracies, India and the US, both of whom have their own set of issues with China, are in the middle of some of the most competitive election processes, ever seen across the globe. Meanwhile, the EU, or at least many of its member countries, not to mention US allies such as Australia are carefully recalibrating the entangled web of engagement with China. It is by no coincidence that Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, was on a strategic three-nation tour of Europe, earlier this week. This tri-nation tour, during which the Chinese premier, also met the European Union president Ursula Von der Leyen, comes after a gap of almost 5 years and is also a time when many European nations have been blaming China for pushing highly subsidised electric vehicles into their markets, making several European auto factories redundant. The Europeans also wanted to focus on China playing a larger role in stabilising its "friends without limits" Russia, in the war against Ukraine, pushing up fuel-aided inflation across the region. The Europeans in the plain speak, they are known for, outlined clearly in the president's press statement, "the first topic where we exchanged views on was the geopolitical situation. We especially discussed Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East. We agree that Europe and China have a shared interest in peace and security. We count on China to use all its influence on Russia to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. President Xi has played an important role in de-escalating Russia's irresponsible nuclear threats, and I



am confident that President Xi will continue to do so against the backdrop of the ongoing nuclear threats by Russia. We have also discussed China's commitment not to provide any lethal equipment to Russia. More effort is needed to curtail the delivery of dual-use goods to Russia that find their way to the battlefield. And given the existential nature of the threats stemming from this war for both Ukraine and Europe, this does affect the EU-China relations. "The message from the EU to China was, don't help Russia in its unjust war on European soil, or else the bilateral relation would be in trouble. No surprises, Ukraine and the Middle East didn't feature, till the bottom three paragraphs of the press statement issued by the Chinese team, post the trilateral meeting. Also no surprises with the language which read "On the Ukraine crisis, President Xi pointed out that China, France and the EU all wish to see an early ceasefire and return of peace in Europe, and support political settlement of the crisis. China has been working vigorously to facilitate talks for peace. China's objective and just position and its constructive role have been widely recognized by the international community. China is ready to stay in communication with relevant parties." The other significant element of these conversations was traded, as all parties involved are feeling the constraints of escalating fuel costs, the volatile geo-political environment and, the post-Covid, supply chain mismatch. The EU provided sharp pointers on Chinese subsidised products, free and fair access to each other's markets and supply chain resiliency in their conversations. A defensive China maintained that the two sides have extensive common interests and broad space for cooperation in green and digital transition. It is necessary that they properly address economic and trade frictions through dialogue and consultation, and accommodate each other's legitimate concerns." China has started making, the right moves to woo back some of its largest market partners, at a time when India and the US, the other key stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific theatre, are busy with their elections. India will get over elections in about a month, and an agile nimble China policy outlook awaits. *(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)*

Economic progress in India: A reality check

Despite notable achievements, economic progress falters due to the neglect of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Public Sector Undertakings and agricultural reforms



India has come a long way since 2014 in the matter of various indices and parameters of economic development. Consider this. India has increased her per capita income through this decade from USD 1560 to USD 2500, a 60 per cent increase. It has purportedly lifted 400 million persons out of poverty during the decade. Its foreign exchange kitty has increased from USD 322 billion to USD 640 billion during the same period. These are impressive figures. Large figures are always impressive, but they need to be checked, compared and corroborated to be sanctified. Consider this now. The per capita income of India increased from USD 600 to USD 1560 for the period from 2004 to 2014 which is a bigger increase of 160 percent. Its foreign exchange reserves increased from USD 107 billion to USD 322 billion between 2004 and 2014. Whereas the surge from 2004 to 2014 was 200 per cent, it was only 100 per cent in the next decade. The above comparative figures talk aloud about India's poor economic development in the last decade. This is not an overall performance report on the current NDA government. This government has many unprecedented achievements to its credit. But on the economic front, it doesn't seem to have delivered. Why has the NDA not been able to deliver on the economic front? There are several reasons. **Neglect of MSMEs:** The micro, small and medium enterprises sector in the country did not receive the attention due to it. This sector is the main source of employment generation. Imports from China continued to swell and many manufacturers closed down their factories to become traders and distributors. Poor implementation of the Make in India programme: The Make in India was a well-conceived ambitious programme



THE GOVERNMENT DID WELL TO BLUEPRINT REFORMS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR—THOSE RELATED TO MSP AND PROCUREMENT OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE. BUT THE GOVERNMENT FAILED TO IMPLEMENT IT BY CAPITULATING IN FRONT OF FAKE PROTESTERS MASQUERADING AS FARMERS

to boost indigenous manufacturing. The scheme had its points of deficiency but regrettably, the major driving points of the grandiose scheme remained largely on paper and were never implemented properly. The result—share of manufacturing in the economy continues to stagnate at 14 percent. Absence of bureaucratic reforms: Our obsolete, corruption-ridden colonial bureaucratic system had never delivered earlier and cried for reforms. But the reforms did not come. The result was a failure of key developmental programmes like the 100 Smart Cities Programme. The government did a remarkable job of establishing GST and promulgating the IBC. This enabled a clean-up of banks and a sharp decline in their NPAs. However, the failure of the government to increase the ease of doing business by cutting down on bureaucratic red tape is a big reason behind the continuing lack of a suitable ecosphere for business and big investment. **Failure to implement Agricultural Reforms:** The government did well to blueprint reforms in the agricultural sector—those related to MSP and procurement of agricultural produce. But the government failed to implement the same by capitulating in front of fake protesters masquerading as farmers. **Neglect of PSUs:** The government paid very little attention to the state and central PSUs which account for 15 per cent of the total economic activities in the country. It kept on harping on the absence of the need for the government to be in business. This

was an impractical approach to handling the Indian economy and failed to tap the big PSUs in which so much of public money had been invested. **Failure to bring about judicial reforms:** Justice in this country continues to be delayed, denied and derailed. Despite big talks to the contrary, the government did nothing in the direction of judicial reforms. This was and remains a big dampener to FDI and even domestic investment in new business. Notwithstanding the above, we must bear in mind that most of the previous governments had left deep pits in our economy that needed to be filled to prepare the ground for the rapid holistic development of the country. The UPA government, between 2004 and 2014 did produce better numbers for FE reserves and economic growth rate but the money generating that investment and growth was preponderantly from the huge proportion of parallel-black money economy out of the overall economy. Money was meagrely flowing for the critical sectors of defence and infrastructure and even for some important socialistic schemes. Modi 1.0 and Modi 2.0 changed this by bringing economic discipline and curbing corruption and economic malfeasance. It brought GST and IBC and did the clean-up of Banks by bringing down drastically the NPAs. It severely dented the black money economy. These were the pits filled by the Modi government that have prepared fertile soil for the fast-track economic progress of the country now. Given the above, it is imper-

ative and is also expected that the Modi government, if returned to power, will take the undermentioned steps to boost real progress on the economic front. Economic progress is the foundation of the overall progress of a country. Progress on other fronts like defence, foreign affairs, etc. has been significant but sustainable multifaceted development can only be achieved on the foundation of a strong and healthy economic bottom line. The country needs drastic institutional and bureaucratic reforms. It needs urgent implementation of the farming sector reforms which were shelved after so much drum beating. The education sector calls for a thorough overhaul to replace the colonial Macaulay established system with an indigenous system in tune with the nation's ethos and tradition. Sloganeering and political gamesmanship need to be replaced by serious, earnest and committed steps for boosting investment, trade, manufacturing and exports. India has a huge potential for becoming an economic powerhouse in quick time but we need to go about building our economy with due seriousness and dedication, rising above narrow interests of caste, class, political affiliations and last but not least, political expediency. It is very much hoped that Modi 3.0, with a two-thirds majority, will usher in the much-needed administrative, bureaucratic and judicial reforms for the speedy economic progress of the country. *(The author is a management consultant; views are personal)*

India and Armenia strengthen defence ties amidst regional instability

As the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan axis looms, the growing Indo-Armenia partnership emerges as a vital defence against destabilising forces

In recent years, the strategic partnership between India and Armenia has undergone a remarkable transformation—fired by their shared commitment to fortify defence capabilities and confront regional security challenges head-on. Against the backdrop of Armenia's enduring struggle with Azerbaijan and Turkey's support for Azerbaijan's advantages, the precipitating connection between Armenia and India stands for recognition. Armenia's proximity to India and both agreeing to diversify their strategic alignment, deserves special attention on the global stage. **Military Cooperation:** Armenia's imperative to diversify its security alliances and bolster its military capabilities,



particularly amidst the enduring conflict with Azerbaijan, is evident through heightened defense spending and collaborations with nations such as India and France. India's involvement with Armenia's military not only strengthens its defensive capabilities but also serves to counterbalance external-internal influences like Turkey and Pakistan in the South Asian region. The expanding Indo-Armenian

partnership encompasses various facets, including the exchange of weaponry, joint military exercises, and strategic consultations, all aimed at enhancing defense readiness and security in their respective regions. **Advanced Weaponry and Joint Exercises:** The acquisition of state-of-the-art weaponry highlights the growing defense cooperation between India and Armenia. Reports indicate ongoing provision of military hardware from India to Armenia, including multiple-launch rocket systems, anti-tank missiles, and radar systems. Additionally, joint military exercises and training programs are underway to enhance preparedness and interoperability between their

armed forces. These collaborative efforts facilitate the exchange of expertise and tactics, fostering effective coordination for potential future operations, from joint exercises to intelligence sharing, both nations are committed to showcasing their military capabilities and strengthening their strategic partnership. **Geopolitical Determinations:** Armenia's pivotal role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) offers India diversified trade routes and enhanced access to Eurasian markets, bolstering strategic interests in economic resilience and geopolitical balancing. Conversely, India's military support for Armenia underscores its commitment to preserving regional peace and countering aggressive

manoeuvres by the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan axis. Through the realisation of mutual interests, India and Armenia can reshape security dynamics in the South Caucasus region by challenging the dominance of larger geopolitical actors and their support for rogue powers. **Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan Axis:** The Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan axis poses a substantial threat to respective regional stability, with Turkey's unwavering support for Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict then raising concerns about potential escalations. The longstanding military partnership between Turkey and Pakistan, characterised by defence production, joint training exercises, and high-level military dialogues, under-

scores their concerted efforts to advance mutual geopolitical goals and exert influence in the regions. This axis represents a significant challenge to the security and stability of the South Caucasus and South Asian regions, as that axis seeks to consolidate its power and undermine the influence of other regional stakeholders. Responses and Ongoing Efforts: In response to the burgeoning influence of the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan axis, India's steadfast support for Armenia signifies a resolute stance against their aggressive manoeuvres in the region. Aimed at preserving a delicate balance of power, India and Armenia are all set to intensify their collaboration to address these threats. While Turkey's stance on

Kashmir validates the burgeoning Indo-Armenia defence cooperation, the nexus between Turkey's involvement in the Kashmir issue and Pakistan's alignment with Azerbaijan's agenda cannot be seen as a mere happenstance, rather a meticulously orchestrated strategy with far-reaching intention. In this backdrop, the urgent need for a meticulously planned multilateral defence partnership underscored. This becomes essential to counter the unholy Turkey-Pakistan-Azerbaijan axis—thereby ensuring stability in both the Caucasus and South Asian regions. **The Promising Prospects:** The emerging strategic cooperation between India and Armenia holds immense promise for enhancing region-

al security and advancing shared interests. Both nations are poised to deepen their partnership and address prevailing challenges through concerted efforts in military collaboration and strategic alignments. India's steadfast support for Armenia underscores its dedication to maintaining peace and stability in the Caucasus region. With far-reaching implications for global geopolitical outcomes, the Indo-Armenia partnership has the potential to redefine the regional balance of power and contribute significantly to the stability and prosperity of both the Caucasus and South Asian regions. *(The writer is working with an Independent Think Tank, views are personal)*

Rural demand woes

Contraction of real wages in most of the 27 months till February’ 24 is a big worry for the India growth story

THE WEAKNESS OF rural consumption is not good news for India’s growth story. Persisting distress conditions in the countryside are reflected in a sustained contraction of rural wages adjusted for inflation. This is not just a blip of higher food inflation in February 2024 that resulted in a 3.3% decline in real wages but has been observed for 25 out of the 27 months to February, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Even over the last nine years ending March 2023, the 4.9% average annual growth in daily wages for rural non-agricultural male labour was completely eroded by inflation, implying zero growth in real terms, according to the Reserve Bank of India’s latest Handbook of Statistics on States.

Lower rural incomes, in turn, dampen consumer demand for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), two-wheelers, tractors, etc., which adversely impact industrial and overall economic growth. Depressed incomes are a major factor behind rural consumption growing by only 0.5% year-on-year in the second quarter of FY24. Looking forward, such a trend is clearly bound to cast a dark shadow over optimistic narratives of robust economic expansion in FY25.

The long period over which rural wages have contracted indicates the need for caution in inferring a pick-up in rural demand based on high-frequency indicators. There are contrary signals from some of these indicators partly due to the fact that while all agriculture is rural, rural is not wholly agricultural. A columnist in this newspaper observed a distinct pattern of a K-shaped rural recovery manifested through big-ticket consumption and premiumisation. Demand for high-horsepower (HP) tractors grew thrice as much as that of low-HP tractors over the last three years, while two-wheeler sales — more than half of which are in rural areas — are sluggish. Paradoxically, this indicates that while farm sentiments may be upbeat, demand in the non-farm segment of the rural economy is not so bullish. Over the nine-year period till FY23, while tractor sales registered an average annual growth of 8%, two-wheeler sales grew by 0.6% per annum. At Hero Motocorp, growth in wholesale volumes was negative every month in the one-year period till February 2024. While rural FMCG consumption outpaced urban in January-March 2024, the growth is in discretionary spending on home and personal care items rather than food. Due to weak rural demand, underlying volumes at Hindustan Unilever grew by 1% in the March quarter.

The outlook on rural demand this fiscal is clouded by the southwest monsoon season from June to September, starting with the risk of impairment due to lingering remnants of El Niño conditions, according to Skymet. Although the forecast is for overall bountiful rains, the prospect of an initial dry spell should warrant concern as it has a crucial bearing on crop output during the kharif or summer season given that June and July are crucial months for sowing operations. This factor can lower output and elevate food prices which will further worsen the outlook on rural incomes. As if all of this weren’t bad enough, water levels in the major reservoirs of the country are just 28% of their full storage capacity. The situation is much worse in the southern states where the major reservoirs are just 15.7% full. If the monsoon turns out to be wayward, this will only worsen the distress in the countryside especially if rural inflation outpaces that in urban areas, further contracting wages.

Apple's tone-deaf iPad ad triggers our darkest AI fears

I FIND IT hard to believe that no one on Apple Inc.’s marketing team saw this coming. Maybe they were too timid to speak up. Perhaps they were overruled. Maybe they didn’t care.

But surely someone in that Cupertino spaceship in California could comprehend the grim imagery of its new iPad ad — titled simply “Crush!” — in which a giant crushing machine slowly squeezes a pile of beloved creative tools. First, a trumpet, buckling. Then paint splattering everywhere. A bust, squashed. An upright piano, crushed, strings and hammers flying out with a horrific crunch. Camera lenses shattering.

The ad’s intended message was to suggest that all these wonderful tools could now be faithfully recreated using one of the new iPads announced on Tuesday. But many saw something different, and backlash is picking up steam.

It is Apple’s worst marketing faux pas since it forced everyone to listen to U2. It speaks to our broad fears that recent drastic advancements in technology are a grave risk to the joy, authenticity, and spontaneity of human creativity.

For decades, Apple’s advertising has played on optimism around technology. Its iconic Orwell-inspired ad “1984”, directed by Ridley Scott, placed Apple as the saviour of individualism against conformity — and we believed it (or at least, the people alive when it ran did. Sorry).

Later, consumers were treated to the excellent iPod advertising, with those distinctive white headphones dangling and a pumping soundtrack. It heralded a world where our treasured music was becoming easier to buy, listen to, and take with us.

As Apple has matured, its advertising has become mundane. Soft hues and cheerful scenes display the core features of the iPhone et al in an informative, if uninspiring, manner.

With this latest effort, Apple clearly decided to get a little bolder to push its new iPads. It is a product line in need of a shake-up given falling sales and something of an identity crisis over what exactly it is meant to be used for.

Apple ended up running an ad that, for want of a better word, was triggering. Over the course of Apple’s lifetime, the sentiment toward technology has changed profoundly. We’re now more sceptical about the longer-term harms to our well-being or the effects of tech-enabled political division. The breakthrough moment of ChatGPT in 2022 supercharged our fears. For the first time, we were having serious discussions about what it might mean when a computer has broad abilities to surpass even the brightest humans. Staring at countless unanswered questions, there seemed only one sure bet: the growing power of the unstoppable tech giants.

Apple is spending massively on AI initiatives and has started trumpeting its products as being best-in-class for AI. We’ll hear more about the company’s AI work next month at its annual developers’ conference, where the company will be under pressure to show it hasn’t fallen behind Microsoft Corp. and others.

In these early stages, the creative arts have felt more vulnerable than most. More than half of American adults have concerns about the effects of AI on music, according to a recent YouGov poll, with the primary concerns being a lack of originality and impact on the livelihoods of human musicians. Just more than one in 10 adults (11%) said they would support AI artists. Meanwhile, OpenAI and other AI creators are being taken to court over their brazen collection of work that does not belong to them and using it to train AI. Overall, a separate Pew study suggests, more Americans are concerned rather than excited by AI.

It’s staggering that Apple has been unable to read this room. I doubt the company intended it this way — I’ve approached them for comment. A spokesperson will no doubt say the iPad is a friend to creatives, lowering the barrier to recording music or producing art. This is true, of course, but it’s the bigger picture we’re talking about here. If Apple wants to sell to creatives, it needs to show it understands them. As a metaphor, the crushing machine is a publicity disaster.

INDIA’S RECENTLY CONCLUDED trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) has brought back to focus another milestone — an India-European Union (EU) FTA. The FTA with four nations (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland) took almost 16 years of negotiations to materialise. It strongly signals India’s intent to persevere in dialogues and willingness to compete in global markets. While this newly signed agreement is largely focussed on goods trade and investments, India stands to gain substantially by negotiating a comprehensive agreement on goods, services, and investment with the EU. However, differences over tariff barriers on automobiles, alcoholic beverages, dairy products, mobile phones, shoes, and clothing, to name a few, derailed the initial trade talks that were launched in 2013.

India’s services trade with the EU has increased rapidly over the last decade, from \$28.76 billion in 2010 to \$32.89 billion in 2020, touching an all-time high of \$48.45 billion in 2019 but lagging behind goods trade, which stood at \$95.2 billion in 2021. There has been a steady increase in services trade between India and the EU over the past decade and exports have outweighed imports in more recent years (see graphic). Thus, India-EU FTA in services presents a win-win opportunity for both partners as services hold a major share in their respective GDPs and each stand to gain from greater market access, knowledge exchange, and investment flows.

Post-Brexit in 2020, both sides agreed to revisit discussions for a “balanced, ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial” trade agreement. To this end, separate negotiations on an investment protection agreement and an agreement on geographical indications were also launched. Progress in this regard has been slow owing to lack of consensus on issues like data privacy and security legislation, rules on intellectual property and competition, Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, framework for investment, and

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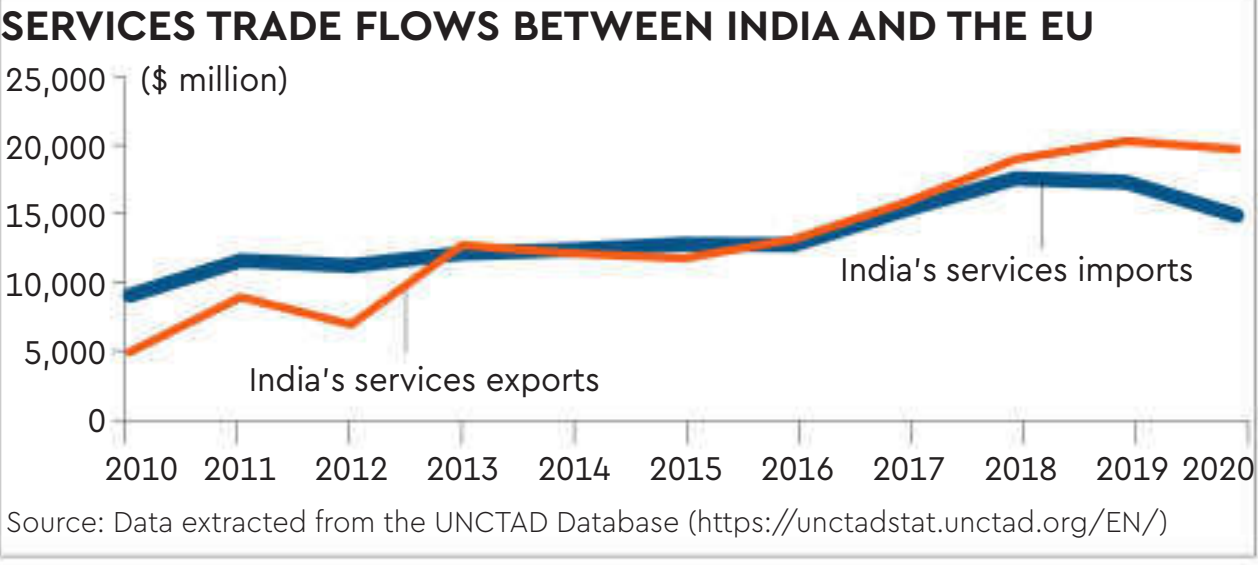
labour mobility.

Navigating a services treaty with the EU may prove challenging for India. Analysis of the trade data from the last two decades shows that the highest shares in overall services exports from India were recorded by technical, trade-related and other business services (22%), computer and information services (19%), and transport services (14%). India has comparative advantage at the bilateral level, with 20 EU countries for technical, trade-related and other business services; with 15 EU countries for R&D and with 14 EU countries for transport. Data shows that India has maintained an absolute comparative advantage over nations like Italy, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, and Sweden across a range of services. These nations could be India’s potential partners in achieving breakthroughs in these negotiations.

India’s top imports from the EU includes some of these same services: transport (38%), technical and trade-related services (16%), computer and

information services (12%), and travel (12%). Computer and information services in particular faces stiff competition from other EU members like Ireland. Concerns of the EU relating to data storage and flows, security, privacy, mobility, standards etc., which are pertinent to all these sectors, can prove to be major hurdles. India has already started regulatory reforms to address the EU’s data concerns. The recently passed new data privacy and protection legislations could prove to be vital step in encouraging the EU to relax restrictions and enable greater access to sectors like computer and IT, professional and management services, and financial services.

India’s prowess in adapting to disruptive technological innovations, excelling in transformative digital ecosystems, and developing advanced applications of artificial intelligence, machine learning, blockchain, data analytics, and cybersecurity are distinctive. India’s trained IT labour force could



prove valuable in the services negotiations. The EU, however, has restrictions on the liberalisation of several sectors under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (especially Modes 3 and 4) involving free labour movement. Enhanced digital trade could be a potential solution. The EU wishes further liberalisation of the Indian market for EU exports, especially in accountancy and legal services. Another key sector of interest for both the parties is professional and management services. Our analysis shows that India has comparative disadvantage in these services with 25 EU countries. For travel and financial services, India has a comparative advantage over only a handful of EU countries.

Notwithstanding the challenges, our analysis shows that this trade agreement can significantly increase India’s services exports to the EU with differential effects across sub-sectors. Precisely, using OECD’s product market regulation indicator as a proxy for services trade restrictiveness, we find that 1% reduction in trade restrictiveness between the partner countries can increase India’s services exports by nearly \$6.5 billion by 2025. Successful negotiations on services trade in the India-EU FTA perhaps begs a standalone approach, separate from the goods negotiations. India’s strategy in negotiating a services agreement with the EU needs a gradatim approach. Though the partners might disagree on certain matters of services trade, there is plenty of common ground that India could use to good advantage. While India has exhibited its resolve to engage the EU as a strong trading partner, the EU has to be cognizant of the fact that India can customise these changes keeping different opportunities and linkages in mind.

This article is based on findings from a research project titled “India’s FTA with the EU: Opportunities and Challenges in Services Sector”, funded by the UNESCAP South and South-West Asia office

Citizen Stack’s role in green goals



MADHUMITHA P RAMANATHAN

The author is an advocate for Digital Public Infrastructure and an iSPIRT volunteer

DPIs are fundamental not only in driving digital transformation but also in laying the groundwork for achieving UN’s Sustainable Development Goals

LAST WEEK IN New York, a landmark presentation was made by an India delegation, comprising the Permanent Mission of India to the UN, the ministry of electronics and information technology, and iSPIRT, at the United Nations. This collaborative effort unveiled the Citizen Stack: Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) initiative, drawing inspiration from the pioneering India Stack. DPIs are more than mere technological frameworks; they are vital instruments for nations committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensuring a trustworthy flow of data amid the rise of transformative technologies such as generative artificial intelligence.

DPIs and sustainability

The connection between DPIs and environmental sustainability is more direct and significant than it might initially appear. Billions of daily transactions are carried out using cash or plastic money — credit and debit cards composed largely of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Despite the claims surrounding PVC, it can only be recycled a limited number of times (typically up to seven), after which it becomes a source of non-biodegradable waste that accumulates in landfills, rivers, and oceans. This extensive use of PVC in the production of financial cards contributes enormously to environmental degradation, showcasing a cycle of consumption and waste that ends in significant ecological damage.

To address concerns regarding PVC,

some credit card manufacturers have switched to using polyethylene terephthalate glycol (PETG), a more sustainable polyester plastic. PETG offers similar strength and durability but can be chemically recycled to its original components, reducing its impact on aquatic ecosystems by preventing degradation into microplastics. However, the transition to PETG is not a panacea. While it represents a step forward in reducing the environmental footprint of plastic

card, it still carries potential drawbacks. It can take decades to decompose in landfills, and improper disposal continues to feed microplastics into the global marine ecosystem. The challenge of managing plastic waste effectively remains a formidable one, highlighting the persistent need for comprehensive solutions. The shift to DPIs proposes a sustainable alternative that drastically reduces our reliance on physical, plastic-based financial tools.

The shift to DPIs proposes a sustainable alternative that drastically reduces our reliance on physical, plastic-based financial tools

Unified Payment Interface (UPI) has revolutionised payments in India with its convenience, security, and cost-effectiveness — most transactions incur no fees. The transition from traditional debit cards to UPI eliminates the need for physical cards, thereby reducing plastic waste. While debit cards often offer perks such as airport lounge access or retail discounts, banks can creatively adapt these benefits to UPI transactions. It could be achieved through exclusive offers within a bank’s app or through linked savings accounts, encouraging sustainable consumer behaviours while supporting SDG 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure.

Direct use case examples

Unified Payment Interface (UPI) has revolutionised payments in India with its convenience, security, and cost-effectiveness — most transactions incur no fees. The transition from traditional debit cards to UPI eliminates the need for physical cards, thereby reducing plastic waste. While debit cards often offer perks such as airport lounge access or retail discounts, banks can creatively adapt these benefits to UPI transactions. It could be achieved through exclusive offers within a bank’s app or through linked savings accounts, encouraging sustainable consumer behaviours while supporting SDG 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure.

Virtual credit cards also present a prime example of how digital innovation can mirror the functionality of physical credit cards while eliminating the need for plastic. Linked directly to one’s credit card account without the physical card, virtual credit cards offer enhanced security and convenience, particularly for online transactions. They retain all the traditional benefits of credit cards, including deferred payments, reward points, and the ability to build a positive credit history.

Global impact

Consider the significant global environmental impact of the current use of physical cards. Approximately 22 billion are in circulation worldwide, each card adding about 5 grams of plastic, cumulatively contributing over 121,000 tonnes to the environment annually. Around 1 billion new cards produced each year add another 5,500 tonnes of plastic. The environmental toll of these physical cards is substantial — not only do they add to the plastic waste burden, but their production, primarily from PVC (a petrochemical product), also results in significant carbon emissions, with the production of PVC emitting about 7.83 kg of CO₂-equivalent per kilogram of plastic. By shifting to digital wallets and payment systems, we can markedly reduce these emissions and make a direct contribution towards global carbon emission reduction efforts.

Virtual credit cards also present a prime example of how digital innovation can mirror the functionality of physical credit cards while eliminating the need for plastic. Linked directly to one’s credit card account without the physical card, virtual credit cards offer enhanced security and convenience, particularly for online transactions. They retain all the traditional benefits of credit cards, including deferred payments, reward points, and the ability to build a positive credit history.

A blueprint for the future

The unveiling of the Citizen Stack DPI at the UN signifies a critical evolution in our approach to sustainable development. This initiative exemplifies a potent synergy between technology and policy designed to cultivate an inclusive, sustainable future. DPIs are fundamental not only in driving digital transformation but also in laying the groundwork for achieving a substantial majority of the UN SDGs. By impacting 12 of the 17 UN SDGs, Citizen Stack can contribute to the achievement of approximately 70% of these global objectives. As we continue to embrace DPIs, their role in global sustainability efforts becomes more evident, leading not just a digital but also a profound environmental revolution impacting all facets of human and planetary health.

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

DECCAN
Chronicle

10 MAY 2024

Finally, Ambani and Adani enter the election debate

After three phases of polling for the Lok Sabha elections, the discussion on the main stage face-off between the two top leaders — BJP supremo and two-term incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi — has brought to the fore issues of wealth creation, cronyism, economic growth, the “ability” of political influence to make easy, big and undeserved money and political funding to the Centre.

For the first time in over a decade, the BJP has not kept the electoral narrative confined to traditional issues — like the Ram temple built in Ayodhya, or the abrogation of Article 370, or the removal of triple talaq, or its future plans centred around the One Nation, One Election, or even the Uniform Civil Code. Instead it has spoken up on economic issues, often attacking the Congress manifesto over populist socialism of redistribution of wealth and a potential inheritance tax, among others.

This steering away of the election narrative away from the traditional strengths of the BJP, often seen by many as ways to “communalise” the elections, is not totally deliberate or a choice of the ruling saffron party as much as a natural twist, and the Congress, perhaps without so much of either a plan or much agency, finds its election ideas at the centre of the poll fight. Among them is the issue of the duo of Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

Of course, there is a parallel track on that — with references replete with dehumanising analogies of a “set of people” who have too many children, or illegal immigrants, or attempts to snatch the “*mangalsutras*” of Hindu women, or stoking fears of one alliance keen to impose the Sharia law in India, or being supported by Pakistan, among others — but somehow, there is a clear lack of traction to such issues.

Hence, the organic shift to issues more along the lines of money.

Historically, Indians have loved the idea of a double-name team to represent a broader vision, from Bollywood scriptwriters and music composer teams to a symbolic phrase to represent infinite wealth — and interestingly, while it was “Tata-Birla” for decades, in the New Age India, especially in the last decade or more, it is Ambani-Adani, who together as an alliterative phrase represent not just extraordinary wealth or rise in success but also proximity to supreme political power.

Rahul Gandhi has used the fact that, like Prime Minister Modi and home minister Amit Shah, the two most powerful icons of India, the two wealthiest icons of India, Mukesh Ambani of Reliance and Gautam Adani of the Adani Group, also hail from Gujarat, to constantly create an image of some kind of nexus or cosy comfort. But Mr Modi has refused to even acknowledge the two businessmen so far.

In his dramatic style, Mr Modi chose to hit back to demonstrate that he has no reason to play this line of attack by Mr Gandhi on the backfoot, and instead, openly asked the people of India why the Congress had gone silent on the Ambani-Adani issue, further insinuating if they had funded the Grand Old Party with black money, stuffing “tempo vans” of cash. Mr Gandhi hit back, challenging Mr Modi to initiate a probe by the CBI or the Enforcement Directorate.

The nation is clearly glued to the discussion, and we can only wait to see its impact on the elections and their final outcome.

IPL: An unsportsman-like rant

IPL team owner Sanjiv Goenka’s rant against K.L. Rahul in the glare of floodlights and TV cameras was most unbecoming of a sports team owner. The dressing down the owner gave his star cricketer was not in keeping with the spirit of sport, particularly an unpredictable game of great uncertainties like cricket.

Champion teams are sometimes mowed down in a complex team sport in which individuals have huge space to shine though it wasn’t Kannur Lokesh Rahul’s day as he batted slowly and then saw his bowlers being blasted to smithereens as Hyderabad Sunrisers bulldozed the Lucknow Super Giants in less than half the 20 overs to climb to third in the IPL table.

There is no denying that generous sports team owners open their purse to pay the players even if the cash-rich IPL is more of an entertainment business that has brought industrialist and showbiz personality owners into the limelight even as it promises to be a rewarding experience for owners as well as players.

The cricketers are professionals who try to live up to their reputation and rating in every match they play in, particularly in a high-profile tournament like the IPL that is all the rage in India and is the world’s highest paying T20 cricket league.

It was the public way in which the owner berated his captain, and presumably his team, for performing miserably that rankled. But then in this game of fluctuating fortunes the chances of having a bad day while the opponents have a good one are quite common.

In IPL history, the owner of Lucknow Super Giants who had once owned the Rising Pune Supergiants, had showed shocking lack of cricketing judgment in sacking Mahendra Singh Dhoni as captain when he was already limited-overs cricket and IPL’s winningest skipper ever, and replacing him with the Australian Steve Smith.

It is not known what the LSG owner told his captain though the body language was a giveaway. To Rahul’s credit, he took the criticism in a stoic style of the quality sportsman that he is.

What the episode brought out was owners, regardless of how rich and powerful they are, they must still bow to the vicissitudes in the game of cricket, which can often be a humbling experience.

As the famous saying about the game as a metaphor for fair play goes, “it’s not cricket”, certainly not when owners pounce on a cricket captain as if he were an employee on the shop floor.

Subhani



China’s Xi: Divide or intimidate & conquer



K.C. Singh

China’s President Xi Jinping has at last begun his structured foreign travel after his stay-at-home posture during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This was partly due to a delayed Covid-19 surge in China as the movement restrictions were lifted, when the rest of the world had crossed peak infections. This week he began a six-day swirl through Europe, starting with France, and then mostly China-friendly nations such as Hungary. Serbia was included as it marked 25 years since the Nato forces mistakenly bombed the Chinese diplomatic premises in Belgrade in the late 1990s.

This happens when the Chinese economic slowdown is now broadly accepted. The International Monetary Fund in its February 2024 report observed that economic growth this year shall be 4.6 per cent, down from 5.2 per cent the previous year. Even more worrisome for China should be their assessment of its drop to 3.4 per cent by 2028. This appears to be due to a combined effect of demographic shrinkage, Western sanctions on cutting-edge technology and restricted Western market access. President Xi’s distrust of the private sector and entrepreneurship probably makes a turnaround difficult.

One obvious result is that talk about China catching up with the United States or even overtaking it has melted. In fact, it is generally accepted that even though the American economy is slowing, but at a lesser pace than China’s, their gap is, if anything, widening. Analysts are speculating that when a rising power, desperate to catch up with the dominant hegemon, starts stalling, one of two things can happen. Its leadership may alter its aggressive behaviour towards the world, especially the neighbours, opting instead for diplomacy. Alternatively, it may get desperate and decide to use force to achieve its territorial objectives, realising its power-differential vis a vis its rivals will diminish over time. Obviously, no sudden change in Chinese strategic posture can be expected. China would not like its rivals to benefit from its perceived weakness. Its recent actions need to be viewed from this perspective. Before setting forth for Europe, China unveiled its third aircraft-carrier, the Fujian. A 80,000-tonne vessel with electromagnetic catapults, on a rough calculation, would enable it to carry 70-80 aircraft. China is planning to have six such vessels by 2035. This still leaves the combined naval power of the US and Japan way ahead. The US Navy, with carriers of the Nimitz and Ford class, has more experience, better aircraft and greater firepower. The Japanese, with considerable experience of using aircraft-carriers since the Second World War, have opted for flat-top vessels with the possibility of being used as carriers for vertical take-off and landing F-35s. Interestingly, the maiden voyage of the Fujian coincided with the May 8 Balikpapan joint military exercise of the US and the Philippines. The Chinese have been muscling the Filipinos out of the Scarborough Shoal naval area. The Philippines had in 2016 got an award, under the UN Convention on the Laws of the Seas (UNCLOS), from the Permanent Court of Arbitration declaring the Chinese 9-dash line as illegal. China has nevertheless continued to thwart attempts by the Philippines to assert its sovereignty in that zone. Even the territorial dispute between India and China has not seen China relenting yet. In fact, China has been increasing settlements all along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC). China also provocatively issued maps with habitations in India’s Arunachal Pradesh shown with Chinese names. Meanwhile, military-level talks have repeatedly faced a stalemate with China unwilling to withdraw forces from the Depsang Plains and Demchok. It is likely that China did not wish to hand the Narendra Modi government a “win” on the eve of crucial Lok Sabha elections. This assumption aligns with China now naming its next ambassador to India, after a gap of a year and a half. At the very least, China may be preparing to use the diplomatic route for testing the next Indian government’s willingness to engage. The problem is that China wants access to the Indian market to continue, if not increase, while it stalls on territorial issues. India has repeatedly asserted that normalcy requires the post-Galwan territorial intrusions to be addressed.

China correctly surmises that a strategically divided and confused Europe is easy prey for its overtures. But China would have to alter its subsidies-based exports to satisfy Europe.

President Xi’s European sojourn is similarly planned to test and exploit the fissures, on the approach to China, within the European Union and between them and the United States. The visit comes after the China visit by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which seemed to display European differences. Further demonstrating that dissension has been Mr Scholz’s unwillingness to join French President Emmanuel Macron in a joint meeting with President Xi. There are differences in the approach of France and

Germany to taxing European imports of Chinese electric vehicles. While the Germans fear Chinese countermeasures against their automobile exports to China, the French want to protect their own manufacturers of smaller cars.

The Sino-European theatre is being enacted against the background of two other events. One is the November presidential election in the United States. The growing possibility of the re-election of Donald Trump sends shudders down the European spine. It can mean the degrading of Nato, trade disputes with the US and Russia’s upper hand in ending the war in Ukraine on its own terms. The other factor is the commencement this week of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s next six-year term, with a more united Russia behind him.

Regarding both these developments, China is a factor. While it has not transferred weapons to Russia, for its Ukraine campaign, it has kept Russia financially afloat by buying its oil and gas. It has also made available chips or other high-tech components crucial for the Russian armaments industry. China correctly surmises that a strategically divided and confused Europe is easy prey for its overtures. But China would have to alter its subsidies-based exports to satisfy Europe. It would also have to restore confidence regarding Chinese activities in illegally transferring high technology from European sources.

While these larger forces are shadow boxing, India has been entrapped in an unnecessarily prolonged national election. A gap of almost a week between seven phases, many in the same state, cannot be justified on the grounds of security and expediency alone. No nation, and particularly one that aspires for Great Power status, can sign off from the world for well over a month while its leadership takes the low road to opportunistic and divisive electioneering.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

MAINTAIN ALL MEMORIALS

It is shocking to learn that the memorial for the great leader Kamaraj in Guindy, Chennai is in a state of neglect, surrounded by shrubs, garbage, etc. Both DMK and AIADMK used to allocate sufficient funds to renovate, beautify and maintain their leaders’ memorials built in the Marina beach in an excellent way, which should be appreciated. But they don’t pay such attention to other party leaders’ memorials. All these leaders have rendered selfless dedicated services to the State and the nation and there should not be any discrimination. As a mark of respect to them, the government owes the moral responsibility to renovate and maintain the memorials of Kamaraj and other leaders and keep them tidy.

M. Govindaraj
Gudiatham

WHY NOT EWS QUOTA FOR CANDIDATES?

The financial status of Lok Sabha candidates belonging to major parties shows most of them are crorepatitis. The political establishment favour rich candidates since they can spend money and are not dependent on party coffers. The eventual fallout is that a common citizen is denied the opportunity to fight the election to serve the people. Why can’t the election commission reserve some seats from economically poor sections apart from SC/ ST/ OBC reservations in assembly and parliamentary elections?

K. S. Sundaram
Coimbatore

Mail your letters to chennaindesks@deccanmail.com



Mahir Ali

The fate of Gaza: Peace of any kind does not seem to suit Netanyahu

Waking up recently to the news that Hamas had accepted a ceasefire proposal came as a pleasant surprise, but it did not last long. It was accompanied by reports of Israel’s long-threatened infiltration into Rafah, a day after it had urged 100,000 ‘civilians’ to evacuate a city in Gaza that has become a refuge for almost 1.5 million Palestinians.

The sector subsequently began to be pounded — presumably with ammunition supplied by the US and UK — under the apparent assumption that any Hamas operatives in the area would not have left among the tens of thousands who evacuated on foot, by vehicles or on donkey carts.

Almost every international ally of the Zionist regime has seemingly tried to talk it out of invading Rafah, yet their weapons keep flowing to Israel. Global history is peppered with instances of hypocrisy, but seldom have they been as egregious or stark as in 2024. In the past, sufficiently serious cautions from Washington have often produced the desired effect by at least temporarily reducing Israeli excesses. Benjamin Netanyahu, however, falls in a different category. Any semblance of a pause in hostilities, let alone a sustainable ceasefire, would spell his doom.

The revived demonstrations in Israeli cities are

by no means dedicated to securing a ceasefire, although some of the protesters support that goal. Their demands on Gaza are somewhat more oblique, but invariably entail the return of the surviving hostages — which would inevitably involve at least a temporary cessation of hostilities. But any kind of peace, however fragile, does not suit Mr Netanyahu. Apart from the indictments for corruption, he presides over a regime that ignored — possibly deliberately — the clear warning signs of a Hamas assault against kibbutzim on the periphery of Gaza, populated to a considerable extent by Jews who do not buy into the narrative of exclusively Jewish nationhood.

Mr Netanyahu and his more vicious allies are almost as contemptuous of conciliatory Jews, Israeli or otherwise, as they are of Palestinians. In their blighted vision, the Jewish students participating in protests in the US, UK or Australia are far more problematic than the goyim who can more easily be dismissed as antisemitic.

The anti-genocide protests have been spreading beyond the US to Europe and even Australia, with the encampments routinely derided by antagonistic politicians pointing out that Jewish students feel intimidated — albeit presumably not as much as children, women and men in Gaza, where the

death toll since October 7 is approaching 35,000.

Later this week, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) is expected to vote on whether to admit Palestine as a full member, yet a probable vote overwhelmingly in favour of the proposition won’t cut ice with the Security Council, where the US veto will prevail, as it has so many times whenever a challenge to Zionism has been considered.

Almost 50 years ago, in November 1974, Yasser Arafat addressed the UNGA, having arrived with his holster and an olive branch, famously declaring: “Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter’s gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand”. In his landmark speech, Arafat decried Zionist acts of “barbarism” and the “temerity” of the “Zionists and colonialists ... to describe the just struggle of our people as terror”.

A couple of decades before the post-Oslo Palestinian Authority he initially presided over became a handmaiden of the Zionist occupation, Arafat pointed out to the UN that “when it became obvious that the Palestinians would not recuperate one inch of Palestine through exclusively political means, our people had no choice but to resort to armed struggle”.

He made no mention of a two-state solution,

which is currently the favoured option among many of those who have contributed over the decades towards diminishing the possibility of such an outcome. Arafat held out a long-term hope for “one democratic state where Christian, Jew and Muslim live in justice, equality and fraternity”.

That remains a dead man’s dream. Neither a one-state nor a two-state outcome is on the cards, and that would not change with Mr Netanyahu’s replacement by a superficially less obnoxious figurehead.

The drift towards Palestinian genocide dates back at least to 1947-48, and the resistance to it has been equally evident since then. The olive branch that Arafat brought to the UN didn’t fall. It was effectively wrested from his hand. All too many olive trees have been chopped down since then, particularly after the Oslo ‘process’, when the trend towards illegal settlements was ramped up, backed by successive US governments.

Replacing the Netanyahu regime with an equally absurd alternative would only mean that, a further 50 years hence, future generations will be marvelling at the impotence of their ancestors.

— By arrangement with Dawn

Rahul’s ‘Royal Magician’ claim on ‘Garibi Hatao’

FROM Nehru to the present government, every political party has been using the poor and the slogan of eradication of poverty. But 75 years down the lane, all have failed to do so. Perhaps, they planned to fail because they wanted a permanent vote bank. So, no one is serious about the eradication of poverty. They only want to throw some crumbs in the name of welfare which includes direct benefit cash transfer and claim they are changing the face of India. Dear leaders how long will you continue to cheat the voters?

‘Garibi Hatao Desh Bachao’ (Remove poverty, save the country) was the theme and slogan of Indira Gandhi’s 1971 election campaign. Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi made the same promise, but poverty still

remains. Now, lo and behold, Rahul Gandhi whom Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls a ‘Shehzada’ and ‘Royal Magician’ has come up with some fantastic ideas and promises. If INDI bloc gets majority on June 4, by August 15 they will start the process of filling 4.3 lakh jobs. Wow, what a speed! But, what he forgot to mention is by when all the jobs will be filled. Does he or his bloc know the financial implications of it? How much money would be required to pay as salaries? Can he assure that to meet the increased expenditure, the dream government will not impose any fresh taxes? Has any scientific exercise been done in this regard?

Another piece of gem that rolled out from Rahul’s brain is that they will remove poverty from the

country in one stroke. His formula is fantastic. He says the INDI government will transfer Rs 1 lakh into the accounts of the poor. Then they will spend that money on buying various goods like pants, shirts, shoes etc. Seeing the increase in spending this money would bring among the poorer sections, industries will start manufacturing more such goods and the children of these weaker sections would get jobs in those companies. He does not talk of need-based skill development. Unless any government focuses on this aspect how can they get jobs whether it is public sector or private sector? He calls it as jump start of economy. He also says ‘Pahli Naukari Pakki’. This is another interesting concept. First, job is guaranteed for one year in

PSU or in private sector and along with it they will transfer Rs 1 lakh. Rahul who does not get tired of talking about Ambani and Adani should know that even when the country was passing through the licence raj in the era of 70s & 80s, Dhirubhai Ambani enjoyed good access to power corridors. For instance, if he was close to Congress leaders, he was equally close to BJP leaders as well. He had smooth business transactions in the regimes of all PMs, except V P Singh. Indira Gandhi saw Dhirubhai Ambani as a symbol of India’s growing business and economic power, and she appreciated his contributions to the country’s development. In the 1970s, Indira Gandhi’s government supported Reliance Industries’ efforts to expand its opera-

tions and become a major player in the Indian economy. Of course, there were times when differences did crop up between Indira Gandhi and Dhirubhai.

But, what really causes concern is why the Congress party always gets into a shell when it comes to controversial remarks made either by its own top leaders or alliance partners. When Sam Pitroda made racist comments on Indians based on their colour and region, Rahul did not even bother to say that they didn’t endorse it. If they had expelled him from the party, and said look we do not tolerate such nonsense, the stock of Congress would have certainly gone up. Seems Congress missed a good opportunity on eve of the fourth phase of polls.

LETTERS

Israel’s intransigent attitude risks wider war

THE anti-Israel protests in US Universities have now spread to many University Campuses across Europe. The opposition to ongoing war on Gaza is gearing up. The war’s continuation with Israel sending tanks to Rafah, is unwarranted as Hamas has shown readiness to talks and negotiation. If Israel is relentless, the situation may escalate to a World War, as military powers on both sides are on watch.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

HOPES of peace in Middle East are dashed with President Joe Biden reaffirming the US unwavering support to coordinate with G7 allies to formulate a united diplomatic response to what it is termed as Iran’s brazen aggression. By far, in the aftermath of lethal attack by Iran’s proxies Houties on Israeli targets, Israel’s defence managed to intercept the incoming threats thereby prevebting significant damage. Amidst the conflicts including the protracted Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, tensions have reached a critical juncture; it is sad that Gaza is sitting on a terrible volcano of anti-Semitism.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

PM Modi’s communal rant shocking

PM Narendra Modis comments that BJP needs 400 seats so that Congress cannot succeed in its plan to put the “Babri lock” on the temple in Ayodhya are nothing but a ditch to polarise the voters on the communal lines. Modi asking people to decide on “vote Jihad” or Ram Rajya is another tactic to divide the two communities. There is no logic in his comments that BJP needs 400 seats so that Congress cannot put the Babri lock. Is it possible for any party to close Ram Mandir? PM should note that Muslims wholeheartedly invited the Supreme Courts judgement regarding Babri Masjid issue. Now, our PM is openly spewing venom at a particular community. The EC is condoning the gross violation of the Model Code of Conduct by the PM.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

Modi’s litany of lies continues

WE could not believe our ears when we heard Prime Minister Narendra Modi telling that Ambani and Adani gave ‘tempo loads of black money’ to the Congress ‘to buy Rahul Gandhi’s silence’. It was a bombshell that nobody thought he would drop and throw us into total bewilderment. It is an irrefutable fact that the Modi government has hailed Ambani and Adani as ‘wealth creators’ and handed many ‘national assets’ to them. Without its support since its assumption of power in 2014, these two businessmen could not have amassed so much wealth. We don’t know what to make of Modi’s intriguing disclosure that Ambani and Adani have cozier up to the Congress, if it is not an addition to his litany of lies.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

A stunning SRH team on a roll

THE exhibition of stunning, sterling and sparkling performance by Sunrisers Hyderabad against Lucknow Super Giants in Uppal stadium on May 9 is rated as highly superlative in Indian Premier League 2024. The target of 165/4 set by LSG was easily chased by SRH without losing a wicket in just 9.4 overs. Maximum utilisation of first six over power play accumulates a big score as proved by SRH. Opens Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma are accredited with all encomiums. Same spirit is expected from SRH in further matches to win the trophy.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

Law must come down on criminals

DR Mohan Kanda in his article ‘When to play and when to Quit’ has described what is comfortable to his thinking. The former Chief Secretary described lots of his experiences in the article. Luckily, some people know how to practise to maintain limitations in many aspects. On the other hand, there are many who enter wrong paths like corruption, crime, cheating, fake information to trap the innocent who cannot resist falling for the vices. Self-restraint is the best prevention and everyone can’t have it. As such, the long arm of law must stretch to save them from criminals.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad

Covishield takers left to their fate

THIS refers to “AstraZeneca withdraws Covid vaccine globally” (9 May). What a sad end of Covishield which has now gone into our body’s immune system. It is the vaccine which was widely used in India and even indirectly PM Modi endorsed the same with his photograph finding a place in our certificate and the only country where the photograph of the head of the state found a place in certificate. After the reports of blood clots started coming in, PM’s photo was quietly removed from the certificate. Now it is for the people who get diagnosed for blood clot to fight a lone battle as everyone has now washed off their hands.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Udupi tops State SSLC results Dakshina Kannada follows close behind

BENGALURU: Udupi district emerges triumphant in the SSLC examination results announced by the Karnataka School Examination and Assessment Board (KSEAB) on Thursday, clinching the coveted first place with an impressive pass percentage of 94%. Dakshina Kannada closely follows suit, securing the second spot in the state rankings with a commendable pass percentage of 92.12%. Conversely, Yadgiri district finds itself at the bottom of the list, with only 50.59% of students managing to pass the board exam.

This year’s results unveil a notable trend as girls outshine boys across the state, reaffirming their academic prowess. A total of 631,204 students have successfully cleared the SSLC exam this year, contributing to an overall pass percentage of 73.40%. Noteworthy is the implementation of stringent measures, including CCTV surveillance during examinations, which resulted in a significant reduction in malpractice incidents by 30%.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

INDIA’S CONTRIVED ‘GROWTH’ STORY

Is GDP a genuine indicator of growth and development?

SATYAPAL MENON

THE oft-hyped GDP-based claims of India being one of the fastest growing economies in the world can at best be described as a red herring to camouflage the existent scenario. India has the potential to become a \$5 trillion economy, but using this metric to present an overall growth narrative is farcical and flawed.

GDP provides an annual cumulative valuation of public consumption, output of goods and services, government spending, private investments and export earnings in the country. While GDP can be a crucial yardstick for providing a comprehensive picture of the status of economy, its positives cannot be a reflection of the realistic development of the country.

GDP is not reflective of access, or lack of it, to even basic essentials for livelihood – forget about luxuries – for a majority of the populace in the country.

India is ranked 134 in Human Development Index (HDI). According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), HDI combines indicators of health, education, and income to provide a broader measure of human well-being. It considers factors such as life expectancy, education attainment, and gross national income per capita.

Both the government and the so-called economists and renowned consulting firms analyse the course of the economy and flaunt growth projections, on the basis of GDP, despite its inherent deficiencies. In fact, there is no rationale in linking GDP growth rate to development. A sham is played out to link

GDP with socio-economic progress. There are many pointers which nail the justification of using GDP criteria – be it nominal or real GDP – to indicate a country’s development. Applying current prices to calculate GDP – sans inflation – is considered more convenient since a long-period comparative evaluation may not ensure the hyperbolic picture of GDP growth.

For instance, India’s GDP has increased by over \$1trillion – Rs 83 lakh crore from \$2 trillion – over Rs 167 lakh crore in 2014 to over \$3 trillion – around Rs 250 lakh crore – in 2024, which is being flaunted as a growth story. But these figures have been arrived at without comparing the prevalent prices in 2014 and 2024. The Real GDP valuation for 2023-24 at Constant (2011-12) Prices is estimated to be Rs. 172.90 lakh crore

Logically, a comparative valuation of the products’ and services’ prices in 2014 and over the decade till date in 2024 would have indicated a much lower GDP growth percentage. For instance, a product which was priced at Rs.100 in 2023 would be costing around Rs.150 in 2024. Similarly the cost of manufacturing a product in 2023 could be five times higher than that in 2024. GDP will increase by Rs.50 for the first mentioned product, and by ten times in the second product in 2024 compared to 2023.

Moreover, one important metric that is not factored in – deliberately or out of ignorance is the fact that even in the case production becoming stagnant or coming to a halt due to increase in manufacturing costs or other reasons – the GDP continues to remain dynamic



A sham is played out to link GDP with socio-economic progress. There are many pointers which nail the justification of using GDP criteria – be it nominal or real GDP – to indicate a country’s development. Applying current prices to calculate GDP – sans inflation – is considered more convenient since a long-period comparative evaluation may not ensure the hyperbolic picture of GDP growth

indicate an upward trend despite the stagnation in output or the product remaining unsold and being rolled over to the next year. The reason for this paradox is not hard to fathom. For example, the price of these products may increase due to market demand or other factors like increased taxes, inflation, etc.

Accordingly, it is inevitable, that GDP seldom reflect a downward trend, since, price differentials and inflationary factors are avoided in the calculations.

There are many loopholes in the GDP evaluation process. Most conspicuous among the flaws is its focus on macroeconomic evaluation. Second major deficiency is its lack of a proper evaluation of the demand-supply relationship. The GDP does not provide answers to the demand-supply gap. Does the GDP include unsold products which are not in demand, and, evaluate them as an output? Or does it go by the price tag of the product and include them in

the calculations?

A case in point case in its favor is that high GDP can churn out higher revenues for the government in the form of taxes which in turn means more money in the country’s coffers for investment on development programmes. GDP can perhaps reflect the status of the various sectors of economy and facilitate the planning process accordingly. But apart from these positives, it is ridiculous to showcase GDP figures as conclusive evidence of growth and performance. There are many other factors that economists and policy makers have preferred to ignore or failed to discern, which break the myth about GDP being the only parameter to gauge a country’s progress. This point of view is substantiated by the fact that the GDP does not reflect an equitable and inclusive portrayal of consumption.

For instance consider this glaring aberration in India’s GDP calculations. An estimated 20% – i.e., around 25

crore of India’s population is below the poverty line (BPL) with each person surviving on Rs.35 per day which works out to Rs. 13,020 per year. Going by these calculations the cumulative total spend by the entire BPL population could be an estimated Rs.1,84,331 crore which is around 2% of the total GDP of over Rs.240 lakh crore. In terms of Purchasing Power Parity PPP, the individual income of those below the poverty line, i.e. Rs. 13,020 is around 5.7% of the India’s per capita GDP of Rs. 2,27,760.

Does this consumption depict equity, inclusivity, and decent standard of living, does it? The objective of presenting a hunky dory picture can be achieved by the addition of spends on luxuries by the highest and higher income groups which can be much more than the expenditures on essentials by the lower and middle income groups. But such facts get obfuscated in the miasma of combinations and permutations that go into the compilation of a convoluted depiction of the economy. If the objective of the government is to project higher standards of living and improvement in the quality of life, the substantial GDP often contrived by it lacks substance to indicate any such development. How does this imply growth and performance? Can these parameters be applied for assessment of India’s overall economic status?

For example, If a large chunk of the population comprising lower and middle income groups can afford to spend 4 lakh crore of the private consumption and a small segment accounts for Rs. 3 lakh crore, then the total sum of all these spends

in all probability could indicate higher standard of living and would jack up the per capita GDP. Whether such a permutation can reflect economic growth and performance is debatable. Apart from consumption, the other component of the GDP i.e., government spending is also considered as providing the impetus for progress. According to the government, spending is directly proportional to growth. This could probably be the case, if the priorities and allocations match the requirements. If GDP is an indicator for growth, how is it that many social sectors, comprising education, health, food security, and, poverty sectors are in a debilitated state? Can the economists and policy makers explain the country’s ranking of 103 and ‘serious hunger’ categorization of India. India has the dubious distinction of being high on the multi-dimensional poverty index. Can the GDP figures explain the absolutely neglected state of education in the country? Is there an explanation for industrial performance indices plummeting to abysmal depths? Is GDP an answer and solution to laggard exports and much required import substitution?

If the answer is in the government spending on these sectors as contained in the GDP, then the actual picture reflects that these allocations have failed to trigger both economic and HDI growth factor. It is high time India’s politicians, economists and policy makers stop harping on the GDP and fabricating illusions of grandeur of growth.

(THE WRITER IS SENIOR PRINT, ELECTRONIC AND DIGITAL MEDIA JOURNALIST)

Biden’s threat to deny bombs to Israel

“Now Israel has a green light to destroy Rafah in slow motion,” says one critic

BRETT WILKINS

WHILE some Palestine defenders on Wednesday welcomed US President Joe Biden’s threat to withhold bombs and artillery shells from Israel if it launches a major invasion of Rafah, critics noted that an invasion is already underway and accused the American leader of walking back a previous “red line” warning against an Israeli assault on the southern Gaza city.

Biden said for the first time that he’ll stop sending bombs, artillery shells, and other arms to Israel if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu orders a major invasion of Rafah, where more than a million Palestinians forcibly displaced from other parts of the embattled Gaza Strip are sheltering alongside around 280,000 local residents.

Referring to Israel’s use of US-supplied 2,000-pound bombs —which can destroy an entire city block

and have been used in some of the war’s worst atrocities — Biden told CNN’s Erin Burnett that, “civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs and other ways in which they go after population centers.”

“If they go into Rafah, I’m not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities,” Biden said on Wednesday. Israeli forces have already gone into Rafah, and it was reported on Tuesday that Biden was taking the unusual step of delaying shipments of two types of Boeing-made bombs to Israel to send a message to the country’s far-right government. It was, however, a mixed message, as the President also earlier in the day reaffirmed his support for Israel’s war on Gaza, which the International Court of Justice said is “plausibly” genocidal in a preliminary ruling in January. Critics noted the shifting



The statement shows that Biden can no longer ignore the will of the majority of Americans who want a permanent cease-fire, release of all hostages, and an end to US complicity in Israeli war crimes. He said he’ll stop sending bombs, artillery shells, and other arms to Israel if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu orders a major invasion of Rafah, where more than a million Palestinians forcibly displaced from other parts of the embattled Gaza Strip are sheltering alongside around 280,000 local residents

and subjective language used by Biden—who previously said that any Israeli invasion of Rafah would constitute a “red line” resulting in unspecified consequences.

“He said invading Rafah was a red line. Israel invaded Rafah anyway, bombing buildings, burning and crushing children to death,” political analyst Omar Badar said on social media. “Biden is now moving the goal post by adding a completely subjective descriptor: ‘Major.’ Now Israel has a green light to destroy Rafah in slow motion.” During the

course of the seven-month Israeli assault on Gaza—which has killed, maimed, or left missing more than 1,24,000 Palestinians — Biden has said Israel has killed “too many civilians” with its “indiscriminate bombing,” even as he’s pushed for more and more military aid for the key ally.

Wednesday’s interview came on the heels of Biden’s approval of a \$14.3 billion emergency military aid package to Israel, multiple moves to sidestep Congress to fast-track armed assistance, nearly \$4 billion in previously authorized annual military

aid, and diplomatic cover in the form of several United Nations Security Council vetoes. Referring to Israel’s US-funded anti-missile system, Biden continued his supportive rhetoric during Wednesday’s CNN interview, telling Burnett that “we’re going to continue to make sure Israel is secure in terms of Iron Dome and their ability to respond to attacks.” But the president added that Israel’s use of devastating weaponry against civilians is “just wrong,” and that “we’re not going to supply the weapons and artillery shells.”

Some peace groups welcomed Biden’s threat to withhold bombs and artillery shells from Israel, even while urging him to do more to stop his ally’s genocidal onslaught.

“Biden’s statement is as necessary as it is over due,” Jewish Voice for Peace executive director Stefanie Fox said in a statement. “The US already bears responsibility for months of catastrophic devastation: The nearly 40,000 Palestinians that the Israeli military has killed, the two million Palestinians being intentionally brought to the brink of famine, the decimation of all universities and almost every hospital in Gaza.”

“Today’s statement shows that Biden can no longer ignore the will of the majority of Americans who want a permanent cease-fire, release of all hostages, and an end to US complicity in Israeli war crimes,” Fox added.

(<https://www.commondreams.org/>)



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: All great achievements require time.

— MAYA ANGELOU



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EDIT

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Beginning of the end in Haryana

Nemesis is finally catching up with the BJP in Haryana. In 2019, the people had given the party all 10 Lok Sabha seats from the state. It was not that the people were reposing their faith in the then Chief Minister, Manohar Lal Khattar. In the Assembly elections held a few months later, the BJP received a drubbing. Thanks to some back-room manoeuvres that brought Dushyant Chautala's 10-member Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) on board and won over the support of independent MLAs, Khattar managed to form a government, though the verdict was against him. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was instrumental in installing Khattar as chief minister, it would have been a setback if he were dropped for one reason or another. Thanks to his support, Khattar was able to manage the government until a revolt, both within and outside the BJP, threatened the government.

Modi changed the rules of the game when, overnight, Khattar was dropped and in his place Nayab Singh Saini was installed. Such was his vision for the state that Saini drew up an 84-day plan that covered the remaining part of the government's five-year tenure. The Opposition and his detractors saw it as a giveaway of his lack of confidence. Meanwhile, the Opposition Congress was gaining traction in the state. Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda was given a greater say in the management of the Lok Sabha elections, so much so that a perception grew that the BJP would lose a considerable number of seats. The farmers who have been complaining about non-payment of support prices have been distancing themselves from the BJP. Small wonder that the three weathervane Independent MLAs withdrew their support to Saini and aligned themselves with the Congress.

With the JJP also ditching the BJP, the government's days are numbered. Chautala would like the Congress to take the initiative to bring forward a no-confidence motion. There is, however, no guarantee that a majority of the 10 JJP MLAs would not succumb to the pressures from the BJP. Since a new government has to be in place before October-end, there is little point in hastening the government's death, more so as the debate on the no-confidence motion would only give the BJP a chance to tom-tom its "achievements". Also, when the government is bound to fall like a ripe mango, why should anyone strain to bring it down?

Pitroda, friend or foe?

In the theatre of politics, where drama and comedy often intertwine, the role of friends and foes can be a tricky one to navigate. Just ask Sam Pitroda, the one-man think-tank of the Indian National Congress, who seems to have inadvertently enrolled in the School of Foot-in-Mouth Syndrome. Nestled comfortably in the US but with a heart still beating for his motherland, Pitroda's musings on policy matters carry weight, or so they thought until he dropped the inheritance tax bombshell. Suddenly, he became the unwitting poster child for BJP scare tactics – if the Congress comes to power, brace yourselves for wealth exodus, they warned, invoking visions of buffalo snatchers in the night.

But Pitroda's knack for stirring the pot didn't end there. It seems he might have a touch of ocular dysfunction, mistaking Indians for a global United Nations parade. As-samese? Chinese. Gujarati? Arab. South Indian? African. North Indian? White as snow. It's like he's playing a real-life game of 'Guess Who?' with regional stereotypes. His unintentional tour de racism left many scratching their heads – in India, labelling someone by their ethnicity is as welcome as a monsoon without rain. Yet, in Pitroda's kaleidoscope of perception, diversity becomes a game of 'Who's That Pokémon?' where every Indian is a unique blend of international flavours.

One can't help but wonder if Pitroda's verbal acrobatics are deliberate or merely a comedic subplot in the grand theatre of Indian politics. Either way, he's certainly mastered the art of keeping the audience entertained, even if it's at the expense of the grand old party's credibility. As the curtain falls on yet another act of political folly, we can only hope that Pitroda's next role is less slapstick and more statesman-like. That is if the party reinstates him in the Indian Overseas Congress!

FPJ Archives

INDIA 75 YEARS AGO
MAY 10, 1949



STOP THE MAD RACE OF RACIALISM India's Plea Before United Nations

Lake Success, May 9. The Indian complaint against South Africa came up before the Political Committee of the United Nations today when Mr. M. C. Setalvad, the Indian delegate, said that the United Nations should send an investigation commission, if that was necessary, to report on racialism there.

When will women's issues be politically relevant?

Mumbai Naama



✦ Smruti Koppikar

The suburban trains do not disappoint. In the midst of every subject that's heard in animated voices in the women's compartments over the last fortnight, I engaged in enough conversations and saw many scroll to the Prajwal Revanna story to know that this has hit women where it hurts, even in Mumbai. There was horror and shock, there was also derision about powerful dynasties in which children abuse their privilege and bring shame to their families, and there were firm denials when I asked some women if they would vote for such a candidate.

The sex scandal — it is more than that, but the media tag sticks — from Karnataka's Hassan in which Revanna, a 30-something third-generation political dynast, was found in nearly 3,000 video clips allegedly harassing, abusing, sexually assaulting women three times his age has opened a can of issues in this election season far away from his constituency. Hundreds of women, it is believed, across the board from his house help and cooks to even officers in the district have had to 'oblige' the depravities of this entitled young man.

After the tapes were outed, as a political checkmate, many of the women whose identities were unfortunately revealed have had to seek refuge even from their families, reports say.

The grandson of former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda, son of long-time legislator HD Revanna, nephew of two-time chief minister HD Kumaraswamy, the young man is contesting as a Janata Dai (Secu-

lar) candidate the second time. Prajwal's stature was significant enough for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to make a whistle-stop at Hassan to campaign for him. The father has since been arrested while the son's return from Germany is awaited. The Government of India, helpfully, put out a blue corner notice for Prajwal Revanna, not the harsher red corner alert used for fugitives. The Congress government in Karnataka has since set up an investigation team.

Did the BJP know of his depravity and video-filming his women victims? Apparently, yes. Prajwal Revanna's driver stole the video clips and reached them to a BJP leader from Hassan who alerted the party to this brazen misuse of power back in December and warned against the alliance. Was the Congress in Karnataka aware? Its leaders would have to be in the know but chose to keep quiet till it was politically expedient to blow the lid off the sordid story.

In the realms of news reports and video journalism I have seen, the politics of this shameful scandal has occupied centre-stage — not the hundreds of women whose suffering and powerlessness should enrage us all. How they continue to live their lives, what is their mental health status, what kind of support and shelter do they have or need, have families shunned some of them, where will these women go now? These questions have seen less space and attention from the media.

Far away, in Bengal's Sandeshkhali, a similar scandal took an unexpected turn as the women victims of the sex-favours story, which made national news earlier this year, accused the BJP of having orchestrated it all, alleging that they were made to sign blank paper affidavits and so on. The disturbing politicisation of this story between the BJP and

the Trinamool Congress is still unfolding. Elsewhere, during the campaign, the prime minister speaks of 'mangalsutras' of women to which Congress party's Priyanka Gandhi Vadra retorts to remind the nation of her mother's sacrifice of mangalsutra for the country.

In each of these, the propensity to merely use women as props in the election season, as pawns against rival parties or leaders, is disgusting and shameful. Political parties make a hue and cry about the welfare for women, remind voters of the many schemes that were rolled out for their benefit, run

is famous for, among other things, her derisive put-down on rising onion-garlic prices in the Lok Sabha. These two had campaigned vigorously and resolutely against the Dr Manmohan Singh government for 'rising' prices of LPG cylinders as well as sexual crimes including the 'Nirbhaya' rape case. What got their tongues when in power? Other powerful women make this list long but the point is this: women in power have rarely spoken up or supported women's issues.

They had rushed to praise the Prime Minister when the 33% reservation for women in Parliament and Assembly election was

fielded barely 15 women candidates on the state's 48 seats.

This when the number of women voters has seen an increase of 16.3% compared to 12% increase in men voters since 2014. In three constituencies — Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, Raigad, Bhandara-Gondia — women voters outnumber men. The turnouts in the past two general elections saw women equal or outnumber men in several constituencies. The figures for this election are still rolling in.

Yet, women's issues from livelihood and amenities to sexual crimes do not get centre-stage attention from parties or leaders that they deserve. On the rare occasion that they do, women are addressed and spoken of as beneficiaries of government schemes rather than participants in a socioeconomic process. Core issues like timely and adequate pay for Anganwadi workers do not even make it to election campaigns. The duality is explained, at least partly, by the emphasis of political parties on the 'winnability' of candidates and avoidance of 'heavy' issues in campaigns.

It will take years and many elections before core issues of women become politically relevant and significant — and women are not portrayed as victims or beneficiaries.

Amidst this, take a moment to remember Jaishri Naishadh Rajji of the Congress party, a freedom fighter and social worker, who was the first woman to represent the city, winning from Bombay Suburban in the general election of 1951-52. Mumbai has a history it can be proud of but the representation has not necessarily become better.

Smruti Koppikar, senior journalist and urban chronicler, writes extensively on cities, development, gender, and the media. She is the Founder Editor of the award-winning online journal 'Question of Cities'

The propensity to merely use women as props in the election season, as pawns against rival parties or leaders, is disgusting and shameful

down rivals as women-unfriendly and so on. The pattern repeats every election. It is cynical and it is sickening, to say the least. The mud-slinging just does not stop, it is not replaced by serious discussions or debates about women's issues.

Would more women in politics have made it different? This is a difficult question because through the many stories of sexual harassment and violence against women in the last five years, women cabinet ministers in Modi's cabinet hardly spoke up to offer support for the women in distress. Remember their silence during the long protests of women wrestlers against the Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Saran Singh? Or during the farmers' agitation in which women farmers were at the forefront?

These worthy women include Smriti Irani who is, ironically, women and child development minister and Nirmala Sitharaman, finance minister, who

made into law. Such selectivity hurts more than helps. Has the BJP offered as many seats to women candidates? Have other parties done so? Has there been an honest attempt by any party, national or regional, to consciously bring more candidates into the electoral fray, especially party workers and not women from political dynasties? In between elections, politicians seem sensitive to fair representation and articulation of women's issues only to swing back to the tried-and-tested mudslinging tactics during campaigns.

In Mumbai, of the 115-120 candidates in the fray for whom we will vote on May 20, women make barely 10%. The prominent ones are Varsha Gaikwad (Mumbai North Central) and Yamini Jadhav (Mumbai South) representing the key political parties while a few women have filed nominations as independents. Across Maharashtra, the two major alliances Maha Vikas Aghadi and Mahayuti have

dra Modi and Amit Shah? This seems to be the emerging picture as of now.

Senior leaders like Vasundhara Raje, Shivraj Chauhan, Nitin Gadkari have already been sidelined by the Modi and they have by and large restricted themselves to their own strongholds — which doesn't serve the larger interests of the party. So

Will the RSS seek support from the INDIA alliance? Or is the RSS working internally to stop the Modi juggernaut at the 272 mark where Modi will become irrelevant?

cesses of the Modi government — be it the witch-hunt of Opposition leaders or dubious methods of getting nominations withdrawn, examples being Surat, Indore and Khajuraho. On condition of anonymity a BJP leader shared "Ab toh bahut ho gaya hai, Modi ji kuchh zyada hi tez bhag rahe hain" (now it's too much, Modi is racing at breakneck speed). So if BJP cadres have withdrawn from many parts of the country, is the party now left only with leaders Naren-

is BJP trying to isolate Modi and Shah? Well, it could be a matter of time.

As far as the RSS is concerned, after the first phase of the election was over PM Modi made a brief stopover at Nagpur to seek more help from the RSS cadres on the ground, but to no avail. The reason being that the RSS is not an individualistic party and it by no means appreciates the dominance of the Modi cult. It doesn't tolerate an individual growing beyond the

organisation.

The RSS feels dwarfed by the Modi persona. Some RSS leaders who spoke off the record even said, "We thought that the country will be given a slow injection of Hindutva but the speed at which things are being run by Modi will break the social fabric of the country, and we never want that to happen." He even went on to say that RSS cadres feel alienated and sidelined to the extent of feeling shortchanged by the BJP, and hence the RSS will not support Modi and Shah in 2024.

So if this is the state of affairs at the end of the three phases, one can imagine the kind of structural changes the BJP is headed for: Will the RSS seek support from the INDIA alliance? Or is the RSS somehow working internally to stop the Modi juggernaut at the 272 mark where Modi will become irrelevant?

For concrete answers, we have to wait for another four phases to conclude.

Neelu Vyas is a senior television anchor and digital content creator. Twitter: @neeluopines

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Honour for football

Football's popularity is unmatched in non-football playing nations as well. The game is a universal language, so to say, and has nicely flowered over the decades through champion players from diverse backgrounds coming together for a common cause: regale fans with skill and perseverance. No surprise, the lovely game is viewed as a promoter of universal peace despite on-field acrimony. Now, in a huge honour to football, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has proclaimed May 25 as "World Football Day". May 25 marks the 100th anniversary of the first ever football tournament. As aptly described by a diplomat at the UNGA, football is the "number one game played and followed across the globe".

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Pressing matter

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has initiated the "Wrinkles Achche Hain" campaign, urging its network of labs and personnel across

India to embrace un-ironed attire every Monday until May 15. This unorthodox step comes amidst a wider effort to raise awareness about energy conservation and environmental sustainability within the scientific community and is aimed at tackling carbon emissions linked to daily routines. The campaign, which translates to "Wrinkles Are Good", highlights the substantial carbon footprint associated with conventional ironing practices. According to CSIR's circular issued on May 3, ironing clothes can emit significant amounts of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas contributing to climate change.

CK Subramaniam, Navi Mumbai

Marketing gimmick

Like every year, people in large numbers will be flocking to jewellery marts on Akshaya Tritiya under the superstitious impression that buying gold on this auspicious day will bring them unending prosperity. But this is the biggest marketing gimmick ever, and a perfect example of how these jewellery shops woo the customers and take advantage of their sentiments to indoctrinate them into buying the yellow metal on this day. This gold rush is nothing more than a clever scam concocted by corporations to drive big

sales on this day. Let's not, therefore, fall prey to the deceptive selling of these big jewellery merchandisers and earn big bucks from our collective ignorance. As Swami Vivekananda once said: "To believe blindly is to degenerate the human soul. Be an atheist if you want, but do not believe in anything unquestioningly."

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Renaming mania

What's in a name? Good question ('Aurangabad renaming upheld by HC', May 9)! Yes, a rose by any other name will still smell as sweet. So, what's the big deal? Why rename Aurangabad or for that matter, so many other cities, railway stations, flyovers, etc. etc. Why do we indulge in such unnecessary meaningless acts; why direct our time, effort, energies, money into such issues? There are so many other important and urgent issues to attend to. Can we get rid of this renaming mania, please?

Melville X D'Souza, Mumbai

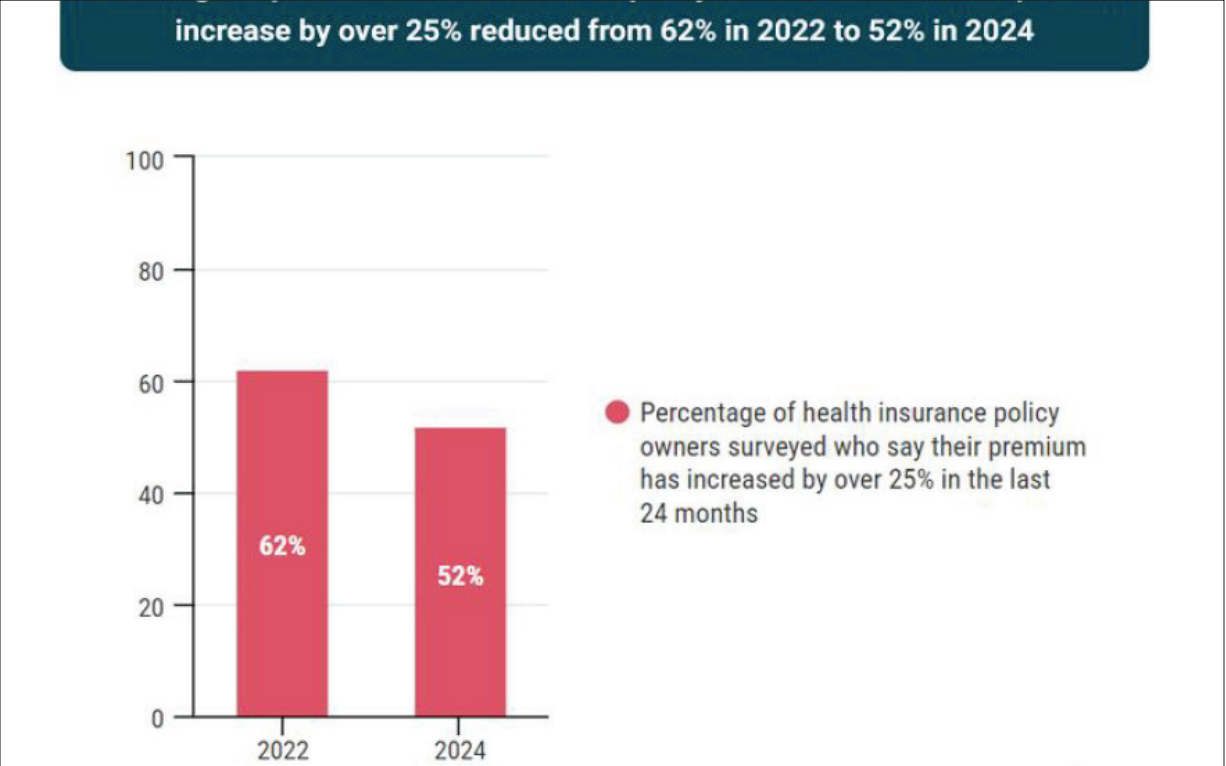
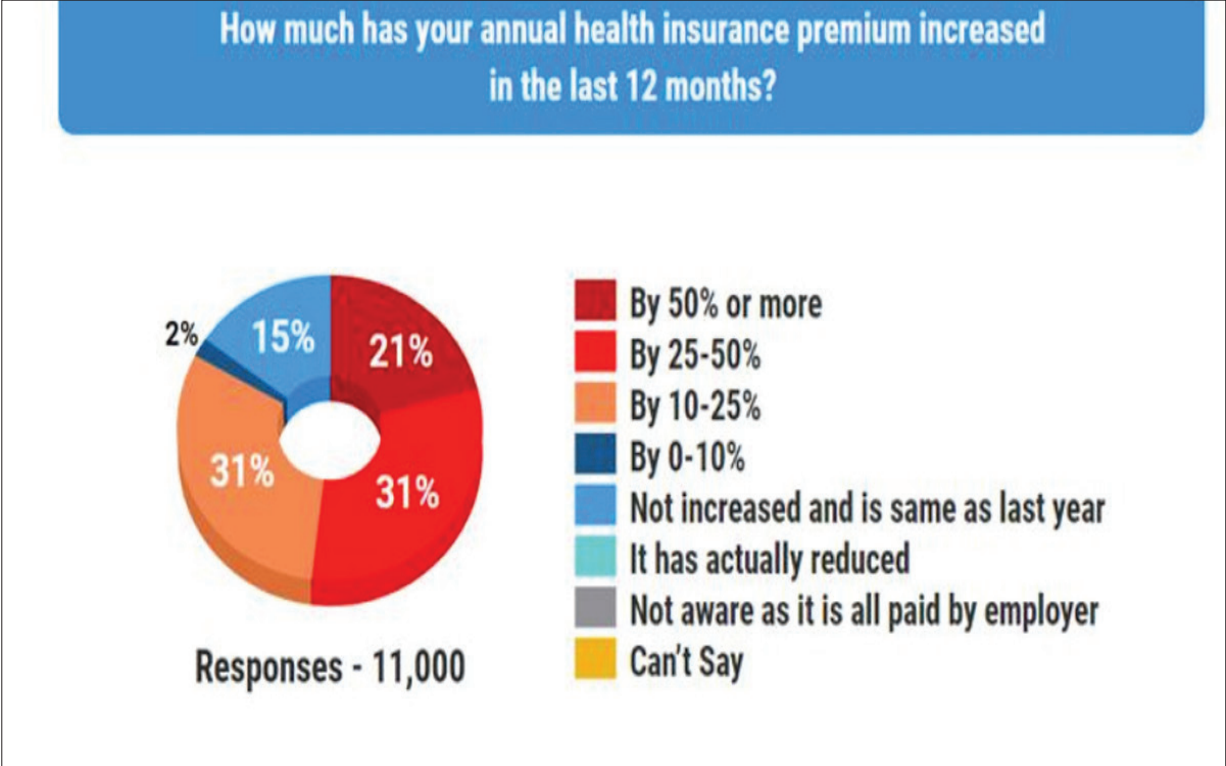
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PERSONAL HEALTH INSURANCE COST IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS: STUDY

52 per cent of policy holders surveyed said their premium has increased by over 25 per cent in the last twelve months, according to LocalCircles.



TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The recent move of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), the insurance regulator, to help senior citizens and those with pre-morbid conditions is expected to make health insurance premiums go up by 10-15%, according to reports quoting experts.

From 1 April 2024, IRDA has updated the definitions of the pre-existing condition and moratorium period (MP) in health insurance policies. While the waiting period for pre-existing disease (PED) coverage in health insurance policies has been reduced from four years to a compulsory three years, the moratorium period has been shortened from 96 to 60 months. Insurance companies enforce a “no look back” policy during this period.

The move comes at a time when consumers are struggling to get their health claims processed. Almost one-third or 1.6 lakh cases out of total 5.5 lakh pending consumer complaints received by the

department of consumer affairs are of the insurance sector, participants at a roundtable on Consumers and the Insurance Sector, organised last year, were told.

In the latest LocalCircles survey, 43% citizens who filed a health insurance claim in the last three years explicitly indicated that they had difficulty in getting it processed. Complaints ranged from outright rejection to exclusions to deduction and most commonly, delays.

The situation is so bad that in many cases, patients spend 8-12 hours on their last day after being ready for discharge to actually get discharged as they are waiting on the insurance claim to be processed. Doctors and hospitals owners are a frustrated lot as well as the patient is occupying a room which can be used to admit and treat another waiting patient.

With hundreds of health insurance policy holders raising concerns about rising health insurance premiums, LocalCircles, a community social media platform through a new survey attempted to un-

- 21% of health insurance policy owners indicated premium increased by 50% or more
- 31% indicated that health insurance premium has risen by 25-50%
- With 43% who filed health insurance claims in the last 3 years saying they had difficulties in processing, many are raising questions about further increase of premiums

derstand how much their premiums have increased by in the last 12 months.

The survey received over 11,000 responses from personal health insurance policyholders located in 324 districts of India. 67% respondents were men while 33% respondents were women. 39% of respondents were from tier 1 locations, 30% were from tier 2 locations while 31% were from tier 3, 4 and rural locations.

The survey asked owners of personal health insurance policies, “How much has your annual health insurance premium increased in the last 12 months?”

Out of the 11,000 health insurance policy owners

who responded, 52% indicated that their premium has increased by over 25% in the last 12 months.

In fact, 21% of health insurance policy owners indicated that the increase in premium was 50% or more in the last 12 months while 31% indicated that it has risen by 25-50%. Of the remaining respondents, 31% indicated an increase of 10-25%; while 2% indicated 0-10% increase in premium rates; 15% denied any increase in premium.

A comparative study with the survey results of 2022 shows that the personal health insurance policy owners who had seen an increase in their premium by over 25% has dipped from 62% in 2022 to 52%



this year. 2022 was an year marked with heavy increases in health insurance premiums as many insurance companies were projecting another wave of COVID in 2022-23 and had increased premiums in anticipation.

In summary, personal health insurance policy holders are deeply concerned with a significant rise in premium in 2024 after already experiencing high double digit increases in the last 2 years. While on the premium front, the insurance companies want a hefty increase each year, the claims processing continues to be inefficient with 1 in 2 who files a health insurance claim struggling.

It is time IRDAI steps in to rationalize the increase in premiums along with processing of claims so health insurance becomes citizen centric.

The study received 11,000 responses from health insurance policy holders located in 324 districts of India. 67% respondents were men while 33% respon-

dents were women. 39% of respondents were from tier 1 locations, 30% were from tier 2 locations while 31% were from tier 3, 4 and rural locations. The survey was conducted via LocalCircles platform, and all participants were validated citizens who had to be registered with LocalCircles to participate in this survey.

INDIA NEWS SURVEY	
SURVEY ON KL RAHUL LSG	DATE: 9 TH MAY 2024
MALE: 94%	MALE: 6%
Q-1 Lucknow Super Giants' Honor Dr. Sanjeev Goenka conducted KL Rahul's class in the middle ground, your opinion	
A- Extremely disrespectful behavior	42%
B- Unprofessional method	26%
C- Right to team honor	15%
D- Can't say	17%
Q-2 What is your opinion about KL Rahul's performance in IPL 2024?	
A- Failed as captain	7%
B- failed as a player	3%
C- worse than expected performance	28%
D- better performance	56%
E- Can't say	6%
Q-3 Has the respect of players fallen due to the auction process in IPL?	
A- yes	70%
B- no	29%
C- Can't say	1%
Q-4 What is the biggest controversy of IPL 2024?	
A- Insult of KL Rahul	17%
B- Captaincy controversy of Mumbai Indians	20%
C- Umpire's wrong decisions	51%
D- Can't say	12%

INDIA NEWS SURVEY	
SURVEY ON 2024 ELECTION	DATE: 9 TH MAY 2024
MALE: 95%	MALE: 5%
Q-1 What is your opinion on Navneet Rana's 15 second statement?	
A- Hate speech	20%
B- Threat to Muslims	16%
C- General statement	42%
D- Can't say	22%
Q-2 Whom do you hold responsible for election campaign on the basis of religion?	
A- Asaduddin Owaisi	34%
B- Madhavi Lata	15%
C- Navneet Rana	20%
D- Can't say	31%
Q-3 Which party is doing the politics of polarization the most in the 2024 elections?	
A- BJP	37%
B- Congress	46%
C- AIMIM	3%
D- Regional parties	8%
E- Can't say	6%
Q-4 What is your opinion on the action of the Election Commission in cases of hate speech?	
A- Commission is strict	41%
B- Delay in action	30%
C- biased attitude	24%
D- Can't say	5%

FASANO SUMMIT: SHOULD G7 BECOME G9, D10 OR G8?

OPINION

RAJESH TALWAR



Towards the middle of next month, the G 7 will be held at Fasano, a scenic Italian town overlooking the Adriatic Sea in the province of Brindisi in the southern part of that nation. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has already sent out an invitation to the person with whom her photograph at the climate change summit held in Dubai in December 2023 had created a social media buzz: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The results of the Parliamentary elections currently underway are not known as yet, but Ms Meloni has probably done her calculations based on feedback from the Italian embassy in New Delhi and

estimated the chances of Mr Modi's return as extremely high. India should welcome the invitation but there is no need for too much hype or excitement over it as there are very many guests at the G 7 table. The G 7 no longer commands the kind of respect it once did. Three decades ago it commanded a major chunk of the world's GDP share. Thereafter economic power has shifted to Asia and its contributions to the world's GDP have fallen drastically, so much so that the BRICS nations have overtaken the G 7 share of global GDP in PPP terms. According to estimates made in January 2024 the BRICS now holds 32 percent of the world's GDP compared to 30 percent held by G 7. As BRICS expands in the foreseeable future this divergence is going to only increase, especially if the G 7 remains static. For some time now, serious reflection has therefore been going on internally within the G 7 as to whether an expansion would lend it greater credibility and clout.

Last year after the G 20 show came to an end in September 2023, two months later, in November 2023 an important article titled 'It's Time for the G 9' was published at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Ronald A Klain, the author, has served as the White House Chief of Staff till the end of 2023. Mr Klain pointed out, inter-alia, that for the past fifty years for the United States the 'core team' has been the other G 7 members namely Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the UK and Japan. He argued in favour of including two other Asian countries namely South Korea and Australia within G 7 thereby converting it to G 9. The advantage of adding Australia, he pointed out, is that it would be adding a country with a GDP as large as South Korea's but additionally vastly increase the G 7's geographical coverage. Another advantage of adding South Korea and Australia is that the group would then no longer remain so Eurocentric since there is currently only Japan, from Asia in the group. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that power and affluence, relatively speaking, has been shifting to Asia. Seeing the growing irrelevance of the G 7, another school of thought has suggested that the G 7 should transform itself into the D



10 by including South Korea, Australia and India. When the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had pushed for a D 10, he was looking at addressing 5 G mobile communications and supply chains. Eric Brattberg and Ben Judah writing for Foreign Policy magazine in an article published in 2020 suggested it be revived with a far bigger agenda. The authors wrote as follows: Looking ahead, the D-10 also offers the United States the perfect platform to implement Biden's foreign-policy agenda should he win—adding working groups on security, corruption, and human rights—and could grow into a grouping that either formally superseded or met in parallel with the G-7. With respect, as on date, there are problems with both the proposals. The problem with a G 9 is that by not including any member of the global south, any impartial external observer looking at such a potential

expansion with a dispassionate eye will see that it is simply more of the same. It is therefore in danger of being perceived as an elitist alliance by the rest of the world. Poor countries have also not forgotten how the West, even with its deep pockets only thought about its own self-interest during the COVID crisis. India, in contrast, was far more generous. Nearly fifteen million doses were gifted free of cost to as many as 98 countries around the world. The idea of the D 10 seems somewhat anomalous given the apparent inability on the part of the US to handle pro-Palestine student protests across the country. Mr Biden's recent remarks about xenophobia in Japan, India, China and Russia were also hastily formulated, inaccurate and certainly not indicative of a team-building approach. Lumping together Japan and India with whom the US has a completely different equation with Russia

Gaming as a pathway to prosperity in Viksit Bharat

OPINION

DR. KIRIT P. SOLANKI



In a world where digital innovation is reshaping economies, India stands at the forefront of a burgeoning gaming revolution. With visionary leadership and strategic initiatives, Prime Minister Modi has catalyzed a seismic shift, inspiring millions to view gaming not just as entertainment but as a pathway to prosperity. His recent engagement with the country's top gamers serves as a testament

to his forward-thinking vision for a new Bharat – the Viksit Bharat, a vision that has garnered international attention. Just recently, Angelos Delivorias, an expert from the European Parliament think tank, highlighted India's sustained economic growth over the past decade, noting that India's GDP surpassing that of China signifies its emergence as a formidable economic powerhouse on the global stage. Recent Statistics Paint a Compelling Picture: The Indian gaming sector is now the fourth-largest segment in the country's vibrant Media & Entertainment landscape. With a projected growth of Rs388 billion at a staggering CAGR of 20.7%, the potential for economic prosperity is undeniable. India accounted for 16% of global game downloads in 2023. Notably, India's contribution accounted for a remarkable 16% of global game downloads in 2023, surpassing renowned counterparts like the US (7.4% share) and Brazil (7.6%). However, what truly sets India apart is its robust ecosystem, talent pool, conducive



startup-friendly policies, and the unwavering support of the government. Under the visionary banner of "Digital India," Prime Minister Modi has championed the cause of gamers, recognizing their potential as ambassadors of India's soft power on the global stage. The Numbers Speak Volumes: Boasting a staggering 568 million gamers, India ranks second only to China in global gaming dominance. This burgeoning community is not merely a statistic but a vibrant tapestry of creators, streamers, and developers, driving innovation and fostering a sense of camaraderie. The Growth Drivers: Central to this growth is the government's commitment to fostering an environment conducive to investment and innovation. With 100% Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) permitted in the gaming sector, India beckons foreign investors to join hands in shaping the future of gaming. The establishment of a task force on Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, and Comics (AVGC) by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting further underscores the government's commitment to harnessing the immense potential of this sector. This includes the creation of a National Centre of Excellence (COE) for the AVGC sector to establish international standards in skilling, education, industry development, and R&D and innovation within the AVGC sector. Moreover, the rise of gaming is not just an economic boon but a societal shift, fostering inclusivity and empowerment. With approximately 40% of gamers being women, India's gaming landscape is breaking barriers and redefining stereotypes. The impact reverberates across sectors, catalyzing ancillary industries such as fintech, cloud services, and cybersecurity. As the gaming industry continues to soar, it presents a golden opportunity to drive FDI inflows, employment, and investments, propelling India towards a digital-first future. Interestingly, from FY20 to FY23, the sector witnessed a remarkable CAGR of 28%, underscoring its potential as a cornerstone of India's digital economy. With consistent investments totalling INR 22,931 crore and the promise of 250,000 job opportunities by 2025, the trajectory is clear: India's gaming industry is not just a trend but a transformative force. With the right policies and regulations in place, there is no doubt that India will come out as the frontrunner. As India stands on the precipice of a digital revolution, the moment calls for seizing the opportunity and harnessing the power of gaming to propel the nation towards a future defined by innovation, inclusivity, and prosperity. With visionary leadership, unwavering support, and a vibrant gaming community, India is poised to leave an indelible mark on the global gaming landscape, shaping the digital narrative for generations to come. Dr. Kirit P. Solanki is an Indian Politician and Member Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha.

End to Israeli-Palestine conflict can be the lynchpin to broader peace in the Middle East

OPINION

PETER DASH



Peace in the Middle East is not only to the humane benefit of Israelis and Palestinians. But the conflict settled, sustainably between these two great people can be the lynchpin to broader peace in the Middle East, preventing oil prices going through the roof and devastating the world economy to enhancing wider regional integration, broadening prosperity. All such peace dividends could mean consumers in India to even small businesses to face better outcomes or protection on energy prices at the gas pump to kitchen gas to food stand energy. As well, without peace but more escalation, there could be collateral damage to farmers on fertilizer costs, produce prices and on many items that have a serious energy/oil cost component as many

do relative to inflation. Just think, Gerald Celente, a well-established forecaster in his Trends Journal predicts that if serious war breaks out in the region, oil prices per barrel could elevate to a whopping 130 US dollars, plus per barrel that would seriously undermine profoundly those on marginal incomes and might lead to an economic depression. On the flip side, Indians may gain better employment both in India and regionally, resulting from the Middle East which produces at least 30 percent of world's exported oil, not escalating to war over or related to Palestine Gaza turmoil. Not to forget, it was bad enough before Iran very recently and without precedent shot off 300 drones and missiles against Israel. So, indeed getting a long term solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, thereby cooling off escalation, by moving to a durable two state solution is relevant to almost every Indian in the end. But to get there certain realism must be looked at with open eyes. The two state solution of the inter-recognition by the Israel state and a new Palestinian one of each other's

indisputable sovereignty, consistent to UN resolutions is generally well adhered to by by the West, as well as the Global South and even by China' and Russia. This is particularly so with the rationale behind it to prevent the recurrence of such mass terrorism igniting conflict in the region as Israel, experienced on October 7 by Hamas pushing for a Palestinian one state by trying to cripple Israel towards unhinging, and eventually swallowing it up. Rather, supporting the two state peaceful approach, instead is the general wisdom by India, its PM and as seen by the forward looking EAM, Dr S. Jaishankar. Consistently, a Quad member leader, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese somewhat recently stated in Australian news, "None of us should abandon hope in the ultimate goal: a two-state solution, with Israelis and Palestinians living securely and prosperously within internationally recognised borders." From another such Quad partner, US President Joe Biden, according to AA news, "Look, I made it clear to the Israelis, to Bibi (Netanyahu, Israel PM) and to his war cabinet that I think the only ultimate answer here is a two-state solution." But after almost 75 years of such a proposal not coming into force, what can be done? Firstly, UN resolutions on the two state solutions of 1948 and 1960s generally represent firm foundations. But more recent considerations are needed, that of

Israel being much more developed, militarily and economically than back then, as well its financial and technologically advanced allies. In these lights, West Jerusalem's views on peace take on more realpolitik gravitas, or least importance, even if some seem unrealistic. Israel's respect is reinforced not only by Delhi's attitude, but by the current generation of most Gulf State leaders who have been recognizing Israel, overall as now a permanent, well-developed presence, close-by that cannot be ignored, seriously boycotted or attacked and certainly not destroyed or taken over. The days of the Yom Kippur war in 1973, when Arab states could think they could make Israel disappear are no more. This is one reason that the Abraham accords were signed by Israel with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco recognizing Israel, as well. And that relations were warming up with Saudi Arabia. But those critically improving developments will only continue with the declaration fully of sustainable Palestinian statehood. In continuing with this realism, let us look at a substantial barrier to peace more closely. Tehran and Hamas want the one state solution to the Palestinian-Israel conflict where Palestinians take over Israel. This goes against the face of hard facts of "fortress" well-off Israel, and the kind of inclusive thinking the Narendra Modi government is leading globally. It could

be well argued that this anti-Jewish/anti-Israel approach by Hamas has represented lost time for making peace and more prosperity for Palestinians and the whole region. Hamas, Tehran and other key players, therefore will have to abandon such a one state approach. But that means Iran may need to be provided more incentives rather than the West does of mostly applying bigger and bigger sticks, like brutal sanctions over carrots. At least to encourage Iran to make it less interesting for its regional proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah to be stone wall resistant and even violent and chaotic to the two state idea - as well, as Iran, itself with its direct conflagration generating attacks on Israel. But on the positive side, at least a Palestinian Authority on the West Bank was established that did not try to threaten Israel. But that authority must be given the power and credibility reinforced by the US-led West to be more independent, competent and backed up by sizeable resources, including a well-trained defence force to deal with internal security problems eventually including on managing Gaza. Hamas relatively de-fanged of its military arm and proven lack of wisdom in blatantly publicly espousing of the demise of Israel might be now more realistic - or at least, less potentially damaging to real peace. So should Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu be more realistic

about the idea of completely wiping out Hamas as an organization and not even letting its non-military civilian parts like medical and health care to be under (or part) of a Palestinian authority? But the issue of Israel settlers on the West Bank remains a real major hurdle to peace, most of whom are zealously adhering to the Greater Israel, one state idea of even further grossly marginalizing Palestinians. Either some special zones for their protection and partial autonomy are needed to be looked at to ensure their protection or considerable compensation provided for their transplantation to Israel - or back, into the United States from which many have come? Bulldozing settlements away will not work but create a new civil war in Israel to add to the region's misery? The good news for Indians as a consolation is if the situation in the Middle East much worsens, it is that the Modi leadership of greatly reducing poverty in the country and managing the nation's fiscal and monetary resources effectively will provide a cushion and proper defences against any overflowing chaos from West Asia. But a two state solution based also in the realism of today is the best solution for Indians, too. Peter Dash writes extensively on geopolitics and has lived in the Middle East. He studied the region at the graduate level at Harvard where he was a researcher.

RICH LEGACY OF GANDHINAGAR

Established in 1967, this prestigious parliamentary seat has witnessed the rise and fall of political titans, shaping the course of the state's and the nation's history.

VISHU MANAV/VIJAYANT
SHANKAR
NEW DELHI

The Gandhinagar Lok Sabha constituency, nestled in the heart of Gujarat, is a testament to India's rich democratic heritage. Established in 1967, this prestigious parliamentary seat has witnessed the rise and fall of political titans, shaping the course of the state's and the nation's history. As the nation gears up for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Gandhinagar finds itself at the epicenter of political discourse, drawing attention to its diverse electorate and the fierce battles that have defined its legacy. This is a constituency comprising 7 assembly segments Gandhinagar North, Kalol, Sanand, Ghatlodia, Vejalpur, Naranpura, and Sabarmati. It's an urban-dominated constituency with 79% urban electorate and 21% rural electorate. The Gandhinagar Lok Sabha constituency boasts a diverse voter base, encompassing urban professionals, government employees, and the rural population. Beyond its political significance, the city is renowned for its cultural festivals, verdant spaces, and architectural marvels like the Akshardham temple.

FROM CONGRESS TO BJP'S CITADEL

In its early years, the Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat was a stronghold of the Indian National Congress (INC). Somchandbhai Solanki, the inaugural Member of Parliament (MP) from this constituency, served as a beacon of Congress' influence from 1967 to 1977. However, the political landscape shifted in 1977 when a non-congress MP Purushottam Ganesh Mavalankar was elected on the ticket of the Janta Party. Again, in 1980, Amrit Mohanal Patel from Congress and GI Patel from Congress in 1984 succeeded in winning the seat but this was the last time Congress attained this seat. After that, the seat became the citadel of the BJP in 1989 when Shankersinh Vaghela, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), emerged victorious, marking the beginning of a new era. Since that pivotal moment, the BJP has maintained an unwavering grip on the Gandhinagar constituency, winning ten consecutive elections from 1989 to 2019. This unbroken streak is a testament to the party's deep-rooted connection with the electorate and its ability to resonate with the aspirations of the diverse populace. In 1996, Vajpayee contested from both Gandhinagar and Lucknow. After winning



The Gandhinagar Lok Sabha constituency boasts a diverse voter base, encompassing urban professionals, government employees, and the rural population. Beyond its political significance, the city is renowned for its cultural festivals, verdant spaces, and architectural marvels like the Akshardham temple.

from both seats, Vajpayee chose to retain the Lucknow seat. Following this, in the by-election held for the Gandhinagar seat, the Congress fielded Bollywood superstar Rajesh Khanna against BJP's Vijay Patel but lost. In 1998, the Congress fielded P.K. Datta, a former Director General of Police from Gujarat, against Advani. In 1999, the Congress fielded Sheshan against Advani, who was serving as the Chief Election Commissioner and was known for his tough stance. Sheshan lost but put up a strong fight. Major Winners

The Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat has been graced by some of India's most influential political figures, leaving an indelible mark on the nation's history. Lal Krishna Advani, a stalwart of the BJP, won the constituency six times, from 1991 to 2014, barring 1996, when the late Atal Bihari Vajpayee, another BJP luminary and former Prime Minister, contested and emerged victorious.

Advani's six-term tenure solidifies Gandhinagar's significance in the BJP's political narrative, while Vajpayee's victory further underscores the seat's importance. Additionally, the constituency has been represented by notable figures like Shankersinh Vaghela, who later became the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and Amit Shah, the current Union Home Minister and a formidable force in Indian politics. Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, who represents the Ghatlodia Assembly seg-

ment within Gandhinagar, was among the campaigners for Shah.

Diverse Electorate: A Reflection of India's Plurality Gandhinagar's electorate is a microcosm of India's rich cultural tapestry, comprising individuals from various religious, caste, and socio-economic backgrounds. According to the 2019 data, the constituency boasts a total of 19,45,772 voters, with a staggering 86% residing in

per 2019)

This diversity in the electorate presents a unique challenge for political parties, requiring them to craft inclusive and nuanced strategies that resonate with the aspirations of various segments of the population.

Congress' Fading Foothold Despite its early dominance in Gandhinagar, the Congress party has struggled to regain its foothold in recent times. In 2014, LK Advani's

tory with 69.58% of the vote share. He won by a huge margin of over 5.5 lakh votes.

This setback for the Congress highlights the party's waning influence in a once-stronghold, as the BJP's grip on the constituency has only strengthened over the years. The BJP's ability to connect with the diverse electorate, coupled with its development-focused agenda and the charisma of its leaders, has contributed to its sustained dominance in Gandhinagar.

EMERGING CHALLENGERS

The Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat holds immense importance for the BJP, serving as a symbolic bastion of its political might in Gujarat. The party's unbroken winning streak since 1989 has solidified its dominance in



urban areas and 14% in rural regions.

The religious composition of the constituency is Hindu dominant, with Hindus constituting 92.86% of the population, followed by Muslims (4.1%), Jains (2.21%), Christians (0.58%), Sikhs (0.19%), and Buddhists (0.06%). Additionally, Gandhinagar is home to a significant Scheduled Caste (SC) population of 8.3% and a Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of 1.4%. (As

victory was resounding, with a total of 773,539 votes in his favor. His Indian National Congress (INC) counterpart, Kirithbai Ishvarbhai Patel, trailed significantly behind, underscoring the BJP's dominance in the constituency. Fast forward to 2019, in the Lok Sabha elections, the party's candidate, Chatur Singh Javanji Chavda, garnered only 26.6% of the votes, while Amit Shah secured a resounding vic-

the state, and the constituency has become a source of pride for the BJP's cadres.

Moreover, the seat's diverse voter base, comprising both urban and rural populations, presents an opportunity for the party to showcase its inclusive agenda and broad appeal.

By retaining Gandhinagar, the BJP not only reinforces its commitment to the people of Gujarat but also sends a strong message about its unwavering political prowess. However, the BJP's dominance is not without challenges.

The Congress, buoyed by its historical presence in the state, may seize the opportunity to reclaim its lost ground by fielding a strong candidate with deep local roots. Additionally, the entry of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) into Gujarat's political arena could potentially disrupt the traditional power dynamics, adding an intriguing dimension to the electoral contest.

However, Amit Shah is more popular as compared to his predecessor. As the Home Minister, he is engaged in several duties, but

LIST OF MEMBER OF PARLIAMENTS FROM GANDHINAGAR

- Lal Krishna Advani from BJP won in 2009, 2004, 1999, and 1998.
- Vijaybhai Patel from BJP won in a by-election in 1996.
- Atal Bihari Vajpayee from BJP won in 1996.
- Lal Krishna Advani from BJP won in 1991.
- Shankersinh Vaghela from BJP won in 1989.
- GI Patel from Congress won in 1984.
- Amrit Mohanal Patel from Congress won in 1980.
- Purushottam Ganesh Mavalankar from Janta Party won in 1977.



even after that, he manages to attend the event every month. Women from his family visit the constituency frequently to know the conditions and the problems of the residents.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As the nation gears up for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Gandhinagar constituency will once again take center stage. The BJP, buoyed by its past successes and the incumbent Amit Shah's popularity, is expected to mount a formidable campaign. However, complacency could prove costly, as the Congress and other emerging political forces may seize the opportunity to challenge the BJP's dominance.

This time the Congress fielded its All India Congress Committee (AICC) secretary Sonal Patel who contested in the Gujarat Assembly 2022 election from Naranpura but lost.

For the Congress and the AAP, the road ahead is arduous, but not insurmountable. By presenting a compelling vision for development, addressing the concerns of the diverse electorate, and capitalizing on any potential dissatisfaction or anti-incumbency sentiments, these parties may yet reclaim a foothold in Gandhinagar.

As per data from the Election Commission of India, in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, Gandhinagar had a total of 1,945,772 voters. Among them, 1,004,291 were male, 941,434 were female, and 47 identified as third gender. Additionally,

there were 8,637 postal votes and 623 service voters (584 men and 39 women).

In the previous election of 2014, Gandhinagar had 1,733,972 voters. Of these, 900,744 were male, 833,210 were female, and 18 belonged to the 'others' category.

There were also 8,358 postal votes and 895 service voters (723 men and 172 women).

In the Lok Sabha elections held in Gandhinagar, 14,214 individuals opted for the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option on their ballots in 2019, constituting 1.11% of the total voters. Similarly, in 2014, 12,777 voters, accounting for 1.12% of the total, chose the NOTA option in the same constituency.

GANDHINAGAR VOTER TURNOUT

During the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, 12,84,090 valid votes were cast, marking a turnout of 65.99%. In comparison, the 2014 elections saw 11,35,495 valid votes, with a turnout of 65.49% in this constituency."

As the nation eagerly awaits the results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the high-stakes political battleground of Gandhinagar, a fierce contest has unfolded between the Congress party's spirited challenge and the formidable incumbent, Amit Shah of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). With voting concluded on May 7th, the nation now finds itself in a state of bated breath, anxiously awaiting the results set to be announced on June 4th.

Political pundits and analysts have painted a daunting picture for the Congress,

suggesting that toppling Shah, the current Union Home Minister, from his stronghold in Gandhinagar will be an uphill battle. Shah's towering reputation, coupled with the BJP's deep-rooted connection with the constituency's diverse electorate, has solidified his position as the frontrunner.

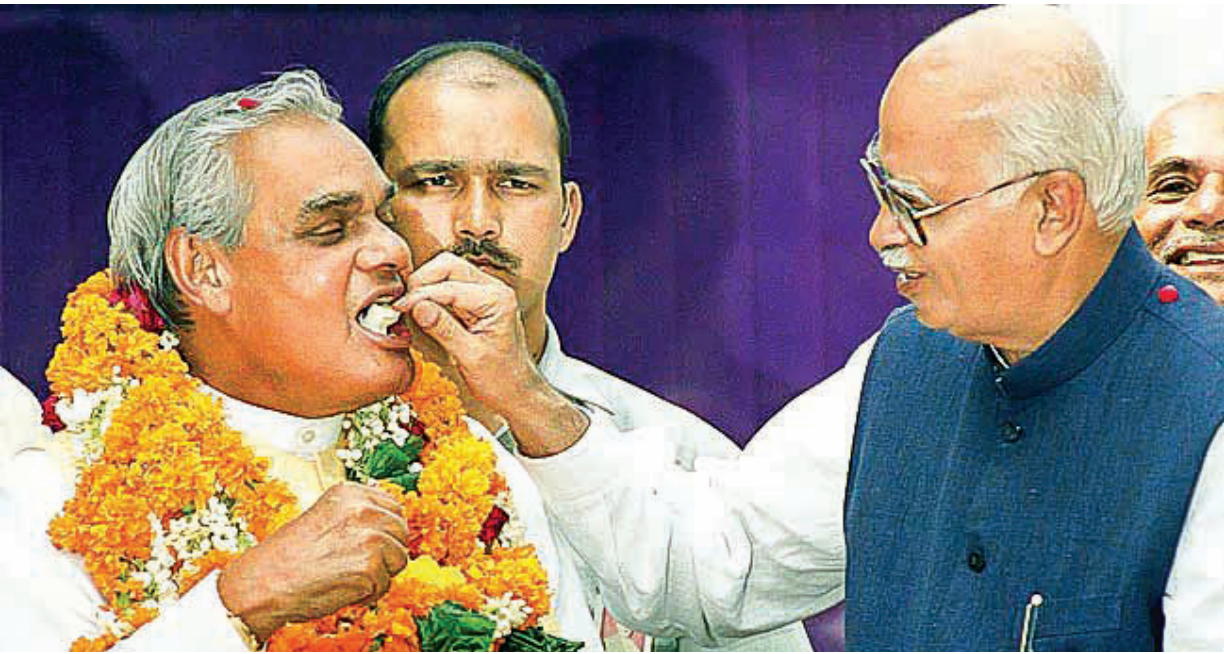
However, the Congress party has left no stone unturned in its pursuit to reclaim lost ground, mounting a spirited campaign that has resonated with sections of the populace.

As the clock ticks down to the announcement of results, the air is thick with anticipation and speculation, with both parties leaving no room for complacency.

Regardless of the eventual outcome, the Gandhinagar contest has once again underscored the vibrancy of India's democratic fabric, where no seat is taken for granted, and every vote carries the weight of a nation's aspirations.

It is a testament to the enduring spirit of political discourse, where ideologies clash, strategies are debated, and the will of the people reigns supreme.

In the days leading up to the results, both parties will undoubtedly be on tenterhooks, with their fortunes hanging in the balance. Yet, in the grand tapestry of India's democracy, the Gandhinagar constituency has etched its name as a crucible of political transformation, where the winds of change can shift at any moment, and where the future of the nation is shaped, one vote at a time.



SUPREME COURT: CONSOLIDATION OFFICER CANNOT TAKE AWAY OWNERSHIP OF TENURE HOLDER ABD GRANT IT TO ANOTHER | UP CONSOLIDATION OF HOLDINGS ACT

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Prashant Singh And Ors. ETC. Versus Meena And Ors. Etc. observed concerning the U.P. Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1953 wherein the court held that the Consolidation Officer is not vested with the power to take away the vested title of a tenure holder and grant ownership to some other person in the property.

The bench comprising of Justice Surya Kant and Justice P.S. Narasimha in the case emphasized the duty of the Consolidation Officer as it is stated under the 1953 Act stating that the duty of a Consolidation Officer under Section 49 of the 1953 Act is to prevent fragmentation and consolidate the

different parcels of land of a tenure holder and not to take away the vested title of a tenure holder as no such power is being conferred upon a Consolidation Officer to take away the vested title of a tenure holder.

The Judgement authored by Justice Surya Kant stated that the power as stated under Section 49 of the 1953 Act cannot be exercised to take away the vested title of a tenure holder and no such jurisdiction is conferred upon a Consolidation Officer or any other Authority under the 1953 Act.

It has been stated under section 49 of the 1953 Act that it contemplates a bar to the jurisdiction of the Civil or Revenue Court for the grant of declaration or adjudication of rights of tenure holders in respect of land lying in an area for

which consolidation proceedings have commenced before the court.

Further, the court clarified that the section 49 of the 1953 Act is a provision of transitory suspension of jurisdiction of Civil or Revenue Court only during the period when consolidation proceedings are pending.

Adding to it, the court stated that suspension of jurisdiction of these Courts through the non-obstante provision is only with regards to the declaration and adjudication of rights of tenure holders.

The court stated that in other words, unless a person is a pre-existing tenure holder, the Section 49 does not come into operation.

The court in the case noted that the provisions of the 1953 Act cannot be construed as a bar upon the

Civil Courts to determine the ownership rights of the tenure holders because the jurisdiction to determine the ownership over the immoveable property could only be exercised by the civil courts and not the Consolidation Officer.

The court in the case observed and has held that the power to declare the ownership in an immovable property can be exercised only by a Civil Court save and except when such jurisdiction is barred expressly or by implication under a law. Therefore, the section 49 of the 1953 Act does not and cannot be construed as a bar on the jurisdiction of the Civil Court to determine the ownership rights.

In the present case, the respondent or plaintiff had acquired the ancestral rights as a tenure holder.

He was the co-owner of the suit land much before the consolidation proceedings commenced. However, when the whereabouts of the plaintiff were not known, the Consolidation Officer took away the plaintiff's ownership or title rights in the suit property and vested the ownership right with the appellant or defendant.

The court observed that provision does not enable the Consolidation Officer to grant ownership to Ramji Lal i.e., the appellant or defendant in respect of a property, which, before the consolidation proceedings, never vested in him. The Consolidation Officer could not take away the ownership rights of Kalyan Singh i.e., the respondent or plaintiff which he had already inherited much before the

commencement of the consolidation proceedings.

It has been stated under section 34 of the Specific Relief Act, A Suit For Declaration Of Possessory Rights Over Property is Not Required When a Person Becomes a Co-Owner Of the Property

It has been contended by the appellant before the court that to claim the possession over the suit property, the respondent or plaintiff would have obtained a decree of possession qua his share in the suit land as per Section 34 of the Specific Relief Act, 1934.

The court while rejecting such contentions observed that once the respondent or plaintiff is held to be co-owner in the subject property, the exclusive possession of the land, if any, with the appellant or defendant, was

joint and it was for and on behalf of all the co-owners.

The court stated that Kalyan Singh i.e., the respondent or plaintiff was already deemed to be in joint possession of the subject land in the eyes of law, hence he was not required to seek a decree of possession qua his share in the suit land.

Accordingly, the court dismissed the appeal.

The counsel, Mr. S.R. Singh, Sr. Adv. Mr. Sushant Kumar Yadav, Adv. Mr. Ajay Yadav, Adv. Mr. Prateek Yadav, Adv. Mr. Gaurav Lomes, Adv. Mr. Prithvi Yadav, Adv. Mr. Anurag Singh, Adv. Mr. Dhroov Kumar Singh, Adv. Mr. Sanjiv Tandan, Adv. Ms. Swapnil Singh, Adv. Ms. Radha Rajput, Adv. Mr. Ankur Yadav, AOR Mr. Yash Pal Dhingra, AOR Ms. Asha Gopalan Nair, AOR Mr. Rohit Amit Sthalekar, AOR

Mr. Purnendu Bajpai, Adv. Mr. Shashank Singh, Adv. appeared for Appellant(s).

The counsel, Ms. Abha Jain, AOR Mr. Dinesh Kumar Garg, AOR Mr. Akshat Kumar, AOR Mr. M.P. Parthiban, AOR Mr. Tanmaya Agarwal, AOR Mr. Wrick Chatterjee, Adv. Mrs. Aditi Agarwal, Adv. Mr. Vinayak Mohan, Adv. Mr. A. P. Mohanty, AOR Mr. Kavin Gulati, Sr. Adv. Mr. Rohit Amit Sthalekar, AOR Mr. Mohith Sivakumar, Adv. Mr. Dushyant Sharma, Adv. Mr. Purnendu Bajpai, Adv. Mr. Shashank Singh, Adv. Mr. Ankur Prakash, AOR Mohd. Saquib Siddiqui, Adv. Mr. Amod Kumar Bidhuri, Adv. Ms. Srishti Kasana, Adv. Ms. Priyanka Singh, Adv. Mr. Yudhister Bharadwaj, Adv. Ms. Jyoti Sharma, Adv. represented the Respondent(s).

Supreme Court Extends Interim Bail Of Hyderabad Businessman Abhishek Boinpally: Delhi Liquor Policy Case

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Abhishek Boinpally v. Directorate of Enforcement observed and has extended the interim bail granted to Hyderabad businessman Abhishek Boinpally in the Delhi Liquor Policy case till the next hearing date.

The bench comprising of Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Dipankar Datta in the case passed the order

wherein the special leave petition is filed by Boinpally's against the judgement of Delhi High Court of July 2023 denying him bail.

In the present case, Abhishek Boinpally, a former director of Robin Distilleries LLP and an alleged middleman is among the many people being investigated in the Delhi Liquor Policy case.

Abhishek Boinpally was arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation, CBI in October 2022, but one

month later, got bail in the case.

The court observed that the said relief was short-lived as at the same time.

The bench of Special Judge MK Nagpal in the case allowed the Enforcement Directorate's plea to take Boinpally into custody for five days. In October, 2022, the businessman went back into custody.

Further, Abhishek Boinpally approached the Special Court and the Delhi

High Court for bail, but the relief was denied by court.

The bench of Special Judge held that Boinpally was one of the representatives of the South Group in the cartelization and played an active role in the payment of kickbacks as well as their recoupment.

Therefore, the High Court did not find ground to interfere with the Special Judge's order and dismissed Boinpally's bail plea citing 'gravity of the allegations'

and 'credible material on record'.

Assailing the order of High Court, Boinpally moved the Supreme Court, wherein the court granted him interim bail on March 20 this year.

Accordingly, the court extended the interim bail on April 29 on a mentioning by Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal.

Accordingly, the court listed the matter for further consideration on the week commencing from July 08, 2024.

SUPREME COURT MAY PASS ORDER ON ARVIND KEJRIWAL'S INTERIM BAIL ON FRIDAY

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Arvind Kejriwal v. Directorate of Enforcement was hearing the batch of petitions challenging provisions of the CGST Act.

The bench headed by Justice Sanjiv Khanna in the case observed and has expressed that an order on Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's interim release from judicial custody may be passed on Friday.

The bench headed by Justice Khanna told ASG SV Raju that as far as the interim order etc. is concerned, this court may pass that order on Friday.

The bench comprising of Justice MM Sundresh and Justice Bela M Trivedi was hearing the present matter.

The bench asked Raju to start his arguments in the

GST batch tomorrow. Reeling under the impression that Kejriwal's matter was listed tomorrow, Raju said, 'Tomorrow, there is Kejriwal.'

Further, the bench of Justice Khanna clarified that Kejriwal's matter is listed on Friday, not Thursday, and interim order may be passed in the case on that day.

It may be recalled that the bench comprising of Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Dipankar Datta is hearing Kejriwal's plea challenging the Enforcement Directorate's arrest of March 21.

On the last date, the court heard the arguments for about an hour on the question of interim bail so as to enable the AAP chief to campaign for Lok Sabha elections, but could not conclude.

When the counsel, Senior Advocate Dr AM Singhvi

appearing for Kejriwal has been questioning the necessity and timing of Kejriwal's arrest, ASG SV Raju appearing for Enforcement Directorate, ED has maintained that there is evidence against Kejriwal and he must not be granted benefit of interim bail on account of elections.

Therefore, the SG Mehta has also addressed the court on the said aspect, contending that releasing the AAP chief in view of Lok Sabha Elections would send a wrong message to society and demoralize the common man.

The bench while considering the submissions made it clear that if it directs Kejriwal's release in the interim, it would be subject to his not performing official duties.

SUPREME COURT REQUESTS HIGH COURTS TO NOTIFY AN AUTHORITY WHO CAN ADDRESS DOUBTS AND GRIEVANCES OF CANDIDATES | JUDICIAL SERVICE RECRUITMENT

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Abhimeet Sinha And Ors.. Versus High Court Of Judicature At Patna And Ors observed and has flagged concerns about the absence of a designated authority by the High Courts which can be approached by the candidates of judicial services examinations for seeking clarification in case of any doubt.

The bench comprising of Justice Hrishikesh Roy and Justice Prashant Kumar Mishra in the case observed

and has placed reliance on the report of Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy titled 'Discretion & Delay- Challenges of Becoming a District & Civil Judge', thus, the court sought for the establishment of the designated authority for a given recruitment process with clearly defined roles, functions and responsibilities so that candidates can approach such a designated authority for seeking clarification in case of any doubt, and would assuage the anxiety of the candidates to a considerable extent.

The court stated that it would be apposite at this stage to note a few of the recommendations which are flagged in the December, 2018 Report of Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy titled 'Discretion & Delay- Challenges of Becoming a District & Civil Judge', which examined the judicial Service Rules of 29 States. Therefore, the absence of a designated authority that can be approached by the candidates is flagged in the said report. As the same appears to be valid concerns, the concerned High Court

should notify a designated authority for a given recruitment process with clearly defined roles, functions, and responsibilities. The candidates can approach such a designated authority to seek clarification in case of any doubt and the same would assuage the anxiety of the candidates to a considerable extent.

Other Suggestions Made By Court With Regards To Judicial Services Examinations The court in the case put forth another suggestion of providing a basic outline of the syllabus for the pro-

posed test to help candidates from diverse backgrounds plan and to prepare for the proposed examination even before the examination notification is being released.

Adding to it, the court stated that the recruitment process must adhere to the timeline but if there is any special and unavoidable exigency, the stakeholders should be kept informed with due promptitude.

Further, the court directed that the judgment be brought to the attention of the Chief Justice of all High Courts.

DELHI HIGH COURT EXTENDS MANISH SISODIA'S JUDICIAL CUSTODY TILL MAY 21: LIQUOR POLICY

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court in the case Manish Sisodia v. ED, CBI observed and has granted further time to the Enforcement Directorate, ED and Central Bureau of Investigation, CBI for filing their replies to the bail pleas filed by Deputy Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party leader Manish Sisodia.

In the present case, Manish Sisodia is under judicial custody in the money laundering and corruption cases related to the alleged excise policy scam.

The bench headed by Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma in the case observed and has listed the matter for hearing on May 13, 2024 after the special counsel, Zoheb Hossain appearing for the Enforcement Directorate, ED told court that the central probe agency wanted further one weeks'

time to file its response as the Investigating Officer, IO was in the middle of filing another supplementary prosecution complaint in the case.

He stated that, another person is in judicial custody and the proceedings are going on in the Supreme Court regarding a co-accused.

The counsel, Advocate Vivek Jain appearing for Sisodia opposed the request wherein stating that ED, before the Supreme Court, had said that the trial will be concluded in the case within six months.

It has also been stated by him that Sisodia's fresh bail plea filed after dismissal by the Supreme Court had been adjourned for three months and that ED's reply before the trial court has already been annexed in the bail plea.

The counsel, Hossain opposed the contention by

calling it 'false submission' and said that Sisodia's bail plea in the High court has not been pending for three months.

On the other hand, the counsel appearing for CBI also sought one weeks' time for filing reply in the matter.

However, the court said that it will only grant time to ED and CBI for filing their response till this week and listed the matter for hearing on Monday.

Accordingly, the court listed the mater for further consideration on May 13, 2024.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE:

On February 26 and March 9 last year, Manish Sisodia was first arrested by CBI and Enforcement Directorate, ED.

In the FIR registered by the CBI, Manish Sisodia and others have been accused of being instrumen-

tal in 'recommending' and 'taking decisions' with regards to the 2021-22 excise policy, 'without the approval of competent authority with an intention to extend undue favours to the licensee post tender'.

It has also been claimed by the Central Agency before the court that the AAP leader was arrested because he gave evasive replies and refused to cooperate with the investigation, despite being confronted with evidence.

On the other hand, it has been alleged by the Enforcement Directorate, ED that the excise policy was implemented as part of a conspiracy to give wholesale business profit of 12 percent to certain private companies, although such a stipulation was not mentioned in the minutes of meetings of Group of Ministers, GoM.

Further, it has been

claimed by the agency that there was a conspiracy that was coordinated by Vijay Nair and other individuals which being along with South Group to give extraordinary profit margins to the wholesalers.

According to the agency, Nair was acting on behalf of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia

Manish Sisodia's bail applications in both cases were rejected by Special Judge MK Nagpal (which is now transferred) on March 31 and April 28 last year.

The Delhi High Court then denied bail to Manish Sisodia in both cases after which Sisodia approached the Supreme Court challenging both these verdicts.

Last Year, In October, the Supreme Court refused to grant bail to the former Delhi deputy chief minister.

OUR VIEW



Bleached coral should rattle the whole world

Coral-reef damage in Lakshadweep offers us stark visual evidence—if any is needed—of climate change as a threat. Sadly, we're nowhere close to bending the carbon-emissions curve

A visit to Lakshadweep islands off the west coast of India is not complete without a dunk in its waters for a view of its spectacular coral reefs. So goes their reputation as a holiday spot. Snorkellers, however, need to be fore-warned. They now risk emerging with faces made pale by the sight of bleached coral—evidence of colourful clumps of undersea life at risk of being lost forever. As reported, researchers at the ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute have found that marine heatwaves since October 2023 have resulted in widespread bleaching of coral reefs in the Lakshadweep Sea. The fourth instance on record till date, this is the most severe. As the world warms up, gigantic clusters of polyp growth elsewhere that once throbbed with marine life have already gone past that stage of stress and turned fully skeletal. To conserve the natural beauty that Lakshadweep hides under its aqua-marine tides, we must choke off carbon fumes. That's a tall order, but at least what we are witnessing makes it harder to deny that the planet is at threat. The frequency of freaky weather, images of shrunken polar caps and sense of warmer seasons cannot compare with the ecological disaster that we're watching unfold underwater as proof of climate change. Since most of the heat that's trapped by the 'greenhouse effect' of our fume-filled atmosphere is absorbed by oceans, marine life faces the brunt of the early stages of global warming. The polyps we find in coral reefs are complex life forms. Most of these live in a deep symbiotic relationship with tiny algae that cling around as nutrient suppliers. The algae's role involves photosynthesis, for which key microscopic inputs are provided by corals. The dazzling

colours that snorkellers love are signals of mutually assured health. While cooperation is the usual state of affairs, excessive heat can disrupt photosynthesis and take this alliance apart, with corals shedding their algae cover in a bid for survival that actually leaves them even worse starved, without nutritional partners. As a coral starves, it turns skeletal, which gives it a 'bleached' white look. Coral reefs are sturdy, though. They can recover after long stretches of bleaching if heat conditions reverse and the algae get back into polyp tissue for photosynthesis. Lakshadweep's heat readings suggest a rising risk of large-scale coral bleaching, with other species that thrive in coral habitats also at threat. While these islands can retain the beauty of their beaches as the mercury gauge worsens, the same cannot be said of their underwater treasures. Coral-reef degradation finds itself in the news only when there's an event. The Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, which has been tracked for two decades plus, has recorded four mass-bleaching events in the last seven years, and its algae losses look set to accelerate. On current climate trends, Lakshadweep's reefs are doomed to share that fate. Beyond letting out sigh-bubbles of despair, there's nothing that snorkellers faced with heart-break can do about it. With or without goggles, we can see right before our eyes why humanity has been such a malevolent force on the planet. We had hoped to keep the world from getting no warmer than 1.5° Celsius above its pre-industrial average. For that, we'd pledged to bend the curve of carbon emissions. Sadly, there's no sign so far of that happening. Outright denial is still around, most glaringly in America. Could skeletal evidence under the sea rattle everyone into acting faster?



is chief executive officer at Agrayah Technologies and adjunct professor for digital transformation at IIM Trichy.

In February 2024, stock prices in three continents hit new highs in a rally that should be of interest to linguists, philologists and others who study languages. Just about 15-18 months ago, Web3, comprising blockchain and crypto technology, was touted as the future and had the attention of venture capitalists—until Generative AI crashed the party. This wave saw Nvidia's shares soar, as it is a key supplier of chips needed for advanced AI processing. But what does linguistics have to do with all this? From the dawn of civilization, every major leap in language processing—whether it's printing, transmitting, recording or retrieving information—has significantly altered our world. In modern history, it starts with Gutenberg's printing press, which accelerated information dissemination. In the 19th century, we deciphered the Rosetta Stone written in Egyptian hieroglyphics to understand an entire civilization. By century end, we got functional radio and telephone technology, which laid the foundation of the

communications we take for granted today. From pigeon mail, this was quite a leap. Think also of Edison's phonograph, which recorded and replayed *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, marking another advancement. Similarly, Alan Turing's decryption of Germany's Enigma code during World War II was a linguistic feat as much as a mathematical one. The birth of modern computer science was greatly influenced by linguistics and philology. In the 1950s, Noam Chomsky coined the phrase "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously" to illustrate the difference between syntax and semantics, challenging the then-dominant statistical approaches to grammar. Notable linguists since, like Leonard Bloomfield and Charles Hockett, have agreed with, refuted and appended the legacy approach to understanding the syntactic structure of languages, a discussion that paved the way for the Cognitive Revolution, integrating psychology, linguistics, computer science, anthropology, neuroscience and philosophy. At a Dartmouth conference in 1956 which sought to explore "how to make machines use language, form abstractions and concepts, solve kinds of problems now reserved for humans, and improve themselves," John McCarthy introduced the term 'artificial intelligence.' Fast forward about 65 years,

past the manned moon landing, rise of the internet and robotic rovers on Mars, and we saw ChatGPT emerge in November 2022. The task of getting AI tools to write an essay about an imaginary dog or create an image of a puppy juxtaposed with a teddy bear has taken longer than putting a man on the moon. The challenge has always rested with making computers understand human languages, context, hidden structures, surface structures and nuances. With advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP), we got an Apple Siri as far back as 2011, and then Amazon's Alexa in 2014. They were reasonably capable of understanding the intent behind spoken languages, but they couldn't imagine, articulate or reason (its simulation at least) until now. We have used NLP in various forms for years. Think of voice search, autocorrect, grammar checks and predictive text, apart from the suggestions of websites. From helping us become more productive

to making us squirm over autocorrect errors, language technologies have already impacted us. These have favoured English, mostly, amplifying its dominance and affecting our careers as well as national economies. In 1973, a 16-year-old boy from Kyushu in Japan took a flight to Tokyo to meet his idol, Den Fujita, then president of McDonald's, who advised him to learn English and computer science. So he moved to California and built a first-of-its-kind electronic translator with some help from his professors and sold it to Sharp for \$1.7 million. This was the founding capital for what would come to be known as Softbank. That kid was Masayoshi Son. By 1999, Son would invest \$20 million in the e-commerce venture of a self-taught English teacher and translator turned dotcom entrepreneur from Hangzhou in China. This investment's value would balloon to about \$108 billion by 2018. The English translator-turned-entrepreneur was Jack Ma,

founder of Alibaba. Both Ma and Son have publicly attributed their success to learning the *lingua franca* of the business world. English dominates the digital realm, dictating who participates in globalization and who remains on the periphery. Consider the business processing outsourcing sector. India had a head-start as early as in the late 80s, but we conceded it to the Philippines by 2010. Industry experts reckon that the cost of running a call centre is similar in both nations, but according to the English Proficiency Index (EPI), India ranks No. 60, while the Philippines is No. 20. In 2017, I saw two major instances of how English enables access to the globalized world. The first was in Kazakhstan (EPI rank No. 104), which held a hackathon to find ways to enhance English literacy and adoption amongst its people to enable them to participate in globalization. The second was in Indonesia (EPI rank No. 79), where I learnt software engineers have poor job prospects beyond its four local unicorns, attributable to their poor English skills. Whether by design or default, English's ascendancy in technology continues to reshape the world and influence cultures globally. This is a testament to the enduring impact of language technologies.

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

AI and GenAI are transforming e-commerce from the ground up

AI can help realize the sector's dream of enriching our shopping experience in unimaginable ways



JASPREET BINDRA is a technology expert, author of 'The Tech Whisperer', and a Masters in AI and Ethics from Cambridge University.

I have often written of the ethical and philosophical impact of AI and how it will shape our future. Now I focus on how AI has reshaped a category which touches our daily lives: e-commerce. AI researcher and entrepreneur Andrew Ng termed AI the "new electricity." Like a general purpose technology, it will power society and multiple businesses silently and behind the scenes. AI can run logistics, factories, social networks, search, smartphones and much else. Its potential in e-commerce is vast. As e-com entered our lives with the launch of Amazon by Jeff Bezos in 1994, AI became a natural fit to make it more efficient. From recommendations, logistics and warehousing to stock merchandizing and other operations, AI has been in use for many years. Amazon, for example, is now using AI and Machine Learning (ML) to monitor the quality of fresh produce like fruits and vegetables. Add to it regional-language customer support and better search algorithms for purchase cues. All this makes shopping convenient for online shoppers. With Generative AI and recent advances in Deep Learning and ML, the e-com industry is at the cusp of a major transformation. These innovations will not just augment but reshape the sector from the ground up. Let us explore how:

Personalization at scale: Hyper-personalization has been the holy grail for retailers. Who has not gotten overwhelmed by the huge variety of products offered by large stores and market places? There are a million dresses to choose from even if we want only one. What if the retailer knew your exact preferences, sizes and needs and threw up personalized options like a human stylist would? The technology exists for this, with AI algorithms predicting consumer behaviour with remarkable accuracy and tailoring recommendations and content to suit individuals. With GenAI, marketing messages can be crafted for unique individual appeal.

A whole new customer experience: GenAI can transform your experience while shopping digitally. A personalized chatbot based on a Large Language Model (LLM) can be your friend and shopping guide. Say, you are excited about your first trip to Ladakh, but apprehensive of the cold there. You turn to an Amazon or Decathlon to buy warm clothes. You could tell a bot about your plan and it will check the weather forecast on those dates and help you get the gear needed for your Ladakh trip. It could even offer travel options and health tips. If you wish to continue shopping on your way there, you need not worry about a spotty telecom network, as many AI-based prediction models can smoothen the online experience. AI can also give AI-generated

reviews to help you make choices. One could also automate and personalize content creation for product listings and marketing material. All of this translates to lower costs and therefore also more attractive retail prices. **Operational efficiency and automation:** AI does a lot behind the scenes to enable a new experience. It is revolutionizing back-end operations in e-commerce, ranging from inventory management and product shipment to process revisions that reduce errors and drive down costs. Autonomous robots don't just reduce human error, they do heavy and complex tasks that are difficult or dangerous. Predictive analytics can forecast demand accurately, so that stock levels are set to minimize waste. AI algorithms can optimize delivery routes in real-time, enhancing efficiency and customer satisfaction. **AI can break language barriers and expand markets:** An exciting possibility with GenAI is its ability to transcend barriers of language and literacy and reach everyone. India has more than 20 official languages and hundreds of dialects, but most e-com is conducted in English, leaving millions of people excluded. GenAI can do real-time translation and use voice and video enablers to help people communicate and transact. This means a wider reach and new markets for digital market-places. It's clear that AI and GenAI are well placed to dismantle barriers in e-commerce, making it more inclusive and accessible.

These are some ways in which AI will transform e-commerce and realize the sector's dream of providing the best products at the most attractive prices in the fastest way possible to every human being. With AI, we can look forward to a completely re-imagined customer experience, truly personalized to our preferences and budgets. The future of e-com underpinned by AI and GenAI is not just about technological advancement, it is about reshaping the global marketplace in ways we are only beginning to imagine.

QUICK READ

Artificial intelligence will impact our lives broadly but it can completely revolutionize e-commerce at the back-end even as it gives us a whole new online shopping experience.

From personalizing offerings to guiding shoppers and from widening reach by breaking language barriers to raising efficiency, AI will reshape the business in dramatic ways.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

If you really think that the environment is less important than the economy, try holding your breath while you count your money.

GUY MCPHERSON

GUEST VIEW

Language technologies are still shaping global culture

SREERAMAN THIAGARAJAN

ISRAEL, HAMAS NEED TO REMAIN ENGAGED AND GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

ISRAEL'S rejection of the latest ceasefire proposals notwithstanding, there is still a glimmer of hope for the return of peace in Gaza as the two sides have agreed to remain engaged. The talks between Israel and Hamas, facilitated by Egypt and Qatar, took place at a time when Israeli tanks had started rolling into Rafah, the last standing city in southern Gaza where the bulk of the enclave's population had moved to after Israeli attacks elsewhere. Israel has already taken control of the Gaza side of the Rafah checkpoint, which is on the border between Palestine and Egypt. There are reports that a full-blown Israeli ground attack on Rafah is imminent. Israel has already announced that its forces have faced rocket and mortar attacks from Rafah and has identified Hamas positions in the town.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that a full-scale assault on Rafah would be a human catastrophe with countless more casualties. He has appealed to all those who have influence over Israel to do everything in their power to avert the attack. His appeal was clearly aimed at the US, the biggest supporter of Israel. The US appeared to be in agreement with Guterres as it has announced a pause in the latest arms shipment to Israel. US defence secretary Lloyd Austin has told a Senate committee that the Biden administration is reviewing security assistance to Israel in the light of the events unfolding in Rafah.

As pressure mounts on Israel, PM Benjamin Netanyahu would do well to heed warnings and seize the chance for peace with Hamas, which has expressed its readiness to release the hostages. The Hamas leadership announced it is ready to accept the deal brokered by Egypt and Qatar. The ceasefire proposal serves one of the two main objectives of the Netanyahu administration—the return of hostages. An attack on Rafah is unlikely to help Israel achieve its second objective of eliminating Hamas any time soon. Israel needs to hammer out a peace deal while allowing humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza. The latest three-stage de-escalation proposal is a good document to work with. It proposes a swap of prisoners, a permanent ceasefire with complete withdrawal of troops, and the return of Gazans to their homes. Israel and Hamas need to take each other's concerns into account and agree to give peace a chance.

SCIENCE CITY WITHOUT A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

BENGALURU may be known as the 'science capital of India', but ironically, hardly any science is seen applied on the ground to make the lives of its citizens safe and convenient. The city, now housing 1.4 crore people, won its sobriquet as the science capital for hosting a high concentration of research and scientific institutions. Nine of the 60 labs of the Defence Research & Development Organisation are in the city, besides the country's premier scientific research institution, the Indian Institute of Science, which has 47 departments under the six divisions of biological sciences, chemical sciences, electrical sciences, interdisciplinary research, mechanical sciences, and physical and mathematical sciences. The Indian Space Research Organisation is headquartered in the city. There are national institutes of excellence working on astrophysics, nanotechnology and space science, too. No wonder then that a slew of private scientific research organisations also find it conducive to be located in Bengaluru.

However, despite boasting such a robust ecosystem with the presence of a large community of scientists, who are also citizens of the city, no scientific approach appears to seep down to the basics of town planning, structural design, tree plantation, road and flyover design, local layout planning and the health system. There is a lack of even safe footpaths, or bus stops set up close to road junctions cause frequent traffic jams. Solutions to road congestion in the form of subterranean tunnels are being proposed by political leaders without prior scientific tests conducted to assess the safety of standing on-surface structures, or the possibility of these causing sinkholes in the future.

Residential layouts have encroached on lake beds without developers understanding the basic logic that when it rains heavily, nature claims its spaces, and that human-occupied lake beds would get submerged along with the dwellings—an example of failure in applying basics of science and logic in development. And all this in a city that hosts the largest working population of foreigners outside the national capital that is attracted to its technological sectors. A scientific approach means the systematic study of structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation, experimentation and testing of theories against evidence obtained. This needs to seep into city planning and services for safety and convenience of the people. It would be a lesson for cities across India to learn.

QUICK TAKE

REAL MANTRAS FOR SUCCESS

It was inevitable. The scent of Champions League glory always reminded Real Madrid of requited dreams. This Wednesday and the week before, they overcame considerable odds to beat Bayern Munich to make it to finals of the most prestigious club football tournament for a record ninth time. As pundits of all stripes pointed out, beyond having great players and tactical mastery (this will be coach Carlo Ancelotti's fifth final of the tournament), it's all about attitude and self-confidence. Management gurus have drawn leadership mantras from unlikely sources ranging from scriptures to wars. A case study on this Spanish club's success should be added to the cannon.

IVEN if the Election Commission lacks the courage or conviction to do it, the time has come for all Indians collectively to say to PM Narendra Modi: "You have gone too far, sir: In the name of decency, please stop."

Inflammatory rhetoric, especially on communal and religious lines, is explicitly outlawed in the EC's Model Code of Conduct. Yet, its principal purveyor has been the PM himself. In harsh and immoderate language, he has embarked upon a fear-mongering offensive, comparing the Congress manifesto to a document of the Muslim League, claiming it will divert SC/ST reservations to Muslims, and declaring the party will snatch away people's gold, even their wives' *mangalsutras*, and give them to Muslims. And then he doubles down on this allegation by claiming the Congress intends to confiscate half of everyone's assets—right down to a buffalo if you happen to have two—to redistribute them to "infiltrators" who "have too many children": an obvious allusion to his Muslim fellow-citizens. He even dragged Mughal emperor Aurangzeb into his invective, claiming that Rahul Gandhi insulted Hindu kings but kept quiet about atrocities by nawabs, nizams, sultans and Aurangzeb.

What's going on? Aside from the PM demeaning his office by uttering such hate-filled words, the allegations are so far-fetched, educated voters would consider them laughable. The Congress manifesto does not even contain the words "Muslim" or "redistribution". Nor was inheritance tax discussed, let alone proposed. Yet Modi has seized upon two stray remarks of Congress eminences to ascribe malign intentions to a party whose long track record in governance points to no such actions.

The first was a speech made by PM Manmohan Singh 18 years ago to the National Development Council, in which he asserted "our priorities should be to uplift the most depressed sections of society, such as the SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, and women and children... We will have to devise innovative plans to ensure minorities, particularly the Muslim minority, are empowered to share equitably in the fruits of development. They must have the first claim on resources". This statement provoked the BJP even in 2006, leading the Prime Minister's Office to clarify at that time that "the first claim on resources referred to all priority areas, including programmes for uplifting SCs, STs, OBCs, women, children and minorities". And Manmohan Singh served as PM for eight more years without doing any of the things Modi now alleges his successors will do on the basis of his statement then.

With its narratives on development and nationalism failing, the BJP has reverted to scare-mongering about Muslims. It presents a stark choice to the Indian voter

WHEN OTHER STICKS FAIL TO STIR THE POT

SHASHI THAROOR

Third-term Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram and the Sahitya-Akademi winning author of 24 books, most recently *Ambedkar: A Life*



SOURAV ROY

The second was a television interview by telecoms guru Sam Pitroda in Chicago, musing aloud that the US had an inheritance tax and it was an idea India could consider. Pitroda is perfectly entitled to express his personal views, but inheritance tax was abolished by a Congress PM, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1985 and the party has never considered bringing it back. The idea was not even discussed in the Manifesto Committee (of which I am a member), let alone included therein. Indeed, the only party to have even contemplated restoring inheritance tax was the BJP—in discussions around the 2019 budget, both cabinet minister Arun Jaitley and minister of state Jayant Sinha advocated the idea, though it was not eventually adopted. But none of this prevented Modi from making hysterical allegations.

A reference by Rahul Gandhi to the "*shakti*" of the government led the PM to accuse the leader of abusing Goddess Shakti. His colleagues and fellow travellers predictably chimed in. Home Minister Amit Shah went so far as to say if the Congress comes to power; Sharia law will be introduced. UP CM Yogi Adityanath says the Congress will impose the *jizya* tax (a tax on unbelievers last imposed by Aurangzeb 350 years ago). A member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust suddenly announced, before the third phase of voting, construction of the Ram mandir was progressing faster than expected and could be completed by November; rather than in 2025 as planned—a desperate attempt to exploit the issue further for electoral gain.

The reversion to scare-mongering about

WHERE THE POLICE ACT AS JUDGE, JURY & EXECUTIONER

SRINIVAS KODALI

Hacktivist and ORA India Fellow

and the poor in the slums. These are unlawful practices currently under litigation, as there were no rules, laws or procedures that authorised these practices until 2022.

Digitisation helped file petty cases against teenagers if they got into any minor argument with the police. Some of them have been sent to jail for 10 days for petty offences—something that will haunt them for life. Anyone who visits the Nampally Metropolitan Court will understand



Telangana is among the most surveilled states in India today. The intelligence failure of the 2007 Hyderabad blasts and Naxal threats spurred the state police to acquire some of the most advanced intelligence gathering systems. But with little oversight and opaque procedures, it has crossed several lines of propriety

how the court police often force people to sign documents that accept they have committed a crime without advocates to represent them. The setup is eye-opening for anyone who blindly trusts the police and praises them for violent enforcement.

The state police have been allowed to act above the law to serve various interests. The intelligence setup wants to surveil the entire population, a need that arose after intelligence failures on the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, and several bomb blasts in Hyderabad in 2007 and 2013. The 2013 blasts made the police amend the Public Safety Act of 2013 to force CCTVs across the city, making Hyderabad one of the most surveilled cities

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Filling vacuum

Ref: *BJP is no longer an outsider in Kerala* (May 9). All these years, the LDF and UDF in Kerala thought there was no alternative to them. Now the BJP has come to fill the vacuum and people, frustrated with the two fronts, can feel relieved to have another choice. This would also teach the LDF and UDF a lesson.

S Retnaswamy, Chennai

Third front

Kerala has had only the UDF and LDF ruling the state over the decades. With just two fronts competing with one another, a sort of complacency set in. This is the vacuum that the BJP can use for winning in the state. A third front in Kerala will prove to be a game-changer.

Bijumon PN, Idukki

Scrap reservation

Ref: *Can higher reservations help tackle inequities in society* (May 9). A strong government at the Centre in June this year should take the hard decision to scrap the reservation policy altogether. Reservation should then be implemented strictly on economic criteria only. This might create uneasiness among the creamy layers of various castes. The downtrodden have not benefited anywhere with the reservation policy.

K Parameswaran, Rourkela

Discuss welfarism

Rightly said, reservation always remains a talk of political parties at every election. But no reconciliation among all sections of society is drawn. So welfarism is the one topic that needs to be discussed more for the development of weaker sections of society.

K S Pramodkumar, Nayarambalam

Not friendly

Ref: *Sour notes in the lovefest with America* (May 9). The US seems to be the worst enemy of developing India. It has a history of creating a ruckus and reaping the benefits. We should not make a big fuss about Elon Musk or President Joe Biden. We have other big countries to look up to.

T S Manoj, Bengaluru

Objectionable statements

Sam Pitroda, the Overseas Congress chairman, had opened a Pandora's box by speaking about imposing the inheritance tax. Now his racial remarks against Indians are highly objectionable. In this advanced computer age, talking about skin colour is atrocious and shows his arrogance.

NR Ramachandran, Chennai

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Key to staying healthy is diet

Heed ICMR's new dietary recommendations. Government can help with enabling policies

India's apex medical research body, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), released new dietary recommendations for Indians this week, pointing out that food and lifestyle choices alone may be to blame for over half the disease burden in the country. A balanced diet must have no more than 45% of the calories from cereals, and pulses, beans and meat should be limited to 15% of the meal's calories. The rest should come from nuts, vegetables, fruits and milk, the recommendation stated. Consumption of salt, sugar and ultra-processed foods must be limited and oils and fats should be used in moderation. The 17 dietary guidelines, in a nutshell, seek to nudge people into consuming foods with essential nutrients and limiting those that contribute to what has been an explosion of lifestyle diseases, such as obesity and diabetes.

This surge in preventable disease has been well documented. The ICMR guideline notes healthy diets and adequate physical activity could prevent up to 80% of type-II diabetes and a substantial proportion of coronary heart disease. Most Indians today consume meals containing an excess of carbohydrates, snack mostly on ultra-processed foods, and finish it off with saccharine desserts. Meals are often cooked in excess or unhealthy oils, clarified butter or fat. Together, they create an unhealthy cocktail that leads to excess calorie intake, triggering fat build-up, driving up blood vessel-choking cholesterol, and creating or exacerbating deficiencies in micronutrients. It is easy to imagine this anecdotally – what proportion of your plate is made up of carbs such as rice or rotis? How sweet is your tea? And how often do you reach for a bag of chips?

The challenge of fixing a diet of any population is not easy by any measure. India is one of the grain bowls of the world, making carbohydrate-heavy cereals and starchy vegetables cheap. Then there is the march of modernity with its quick-service, gig-worker-delivered, discounted fast food and ready-to-eat meals. Adding to this is a population that is increasingly sedentary. It is about time India's policymakers and health authorities double down on advisories such as the new dietary recommendations to stem this slide in public health. Nutrition labels and classification of unhealthy foods will be crucial, as will public infrastructure that makes walking, exercising or cycling easy. But the biggest change needs to come from within – it must start with educating oneself on what to eat and how much to eat.

All isn't well with BJD, the blame lies within

Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik's aide and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leader VK Pandian believes that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) may split his party to come to power in the state. In a competitive electoral democracy such as India, political parties do poach rivals to expand their base or to form the government, especially ahead of elections. The BJD too has been welcoming leaders from other parties. There is nothing unnatural about it, except that it may be an excuse to complain about ideological infidelity and the transformation of politics into a transactional vocation.

With the first phase of elections in Odisha set for May 13, and accepting Pandian's comments at face value, the question is why the party fears a split now. The BJD has had a remarkable run in electoral politics since its founding in 1997. Patnaik has been Odisha CM since 2000 and the state has done well under his stewardship. Despite this record, if the BJD needs to watch out for poaching by rival parties, then the answer could well be its own structural frailties. When Patnaik broke with the Janata Dal, he had a set of popular leaders with him who laid the ground for a regional party that claimed the anti-Congress, socialist space that existed in Odisha and the political legacy of his father, Biju Patnaik. However, the BJD in office turned into an extension of Naveen Patnaik's personality and became overtly centralised. The centralisation of power empowered the bureaucracy and while this may have helped Patnaik to streamline governance, it limited the space for other leaders, which explains the disillusionment one hears from the lower rungs of the party. This is manifest in the meteoric rise of Pandian, who is now seen as Patnaik's successor despite his limited political experience. An ambitious BJP may only be threatening to exploit this succession crisis in the BJD.

{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



A medical cadre for correctional homes

The State is both the health provider and the sentence implementer for prison inmates. It needs to ensure swift and quality treatment of illness – physical and mental – for them

Thank God for the Right to Information (RTI) Act and thank God, too, for Aruna Roy who was its chief initiator, and Wajahat Habibullah, who, as the first Chief Information Commissioner, set its standards high. Responding to a recent RTI query filed by an advocate in Madurai, KR Raja, a reply came saying that between January 2022 and February 2024 – a space of two years – 118 inmates in five central prisons – Madurai, Coimbatore, Tiruchirappalli, Cuddalore, and Vellore – died. The query related to these prisons located in Tamil Nadu but there is no doubt that the statistics are not a reflection on central prisons in that state. They would be found to apply all over India. And there is no suggestion in either the query or in the reply that there was anything to the deaths other than illness and death.

But reading the report I could not

help having the following thoughts.

Prisons – now appropriately called “correctional homes” – are where the homemaker is the State. The difference between these homes and any other residence is that its inmates are not there of their own accord but because they are either undergoing a trial for one or another offence under the IPC or have been convicted for a term in those “homes”.

This arrangement casts two responsibilities on the homemaker, namely, the State: One, to ensure that the processes of lawful penology are observed and the inmates are confined according to those processes; and two, to also ensure that the inmates suffer no privation (other than their compulsory confinement) which will adversely affect their physical or mental status.

The second responsibility may be regarded and described as subsidiary to and a corollary of the first but it is nonetheless there. The health of the inmates of correctional homes is the responsibility of the homemaker, namely, the State. No confinement, either during the trial or under conviction includes as a part of the arrangement, the additional concomitant of a breakdown in the inmates' health. No punishment includes *inter alia* a health breakdown.

Inmates of correctional homes are just as vulnerable and susceptible to illness as anyone anywhere. But two situational issues arise: First, an inmate has

no opportunity while housed there, to seek or obtain medical redress of her or his own choice and free will. She or he cannot say, for instance, while in a prison in Delhi, that she or he would like to be treated at AIIMS.

The inmate is at the mercy of the home's discretion in the matter. Second, the inmate who is unwell becomes at once two entities, a prisoner and a patient. During the incumbency of the infirmity, according to the common laws of prioritisation, the patient supersedes the prisoner for attention. And thereby the homemaker, i.e. the State, becomes a health provider in addition to being a sentence implementer.

As per official statistics, by the end of 2022, India had 1,330 correctional homes of all categories, housing 5,73,220 inmates, 75% of whom were undertrials. These nearly 600,000 human beings are the penological and medical responsibility of the State, whether represented by the central government as in the case of central prisons or the state governments in respect of the others. It is nobody's case that the State must ensure that these 600,000 human beings do not fall ill. That is not reasonable, not scientific. But it is the undeniable case that the State must ensure the swift and quality treatment of illness, physical and mental, where it occurs, of correctional home inmates.

I am putting the following to my reader and the authorities. India must



Prisons – now appropriately called “correctional homes” – are where the homemaker is the State
VINAY KUMAR/HT PHOTO

set up a medical authority exclusively for its correctional homes, making medical expertise a partner of their punitive expertise. Without this, they cannot carry out their second responsibility, namely, their inmates' medical health. Without such a setup, for instance, the military would be unable to maintain health standards in barracks, cantonments, or units in the field. Medical personnel hold ranks in the military services.

The same should be the case with our correctional homes. Just as there are superintendents and wardens exclusive to them, so should there be medical professionals, including physicians, surgeons, and nursing cadres comprising a medical wing to assist the officers in charge of correctional homes. Requisitioning specialist doctors from “outside” can always be done in emergencies but a standard operating system must be in place.

I can anticipate the reaction: So, you want jails to morph into hospitals, right?

While saluting the healthy cynicism behind that comment, I would say no. I am not doing that; I am only suggesting that our jails should not be thought of as a place where you are confined but also a place where you are left to sicken and,

God forbid, follow the 118, whom the RTI reply to advocate Raja showed, on their unintended “journey out” of the home.

At the end of the day, the issue is about how we as a modern society, and the post-colonial State as our society's most prominent public entity, view our responsibility towards prisoners. Do we look upon them as persons who need the opportunity to emerge from their incarceration as better people? Illness and death in jail have, globally, a morbid history. Kasturba Gandhi died of illness in the British Raj's custody, with medical aid leaving much to be desired. Syamaprasad Mookerjee died a prisoner in Srinagar, with the nation still unconvinced about the medical aid received by that patriot. Jayaprakash Narayan's critical illness while he was a prisoner during the Emergency elicited a comment from Dr MK Mani, who later restored him, that saving his life would have been easier had he come to hospital care two weeks earlier.

We are citizens of a Republic not subjects of a medieval order. Our prison reforms are incomplete without a credible medicare component.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator and diplomat. The views expressed are personal

Macron and the spectre of an Atmanirbhar Europe

The French President Emmanuel Macron is nothing if not cerebral. Soon after he assumed office in 2017, he made a speech at the famous Sorbonne University arguing for a “sovereign Europe”. Now, he has made another seminal speech at the same venue about his vision for Europe. The speech deserves careful scrutiny.

Macron claims that since his speech in 2017, Europe has indeed become more united and more sovereign. In defence of this argument, Macron refers to action taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the initial unity displayed by Europe when Russia invaded Ukraine. But he admits that other actions such as the energy transition characterised by the “Green Deal”, and what he calls “technological and industrial sovereignty”, are clearly a work in progress. Macron makes a fundamental point when he says there can be no sovereignty without borders and makes a strong pitch, therefore, for the effective implementation of laws on immigration and asylum. With European elections looming large, this stance is hardly surprising.

In a dramatic statement, Macron asserts that Europe is mortal and can die if steps are not taken to save it. To illustrate this point further, he candidly admits that Europe cannot effectively face all the risks it confronts. He then links it to the all-important transatlantic relationship by stating that the United States (US) has two priorities. America First, which he describes as entirely legitimate, and then China, on which he does not comment. But his main inference from this is that Europe is not a geopolitical priority for the US in the coming years and decades, no matter how strong the alliance and how committed the administration is to the Ukrainian conflict. And so, yes, he says, the days of Europe buying its energy and fertilisers from Russia, outsourcing to China, and relying on the US for security are over. I doubt any European leader has put the transatlantic relationship in such stark terms.

In stating the above, Macron gives reasons as to why Europe is currently not up to the task. He says the basic rules have changed to the detriment of Europe. For one thing, he notes war has returned to the heart of Europe and a nuclear power is involved. Second, he asserts that Europe does not possess an economically viable model with both the US and

China “over subsidising”. Even before the Inflation Reduction Act, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the US had grown by 60% between 1993 and 2022. Europe grew by a mere 30%.

The interesting point that Macron makes is that both the US and China have stopped respecting the fundamental rules of international trade. Macron says this situation is completely untenable for Europe which has the “most onerous social model in the world”. Finally, Macron also claims with some justification that European values of democracy and human rights are under attack worldwide because of the digital revolution and young Europeans are consuming narratives produced elsewhere in the world.

Macron says that Europe has hitherto naively delegated everything strategic: Energy to Russia, security – not France, but several of its partners – to the US, and equally critical perspectives to China. Macron's prescription is that Europe must take them back.

Macron then proceeds to explain how this might be done. First and foremost, he says, there must be a credible European defence. He stands by what he controversially said in February about possibly putting troops on the ground in Ukraine, describing it as a policy of “strategic ambiguity”. Macron also wishes to press ahead with implementing the “strategic compass” and, in particular, to set up a rapid reaction force to be able to deploy up to 5,000 military personnel in hostile environments by 2025. Macron follows up on this by saying that there must be a strong European defence industry. In addition, he advocates a serious industrial policy which he calls “Made in Europe” in strategic sectors of economy and technology. But all this is in vain if Europe does not control its borders, according to Macron. Significantly, Macron seeks a “new trade policy” for Europe based on reciprocity, preferences for Europe and high labour and environmental standards.

The above vision of an “*aatmanirbhar*” Europe has the following strategic implications for India. First, a Europe that is strong and self-reliant is in India's abiding strategic interest. Macron is brutally honest when he says that Europe cannot – and must not – be a vassal of the US. Here, he is “Trump-proofing” the European Union (EU) to an extent. Second, an “*aatmanirbhar*” Europe will serve as an independent pole in a multipolar world, which again is in India's interest. Third, it is important to realise that this vision may prove problematic for the early conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the EU.

Finally, in areas like technology, innovation and critical minerals, India must offer itself as a serious partner to France and the EU so that our own “strategic autonomy” is enhanced. China finds mention in Macron's speech on more than one occasion. However, it remains to be seen how the EU eventually deals with China. The German Chancellor's recent visit to Beijing and Chinese President Xi Jinping's impending visit to Paris may offer clues about the EU's China policy, which does not necessarily mirror that of its transatlantic partner. This too should matter to India.



Mohan Kumar



The French President Emmanuel Macron is nothing if not cerebral
REUTERS

Mohan Kumar is a former Indian ambassador to France and is dean/professor at OP Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal

{ JOE BIDEN } US PRESIDENT



The search for balance in regulating deepfakes

Deepfake videos have become a way to garner millions of views and generate revenue on social media. From Barack Obama calling Donald Trump “a complete dip...” to President Volodymyr Zelensky telling Ukrainians to lay down arms, we have seen deepfakes. While most of the rumours have been put to rest, it raises unsettling questions about where reality ends and fiction takes over.

Photo manipulation can be traced back to as early as the 1800s wherein it was a regular occurrence to retouch and create an ideal picture. What has changed with the advent of technology is the ease and speed with which such manipulation can be done. The consequences of deepfake technology could be devastating. In seconds, information gets communicated across various platforms. The diffusion of any technology in an ecosystem depends on the trust factor. Deepfakes have resulted in a trust deficit in a society wherein data alteration has become easier and more difficult to spot.

Yet, at the outset, the term deepfake is problematic as it gives a negative connotation, overlooking the innovation and positive effects of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology. First conceived by a Reddit user (by the same name) in 2017, the term deepfake refers to synthetic/altared content generated by implementing deep learning algorithms. AI has a lot of potential to reshape society for the better. The deployment of AI technologies across various sectors has been a game changer. In the global campaign to end malaria, David Beckham delivers an appeal in nine languages using a deepfake voice. This illustrates how deepfake technology can be harnessed to bring creative ideas to life that could not be realised in the past.

On the flip side, many privacy and defamation issues have surfaced in the recent past. An overview of the risks identified includes, but is not limited to, deepfake revenge porn, reputational damage, defamation videos, voice cloning, news media manipulation, financial fraud, and threat to national security. A major part of deepfake adult content videos targets entertainment industry celebrities. Women, in general, are the most vulnerable to non-consensual deepfake videos. This raises questions about their safety and privacy. The underlying factors for the rise of deepfake pornography include the availability of user-friendly tools and software coupled with negligible costs involved in swapping faces.

Another concern is ethical. Music composer

AR Rahman found himself in hot waters for using AI tools to resurrect the voices of late singer Bamba Bakya and Shahul Hameed to compose a track. Not only does cloning a voice trigger personality rights, but it poses serious questions of how far we can push technology in the name of creativity. Voice forms a part of personality rights and if such practices go unchecked, it may result in long pending lawsuits or even eventually replace human artists.

Since the existing legislations were drafted long before the emergence of AI technologies, there exist gaps that need to be addressed. A blanket ban on deepfake content could stifle innovation and creativity. Another factor that requires attention is the lack of regulatory harmonisation across jurisdictions and specific areas of law within a particular jurisdiction. Consequently, enforcement remains a challenge.

Instead of starting afresh, there needs to be a dialogue between intermediaries, industry experts, and the government to arrive at tech-based solutions. This would broadly include identification of deepfake content, labelling and notifying the concerned party, and serving a takedown notice to the platform. Further, digital platforms need to adopt a comprehensive approach to address deepfake content. For instance, Meta has a three-pronged approach – the first is to ensure transparency. This helps the users understand when they are interacting with content generated by AI.

The second is for digital platforms to enforce existing community standards and self-regulation. This guarantees the removal of content that does not adhere to the community standards prevalent in the industry. Lastly, there needs to be a cross-industry collaboration to combat the deceptive use of AI. Ahead of the 2024 elections, Meta announced revamping its strategy towards altered content.

The complexity and multifaceted nature of the issue of deepfake underscores the need for a uniform regulatory and enforcement mechanism. Governments have to strike a balance between innovation, on the one hand, and community welfare on the other before the perils eventually outweigh the perks.

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Risk provisioning

The stability of the banking system should be paramount

Draft norms on provisioning pertaining to advances for projects under implementation have stirred up a storm in the banking sector. Commercial banks, as reported by this newspaper, are planning to write to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to seek relaxation. The government is also reportedly studying the proposed norms, while banks' and non-banking financial companies' (NBFCs') stock prices have taken a knock. The RBI last week proposed to increase the provisioning for project finance to 5 per cent from the existing level of 0.4 per cent. Commercial banks are willing to settle for 1-2 per cent. Notably, the RBI draft suggests increasing the provisioning in a phased manner — 2 per cent effective March 31, 2025, 3.5 per cent by March 2026, and 5 per cent by March 31, 2027.

The concerns among lenders are not very difficult to understand. Higher provisioning for project finance books will affect the bottom line. It is also being argued that this will push up lending rates, making some projects unviable. On a broader level, it could arguably affect capital expenditure and overall growth. The factors driving the move at this stage remain debatable on the RBI's part, but the intention is clear. The regulator intends to ring-fence banks and NBFCs at the very beginning of the investment cycle. Although the private sector has been reluctant to increase investment in a big way, there are signs of tentative recovery. It is worth remembering that it was mainly the infrastructure and project financing that caused the twin balance sheet crisis of the last decade, which pushed up gross non-performing assets in the banking system to double digits. Evidently, the RBI doesn't want the banking system to be in the same spot again. It has taken a lot of time, effort, and capital to rebuild the banking sector balance sheet, which is now in the best position in over a decade, and must be protected.

To be sure, the proposal is at the draft stage and the RBI is expected to take suggestions from all stakeholders. However, the final decision by the RBI should be based on two basic principles, which should be acceptable to all stakeholders. First, the stability and soundness of the banking system is paramount. There should not be a compromise on this aspect. India witnessed in the last decade what lax lending can lead to. A capital-expenditure cycle based on inappropriate lending standards and the resultant economic growth cannot be sustained. The RBI should also explain why provisioning of 5 per cent would be appropriate.

Second, there should not be a distinction between projects in the public and private sectors. It has been argued that public-sector projects should attract lower provisioning. This can put the private sector at an artificial disadvantage, which should be avoided. The norms should also not differ for private and public-sector banks. On the whole, higher provisioning could discourage some banks from lending to long-gestation projects, which are inherently riskier. It is worth noting that Indian firms are overdependent on banks and NBFCs due to the lack of a vibrant corporate debt market. It is prudent to guard banks from financing long-term projects, but policymakers must also work on creating enabling avenues for raising long-term debt finance.

Xi's balancing act

China tests EU cohesion on Ukraine and trade

Trade and Ukraine were on top of the agenda during Chinese President Xi Jinping's first visit to Europe in five years, but reaching a closer understanding on either issue appeared elusive. As with the hectic diplomacy between Washington and Beijing over the past year and a half, Mr Xi's six-day visit appeared to achieve little more than emphasise each side's agenda and further engagement; if anything, his three-country itinerary, which included Hungary and Serbia, appeared to test the cohesion of Europe. Coming close after the visit by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to China last month, the main item on the agenda of a trilateral meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron and European Union (EU) Chairperson Ursula von der Leyen was China's support for Russia in its war against Ukraine, principally in the transfer of dual-use technology. Ms Leyden said the EU also counted on China to use its influence on Russia to end its war against Ukraine. The EU, however, has been relatively circumspect in its responses on this issue; it has not followed the example of the US, its ally, which has imposed sanctions on select Chinese institutions they suspect of extending support to Russia.

Mr Xi's position did not suggest a rethink. Though he diplomatically went along with Mr Macron's call for a global truce during the summer Olympics in Paris, he has not committed to participate in a peace conference on Ukraine in June and has maintained that the crisis must end through negotiation, underlining the fact that he had not instigated the war, nor was part of it and had no intention of participating in it. On trade, the EU leaders' argument for more balanced trade and better market access did not move the needle. China retaliated against France's role in the EU's investigation into Chinese electric vehicles by launching an anti-dumping investigation into European brandy, especially French cognac, which is popular in China. But apart from lifting restrictions on German beef and apples earlier, Mr Xi has not budged on the question of wide EU market access. On the bloc's concern on China's state subsidies to its electric vehicles, Mr Xi maintained his earlier stance that the industry had played a major role in alleviating the impact of climate change.

Mr Xi's visit to Hungary and Serbia, however, is likely to have sent a discomfiting message to mainland Europe. Hungary is an EU member where growing authoritarianism is testing the limits of EU membership. Serbia has been a candidate for membership since 2012. Both countries are pro-Russian in orientation and also among the first to sign on to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) programme. The Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway is a flagship project of this initiative and is part of a "16+1" initiative by China to promote business and investment relations with central and eastern European countries on the edge of the European Union. It is expected to connect to Greece, creating an unprecedented land-to-sea passage through Eastern Europe to Mediterranean ports, offering China geostrategic entry and proximity to EU markets. On the whole, Mr Xi may well have gained more from his trip to Europe in furthering China's national interests than the European Union did from hosting him.

India's unhealthy truths



BOOK REVIEW

DEEPA NSH DUGGAL

Blowing the lid off medical malpractices in India's healthcare system, Sumanth C Raman's exposé, *Sick Business*, packs solid arguments backed by facts and extensive research. "India's healthcare system, in one word, is horror," writes Dr Raman, who has over 25 years of experience in medicine. He intersperses every argument he makes with disclaimers that his aim is not to demean the country's healthcare system but to "shake you [readers] out of complacency". He argues that the survival of a patient in India often depends on God's grace or luck.

In a way, the book is prescient. A week after it hit the shelves, the Supreme Court cracked down on Baba Ramdev's

Patanjali, asking for a public apology after the Indian Medical Association (IMA) accused Ramdev of a smear campaign against the Covid vaccination drive and modern medicine.

Dr Raman is aware that he is walking a slippery slope. At a time when any criticism of modern medicine can be misconstrued as an alignment with pseudoscientific approaches to healthcare — homeopathy, ayurveda, *et al* — he treads the path of exposing the flaws in India's healthcare system with caution.

He begins by addressing India's Covid vaccination drive, highlighting how Bharat Biotech received permission for emergency use of the vaccine Covaxin without putting out the trial data in the public domain. Subsequently, the World Health Organization (WHO) suspended the supply of Covaxin to United Nations (UN) agencies for "less-than-stringent manufacturing practices".

A couple weeks after the book's release, AstraZeneca admitted Covishield can cause a rare side effect leading to the formation of blood clots. This is another

slippery slope to navigate for Dr Raman because any questions on the legitimacy and efficacy of vaccines can be misunderstood as an alignment with the anti-vaxxer agenda where conspiracy theories on side-effects run amok.

Beyond the vaccine controversy, Dr Raman details many horrifying accounts of medical negligence in his book — from an aspiring athlete dying during surgery to an aspiring badminton player losing his vision because of an error. These experiences highlight the abysmal state of healthcare in India, but I couldn't help but worry that these might cause the unsuspecting reader to grow averse to seeking medical help in times of need.

It is possible, of course, to apply your judgement in distinguishing between the quacks and genuine practitioners but in a country like India, where fear mongering is rampant, such stories could well make people suspicious of modern medicine. So to give credit where due: Dr Raman clarifies his intentions frequently lest they be misread — he isn't trying to dissuade readers from seeking help but rather opening their eyes to an

institution that has become increasingly exploitative and corrupt.

Out of all the chapters in the book, perhaps the most compelling is the one titled "Is Big Pharma influencing your treatment?" Dr Raman offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the unholy nexus between doctors and the Big Pharma companies. He narrates a familiar story of a doctor accepting a business class ticket by a Big Pharma company for a sales event overseas. In exchange, the doctor is expected to prescribe their drug to most of his patients — except that this doctor now wants a business class seat for his wife, too. The ground-level sales reps of Big Pharma companies often struggle to meet these unreasonable demands.

Dr Raman explains Big Pharma companies recover their clinical trial costs by liaising with chemists and doctors, both of whom can boost the sales of their latest drug. The chemist boosts sales by saying "no other brand is available", "the other drug isn't

effective" and "no stock" and the doctors over-prescribe these medicines. "Doctors often keep track of their prescriptions and have a good idea of the revenue they generate for the company," Dr Raman observes.

As Big Pharma colludes with doctors and chemists, it also plays with the law by finding loopholes that strictly prohibit direct advertising of medicines to the public. Add to it the ethical violations during clinical trials — forcefully picking up volunteers, making them sign consent forms in a language they cannot read, lack of transparency around clinical data for

drugs, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Though healthcare in India is marred by inequality both in terms of access and quality of treatment, the privileged are not spared either. "If you think only the government sector is apathetic, think again," Dr Raman writes, detailing many instances of criminal negligence that shook up the

Making a better Indian Union

The idea that the southern states are being penalised for better performance overlooks the full costs and benefits of being part of the Union



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

There is a growing clamour among some prominent politicians and commentators from South India, now labelled "The South Tax Movement", who argue that they are not receiving a fair deal as part of the Indian Union. They contend that their relative prosperity has resulted in them transferring resources to poorer northern states. They submit that Karnataka gets only 15 paise for every rupee of tax paid, and Tamil Nadu gets 29 paise, whereas Uttar Pradesh gets ₹2.73, and Bihar gets ₹7.06. They assert that they are being penalised for better economic management, while the poorer northern states are being rewarded through fiscal transfers for not performing as well.

This resentment may increase as incomes across states diverge further. But it's not just a North-South issue, it's a rich vs poor state issue. States like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, and Delhi also contribute more than they get back, and net beneficiaries also include eastern states like Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal.

Similar complaints are also heard in other economic unions such as the the European Union (EU), where richer northern countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark feel they are overcontributing compared to, until recently, less well-managed countries in Southern Europe, such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain, and poorer East European countries that are converging but still need help. The large net fiscal contribution required by the UK may have been a factor, though not the only one, in its decision, which it now regrets, to leave the EU.

But fiscal transfers alone do not capture the full costs and benefits of a Union. The more industri-

alised, richer countries get a huge captive market in the EU in which they can sell their products. Those that have adopted the euro as their currency also get a huge competitive advantage as their labour becomes cheaper (relative to labour productivity), while that of the relatively poor countries in the euro — such as Spain, Greece, and Portugal — more expensive. The Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation showed that German growth was 0.5 per cent per year higher due to the euro — largely because its national currency the D-Mark would have been stronger, and, as a result, exports were lower. Similar benefits also accrue to Austria and the Netherlands, and even to Denmark, which is not in the EU but keeps its krone pegged to it. So, while the richer parts of the EU subsidise the poorer parts through fiscal transfers, they also gain by having a captive market and an undervalued currency that improves their competitiveness across the world.

Similar benefits accrue to richer states in the Indian Union. And they are not just those in the south, but also include states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, as well as the PHD states Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and the hill states of Himachal, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim. Labour productivity in these states is three-four times higher than in poorer states like Bihar, UP, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, giving them a competitive advantage. This attracts more new investments and even faster growth. All this makes convergence between richer and poorer states more difficult. Businesses in these states also get a captive internal market — further enhanced by the introduction of the goods and services tax. Companies from Coimbatore,



IF TRUTH BE TOLD

AJAY CHHIBBER

Voter's choice: Mediocrity or prosperity?

India's economic future will be significantly impacted by the outcome of the general election, for political economy reasons. The economy is flailing, assailed by a triple whammy of inequality, declining prosperity, and structural weakness. Rural distress has been a feature of the economy, accentuated by Covid.

Agriculture, employing 45 per cent of the working population, grew by just 1.8 per cent per annum last year. As a result, 40 per cent of Indians receive subsidised free food. Urban employment languishes. Over 100 million young people are neither working nor in education or training. Hordes of youth waste the best years of their lives competing for a static pool of low-end government jobs or working in the informal sector for pitiful wages, as the share of manufacturing has declined to a low of 13 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Like the French Bourbon monarchs, the elites eat their cake inside gated communities, growing fat on capital gains and booming stock markets. Real wages are stagnant, even as crony capitalists spend lavishly and hedge options by transferring their wealth and children abroad.

There is no coherent long-term economic strategy or vision. Sharply deepening inequality between the North and the South is giving rise to existential political economy questions, which remain largely unaddressed.

In the face of these challenges, the ruling party's manifesto offers little except gloss and subsidies. It does not even speak of the unemployment challenge or acknowledge rural distress. Only the Home Ministry seems to have a clear strategy on the use of coercive power to implement things promised in the 2019 manifesto. In an interview yesterday, the Home Minister talked of stock market performance and rupee currency settlement as the key economic aims of the next administration, seemingly overlooking the core afflictions of the Indian economy.

On the above track record, no electorate that votes with long or short-term economic considerations in mind in 2024 would deliver the same (or an increased) mandate as it did in 2019. Hence, if the present administration gets an absolute majority or better, it will be very clear that the economic fortunes of the country have little or no impact on electoral outcomes. Conversely, if a coalition government of any hue comes to power, then, for these very reasons, the opposite will be true: It will be "the economy, stupid".

What happens then? In 2019, a senior Congress leader dismissed any ideas on structural transformation and asked me to suggest "small economic reforms". This seems to have changed. The Congress manifesto presents both an acknowledgement and a diagnosis of the structural challenges facing the nation and the need for bold action to reduce inequality, harvest prosperity, and foster social justice. This is reinforced in public statements by elected party leaders.

The Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party manifestos both include the usual promises of subsidies and reservations for different socio-economic groups. While these measures are necessary, they are not sufficient to tackle the structural challenges. On agriculture, the Congress makes important proposals to reform agricultural finance, frame a sound agriculture import-export policy, and tackle the thorny minimum support price question. It particularly acknowledges the land question, and recognises the need to restore the balance between labour and capital amidst declining real wages and a rising share of profits. The best proposal is to provide a year of paid apprenticeship on demand to every diploma holder and college graduate to improve the quality, breadth and employability of the workforce.

The DMK is the other party that presents a coher-

Bengaluru and Chennai with higher productivity can sell products in a large protected internal pan-India market.

Free internal migration is another benefit in the EU — estimated to increase EU income by €100-230 billion over 10 years. Just as in the EU, in India as well, growing labour migration from the poorer states to richer ones benefits both the workers from poorer states, who obtain relatively high-paying jobs in construction and as farm labour, and the recipient states. Migrants fill jobs that the richer local population is not willing to do anymore, and allows them to move into more skilled, better-paid work. Restricting jobs to locals — proposed by some states — will reduce, not enhance, overall welfare.

Of course, economics alone does not drive tensions within a Union. The UK's exit from the EU was driven by factors that were largely non-economic. One ticking time bomb for the Indian Union — with a pronounced North vs South cleavage — is that India has not adjusted the state-wise allocation of parliamentary seats since the 1991 census. The constitutional requirement to adjust the seats after 2026 means that the disparity between the actual seats and those that would be allocated, if based on population, will be huge. Milan Vaishnav has shown that due to much faster population growth in the North than in the South, Bihar and UP, which already dominate Parliament, as well as Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, would gain over 30 seats. The losers would be the southern states, Odisha and West Bengal. Some solutions to this can be found, such as increasing the seats in Parliament, dividing the larger states, or giving smaller states more seats in the Rajya Sabha to balance out the Lok Sabha. India will need to confront this time bomb between 2026 and the census of 2031.

In the meantime, the issue of fiscal allocations confronting the 16th Finance Commission is imminent. But in debating the costs and benefits of belonging to the Indian Union, the richer states — including the ones from the South — must realise that they gain enormous other economic benefits from the Union, while they subsidise the poorer states through net fiscal transfers. The real issue that India must confront is that the gap between the richer and poorer states is widening despite more funds going to the poorer states. Improving the gap in education, health, and economic infrastructure is key to getting more investment to the poorer states. Ensuring that the net fiscal transfers are directed at addressing these gaps in the poorer (Bihar, MP, Jharkhand, UP and Rajasthan) and lagging states (West Bengal) is key to having a more convergent growth process across the country, leading to a better Indian Union by 2047.

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ent social justice manifesto, with specific proposals to improve manufacturing and high-value service jobs, building on past human development and growth achievements.

These are promising beginnings, but much more needs to be done. Financing is not the problem — to paraphrase Keynes, "If you can do it, you can afford it." Even ₹1 trillion spent on the apprenticeship proposal will yield massive returns if it creates skills for jobs. A stable, high-productivity agricultural sector has the potential to convert a perceived liability into a tangible asset for inclusive growth, as will social justice measures that remove barriers to human development and participation. The key lies in ensuring that these measures are implemented substantially. Ragged progress, similar to what we saw with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, will neither be acceptable nor affordable going forward.

There is no shortage of other big-ticket policy ideas. My own proposal of "Jahaan ghar wahin naukri" (jobs where people live) will address both the migration problem and the North-South divide, and could form the basis for a renewed national political settlement. An urban NREGS coupled with the release of government land towards achieving a slum-free India, a renewed focus on manufacturing to meet home market demand, stopping import of ₹200 shirts from Bangladesh and Vietnam, and a focus on pro-poor infrastructure (bus stations over airports, pavements over freeways) resonate with grassroots workers across political parties.

This election is key. The present day voting population is deciding whether economic transformation will determine its electoral choice. If it chooses otherwise, it will have chosen economic obscurity and mediocrity over prosperity and inclusive transformation. Its decision on June 4 will reflect the outcome of our collective vote.

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private hospital chains. Many of the private hospitals built in large acres of land occupy space for medical equipment but are poorly staffed.

As Dr Raman glides from one traumatising and gut-wrenching anecdote to another, he asks a pertinent question: Why does a poor healthcare system not evoke as much anger in Indians? Why have we become so complacent? Why don't we call out the medical malpractices we see around us? More importantly — how did a profession that was earlier considered a hallmark of compassion and altruism fall prey to greed and money-making motives?

He acknowledges that there are doctors, honest ones, who are swimming against the tide, trying to keep the system afloat. However, much reform is still needed for us to imagine a future where equitable and accessible healthcare is no longer a distant dream for Indians.

Sick Business will make you fearful of the next time you need an IV drip or an emergency room visit. It speaks volumes about the state of healthcare in our country.

The reviewer is a freelance film and book critic based in New Delhi. He is @Deepansh75 on X

Tackling Turbulence Is Part of Flight Plan

Tata has the capacity to tackle complex mergers

The Air India Express crisis, which led to the cancellation of over 170 flights since Tuesday, has been brought under control. The union, representing a section of the airline's employees, said on Thursday that crew members who had reported sick will return to duty 'immediately', and the airline's management has agreed to reinstate 25 crew members who were sacked. The airline will be merged with AIX Connect, formerly AirAsia India, another Tata-owned budget carrier, and the staff was unhappy with service terms. This isn't the first instance of disquiet over assimilation of the four airlines that Tatas own. Vistara pilots had to be pacified last month over service terms after the airline merged with Air India.

These flare-ups, although avoidable, are expected from a merger as complicated as that of Air India, given the diversity of ownership and management cultures of the airlines involved. Vistara and AIX Connect started as Tatas' JVs with Singapore Airlines and Malaysian AirAsia, respectively. Air India and Air India Express were state-owned and struggling under debt and losses. The group's plan to revive Air India involves negotiations with unions to align working conditions post-merger. This is tricky at the best of times, and even more so when dealing with such diversity. However, Tata Group has the bandwidth to manage this complex amalgamation with its record of domestic and international acquisitions.



Tata's strategy for its airline business centres around fleet expansion. Demand for pilots and cabin crew to operate Air India's new aircraft, and those of competitor IndiGo, is projected to remain robust for the next decade, as over 1,000 aircraft are set to join India's commercial airline fleet. Existing employees stand to gain in an industry grappling with a shortage of training facilities, considering growth forecasts for India's aviation sector. This favourable outlook should facilitate resolution of differences between staff and Tata management without causing undue inconvenience to passengers.

Social Network That Needs Connecting

Robust and well-laid-out transport systems are critical because they facilitate access to work, healthcare and education. Yet, India's focus on improving this sector has been limited, leading to commuter harassment, delays, loss of revenue and high environmental costs. According to a report in this paper, GoI is planning a revamp of the urban transport sector. This would help integrate metro and bus networks with an emphasis on clean fuel, incentivise greening of intracity goods transport through small trucks and align bus and metro routes. Financial support could be offered for electrification of small commercial vehicles that move goods within cities.

While there are several reasons for India's transportation system being fragmented and under-resourced, one key reason is the lack of a holistic approach. Close to half a dozen central ministries, including roads, railways, housing, civil aviation and shipping, form the backbone of the sector. Almost all of them work in isolation, with minimal or no coordination. This has often sparked discussions on the need for an omnibus transport ministry.



In 2014, the National Transport Development Policy Committee recommended setting up a single unified transport ministry at the Centre, with a similar merger of transport functions at the state level. But all plans remain on paper. In the last five years, Union road transport minister Nitin Gadkari has also spoken about the need to have an integrated, multimodal transport planning body. Such integration, if it finally happens, should prioritise seamless travel, enhanced affordability, reliability, safety and, crucially, align with India's recent climate pledges, given that the sector contributes 14% — and rising — of GHG emissions.

JUST IN JEST
Scientists trying on an unironed look isn't about absent-mindedness

The Wrinkled Look's For Saving the Planet

Starting coming week every Monday, the boffins at Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) will get less starchy as they join the very Muggles-sounding 'Wrinkles Acche Hain' — WAH — campaign. The plan: CSIR staff will wear unironed clothes to their offices, a subtle (sic) sartorial nudge to all around on the importance of saving energy and environment from CO₂ emissions that ironing clothes releases. Wah, indeed. Before you dismiss this crumpled couture effort, remember the plan kills three birds with one stone. One, there's the greenwashing thing — saving the planet without breaking the ironing board. Then comes the 'carefully careless' style statement. Third, it's a subtle flex on their scientific prowess on green issues. And, if wrinkled clothes don't work, then can always opt for curated wrinkles, a.k.a. pleats, that Issey Miyake invented in the late 1980s.

So, next time you see a CSIR scientist scrunching up his shirt or her sari, remember, he or she is saving the world. But, remember, the wrinkling mustn't mean a longitudinal one from a clothesline, but rather minor folds in the fabric, as if you pulled it out of a wardrobe in a hurry. There is a fine line between looking chic and looking like you just wrestled with a herd of sheep. After all, you don't want a 'saving the world' look to come across as sloppiness.

EYES WIDE SHUT While money matters in Indian elections, it's no guarantee for victory

Does It Pay to Poll Dance?



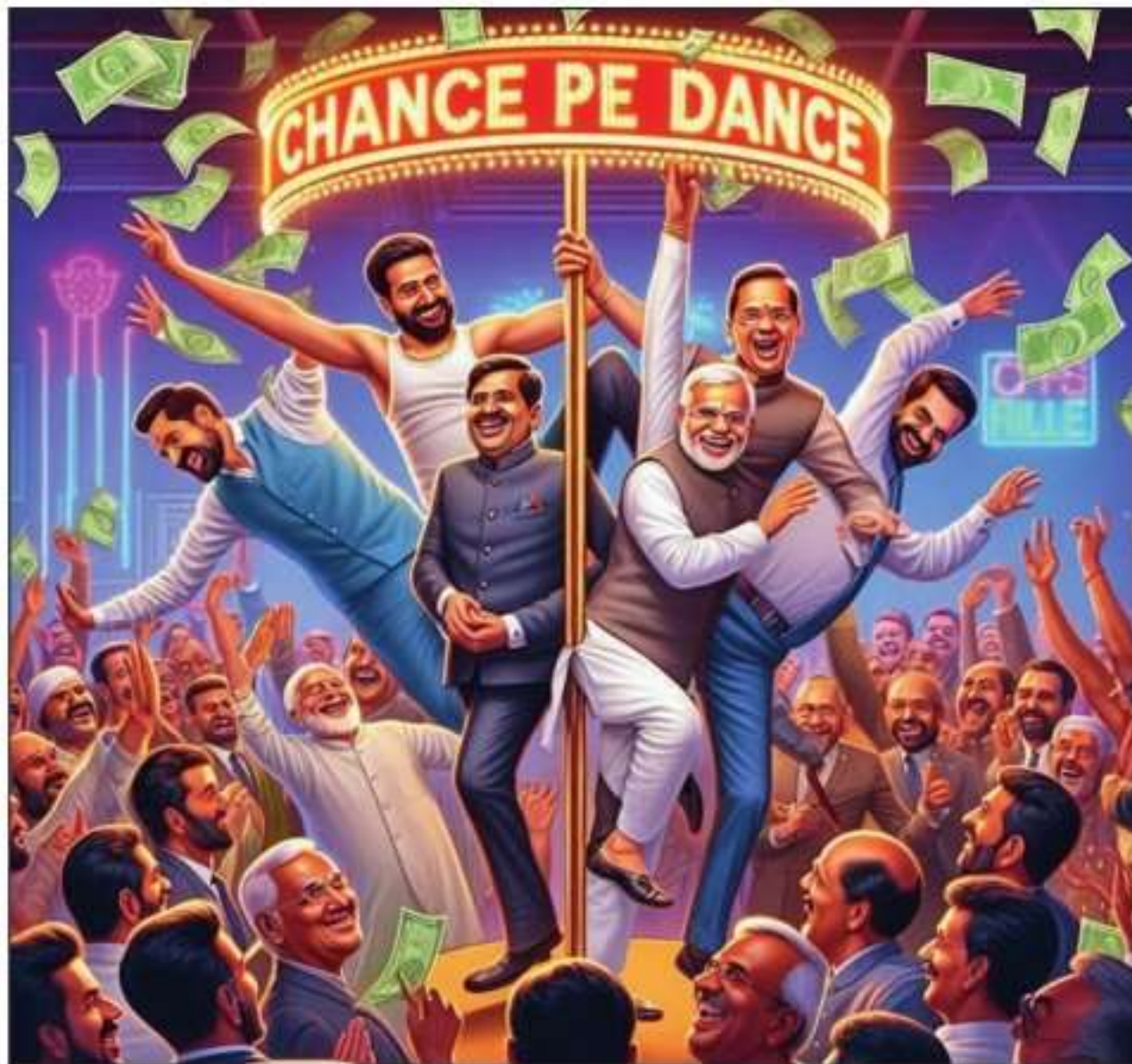
Neeraj Kaushal

The most common commentary on the 2024 general elections is that their outcome is a foregone conclusion. It's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'guarantee' that NDA will return with 400-plus seats. Even if the outcome falls short by 100 seats, BJP will remain comfortably in power for another five years. So, it may be a bit strange to also hear that BJP is projected to spend more than double of what it did in the 2019 general elections.

2024 Lok Sabha elections are the most expensive polls not just in India's history but in the world's, according to The Economist. Centre for Media Studies (CMS) has projected an expenditure of ₹1.35 lakh crore, double the amount spent in 2019. In 2019, BJP outspent Congress by almost a factor of three. This year's gap will most likely increase given that BJP is flush with funds, and Congress has its accounts 'frozen' — or, rather, some of the party's accounts 'attached' by the I-T department for alleged non-payment of dues as per I-T rules.

Can you imagine what political parties would have spent if the electoral field was more competitive, and the election was not a 'foregone conclusion'? In the US, which has the second-highest spending on elections, elections are fought on small margins. For instance, the difference in the projected polling averages for Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the forthcoming elections, based on polls during April, was less than 2%, with the margin falling to less than 1% in the second half of the month, according to psephologist Nate Silver's 538 website on ABC News.

In the last general election, BJP spent 45-55% of the total, according to CMS estimates. Assuming the same proportion, in 2024, BJP would spend what all parties together spent five years ago. These numbers don't include spending



Items numbered

on ads, highlighting state schemes and achievements that appear across media platforms, and overt and covert promotions of politicians' image.

These ads are paid for by governments, not parties. And these numbers don't include expenditure on branding 'India' during G20 events.

Meanwhile, Congress' expenditure has fallen. In 2009, CMS estimates suggest that the party had spent somewhat more than BJP. However, in the following two general elections, its spending on elections remained stagnant and, adjusted for inflation, was lower than in 2009. Congress' coffers were shrinking, as was its influence. Meanwhile, BJP's estimated spending on general elections rose almost four-fold.

Some of the increase is neutralised by inflation. Part of the increase reflects spending on more sophisticated, professional and tech-savvy campaigns, and part on increased spending on social media.

One must add that, of course, BJP's spending on elections may not amount to its victories. But it does project the party's rising influence. Note that while I report the averages, CMS estimates provide a band, thus allowing for a margin of error.

Yes, money, indeed, makes a candidate more competitive. But this should not in any way be taken to mean that higher spending suggests candidates are buying elections. Simon Chauchard's 2018



Imagine what parties would have spent if the electoral field was more competitive, and the election was not a 'foregone conclusion'

ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai, 'Electoral Handouts in Mumbai Elections: The Cost of Political Competition', conducted over several years, shows that while it's not uncommon for political parties to give gifts — and even cash — to voters, these expenditures are not the primary cause of rising expenditures. Candidates spend most of the

Incumbents, because of their position, have more resources and money. But they are routinely defeated



money on paying wages to party workers, bringing voters to rallies and using social media.

Research on electoral funding provides interesting insights into the role of personal wealth on electoral outcomes. Neelanjana Sircar investigated data on more than 20,000 parliamentary candidates during 2004-14 in his 2018 study, 'Money in Elections: The Role of Personal Wealth in Election Outcomes', and found that candidates with more liquid wealth were likelier to win.

This is partly because political parties select candidates who are far wealthier on average, so that they can self-finance their campaign. However, Sircar's findings remain valid, even after controlling for party selection.

Money becomes less important when there is a wave. An important aspect of Indian elections is that ruling parties face anti-incumbency. Incumbents, because of their position, have more resources and money. But they are routinely defeated. Thus, while money matters, voters in Indian democracy are highly sophisticated and trounce incumbents who did not perform.

So, why is BJP spending so much when it is sure to win by a huge margin? A simple answer: it's spending more than necessary to keep Modi's 'guarantee'. It is also possible that the ruling party at the Centre is not as confident as it sounds. Which is why it may be spending as much as it can in the hope that money will help it win the elections. To get the correct answer, though, you'll just have to wait for June 4.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

To Choose, Or Not To

NAJIB SHAH

There are choices to be made every day. Important political choices are made during election season, which we normally exercise once every five years. A choice indicates a preference for one over another. It could be as trivial as choosing a sweet over a namkeen, which only indicates a sweet tooth, or it could be an issue involving right and wrong, where morality comes into play. If a person cheats the government on taxes, dupes a business partner or lies, he consciously chooses to do something wrong. This has unethical overtones. It's a choice to do something consciously wrong.

There are situations when we are confronted with more complex moral dilemmas, such as the classic 'trolley problem'. A train is moving on a railway track and about to run over five people; there is an option available to divert the train to another track where only one person is likely to be impacted. What is the choice we would make? Thankfully, very few of us are confronted with such morally challenging situations. The choices that we must make are less complex, but they define us. What each of us must do is weigh all options and the consequences, and do the right thing. Our choices should reflect our hopes and not our fears. As the Bard has said, the choices we make dictate the lives we lead.

Chat Room

Truce Behind Hamas Stonewall

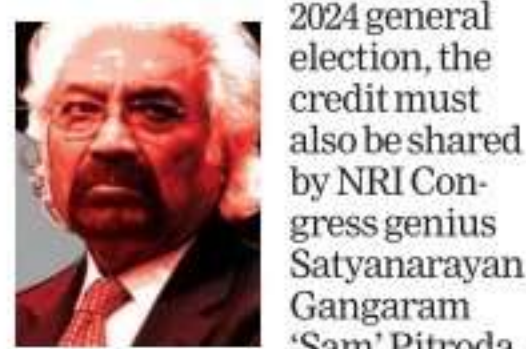
Apropos 'Vietnam in Palestine' by Ateesh Tankha (May 9), Hamas has no legal standing and has been disowned by the PLA/Fatah since 2007 for its violent agenda. A premature ceasefire by Israel followed by unilateral evacuation from Gaza would only create conditions for a repeat of Oct 7, 2023. How can Israel, by itself, create conditions for a two-state solution when Hamas' agenda is to eliminate Israel from the river to the sea, by leveraging its 400-mile tunnel network for periodic terrorism?

The failure of the Camp David and Oslo Accords shows that past American injunctions and centre-stage mediations have backfired. Hamas is neither keen nor authorised to negotiate a solution, let alone a two-state solution. The Arab states have learnt from bitter experiences over 75 years with the Palestinians that negotiations will not work — none of them is interested in the rebuilding of Gaza or helping to maintain a tenuous peace. A military solution to Hamas and a dismantling of the elaborate tunnel network in Gaza is a priority before any ceasefire.

R SRINIVASAN
Chennai

Pitroda BJP's Star Campaigner

This refers to the news report, 'Pitroda Forced to Quit Post as his Comments Give BJP Ammunition to Target Cong' (May 9). If BJP gets 400-plus seats in the



2024 general election, the credit must also be shared by NRI Congress genius Satyanarayan Gangaram Sam Pitroda, 82, born in Odisha from Gujarati lineage. First, he must clarify which category of Indians he belongs to: Chinese, African, Arab or Indian-American. Further, ECI must declare Pitroda man of the match, or elections, for garnering most votes for BJP through his liberal no balls, wides, full tosses and overthrows.

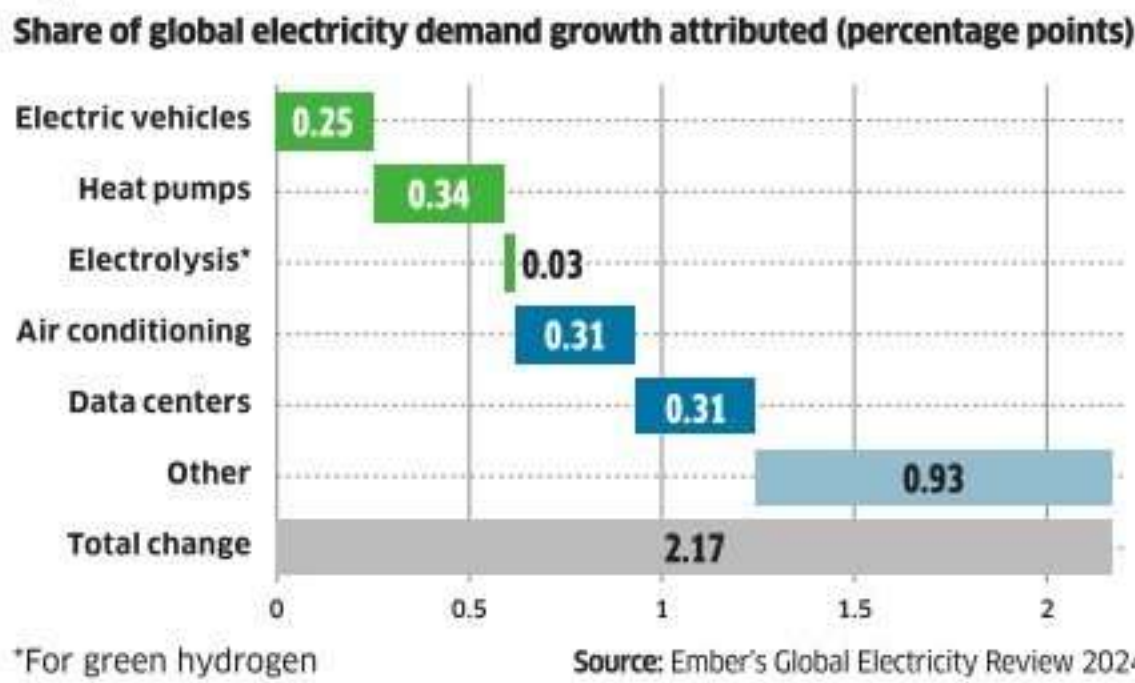
Modi should reward Pitroda with a Padma Shri for working tirelessly for BJP's victory with his ideas on Indians' appearances, inheritance laws and people wasting time on Ram lalla. Congress does not need to fight political opponents to win elections but has to fight its own motor-mouths whose canvassing for the party brings more votes for Modi. For the downfall of Kaurava, one Shakuni was enough, and Pitroda is on this mission for Congress in Kali Yuga.

PARTHASARATHY MANDADI
Tirupati

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Need for Power

Five fast-growing technologies — EVs, heat pumps, electrolyzers for green hydrogen, data centres and air conditioners — are already noticeably contributing to electricity demand growth, accounting for over half of the world's demand growth in 2023, according to a report by Ember. For instance, the report said, the 72 TWh of additional demand from EVs in 2023 was enough to displace over 260,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day, had it been burned in ICE vehicles...



This AI Tide Ain't Ebbing



Anil Nair

The biggest takeaway of Stanford University's AI Index Report 2024 is that AI has surpassed human performance on several benchmarks. These include image classification, basic reading comprehension, English understanding, visual reasoning and multitask language understanding. It's also getting there vis-a-vis competition-level math. As a result, it's only natural that the world continues to be in the thrall of AI, overlooking some of its contradictions.

► **Valuations** In the world of private equity AI stands out as path-breaking in its potential. Goldman Sachs had put AI investment burgeoning to \$200 bn by 2025. This now appears conservative. All that optimism is widening the arena of impact and extending to allied industries like semiconductors, servers, storage, networking, data management and analytics.

And, yet, with Inflection AI closing its original business after raising \$1.5 bn, Stability AI paring down its people and business, and Anthropic doing everything to close the \$1.8 bn gap between its sales and expenses, some are predicting the end of the AI boom.

AI-induced frenzy is visible in equity markets, too. Nvidia, which controls 80% of the chip market at the high end, is single-handedly pushing Wall Street performance to record levels. Its market capitalisation is around \$2.22 tn, up \$1 tn in nine months, and catching up with Apple at \$2.83 tn, which conceded leadership early this year to Microsoft, now valued at about \$3.02 tn. Microsoft is in the process of pivoting the company on this tech.

Traditional methods would rate valuations of many of these entities as overly optimistic, considering the field's nas-

cent and complex nature and uncertainty around quantifying potential.

► **Mega-investments** The biggies seem more certain about AI's future. Microsoft, Meta and Alphabet have spent north of \$32 bn in Jan-Mar 2024 to create new data centres. Microsoft and OpenAI are working on a \$100 bn-plus project, to be funded by the former, involving advanced AI data centres and a supercomputer called 'Stargate', to be unveiled in 2028, and a smaller one, may be in 2026. The programme also involves deployment of expensive, custom-designed chips.

Many others, including countries like Saudi Arabia, are racing to build supercomputers to push AI. Jeff Bezos' Explore Investments, Amazon, Nvidia, Microsoft and OpenAI are investing in Figure AI. It's an OpenAI and Microsoft startup that aims to raise \$675 mn at a pre-money valuation of \$2 bn to create a human-like robot to execute jobs dangerous for human beings.

► **Hiring paradox** Companies in the ITeS space are struggling to board the bandwagon. Urgency has increased with the advent of GenAI, accelerated by large enterprise deals swinging towards AI-powered transformation. Infosys claims to have reskilled 80% of its employees, and TCS 350,000. Hiring by IT majors — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, Cognizant and Cap Gemini — has declined collectively by over 2 lakh in the last year. Is that a consequence of

the AI revolution? Companies, however, have unprecedented urgency over hiring chief AI Officers.

► **Social impact** A recent Oxford University-Cognizant report, 'New Work, New World', which analyses the future of jobs and economic impact of AI in the US, states that by 2032, AI could inject \$1 tn into the US GDP by way of additional value. The model examines 18,000 tasks driving the US economy and the impact on 1,000 jobs composed of these tasks.

It concludes that 90% of the jobs could experience some degree of disruption over the next decade. But pre-emptive steps to overhaul business and build trust and transparency would lay the foundation for ensuring that AI is a positive force. Interestingly, the report says, less-experienced workers will show greater productivity gains than skilled workers.

One of the imperatives of the AI boom is the inherent need for microtasks like transcribing files, translation, identifying objects and annotation (labelling). Did you know that there are more than 4 lakh annotators worldwide, and this figure is likely to go up 15 times to 6 mn by 2040? So, is AI going to be the great social leveller?

We are seeking to wrap our minds around all this, and ethical implications, regulatory change, how global adoption will gain traction, how humans will collaborate with AI, the environmental impact of AI technologies, advances in AI research, and more.

A recent EY CEO Outlook Pulse Survey for India reports that 84% of respondents are reallocating, or raising new capital, to fund AI-related investments, even though 80% of them say that the uncertainty makes it challenging to act quickly. 62% feel that GenAI's rapid progress and changing regulatory environment restrict their capital allocation decision-making.

Despite all these contradictions and uncertainties, there's no slowing the AI juggernaut down.



With you, for you, always

The writer is founder, ThinkStreet

Bell Curves



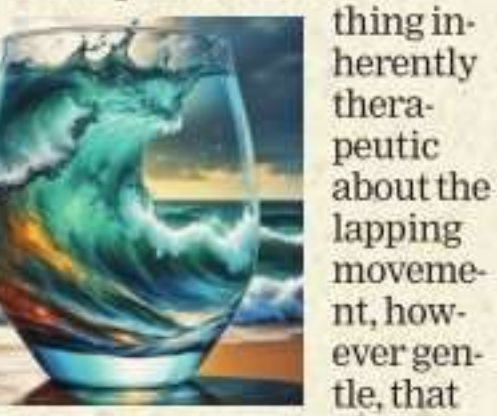
I have no issue with freebies, provided they conform to trickle-down theory.



Watching Water

Watching water, in its many forms, offers a transcendental pleasure. Whether it's gentle waves lapping against the shore, the mesmerising dance of a babbling brook or the majestic spread of the ocean before us, water has an undeniable allure. In fact, look long enough into a clear glass of water and you may feel a slice of the deep sea.

One of the greatest pleasures of watching water lies in its ability to induce a sense of calm, something the Japanese know about with their koi ponds. There's some-



thing inherently therapeutic about the lapping movement, however gentle, that transcends time. Observing water can provide a respite from the ebb and flow of daily life.

Moreover, water possesses a remarkable versatility. From delicate patterns formed by raindrops on a windowpane, to the dynamic power of waves crashing against the shore, it constantly reminds us that beauty and awe are contained in all things big and small.

Watching water is meditation, a plug-in to the world's rhythms, whether in the stillness of a glass or surges in ocean currents. It's feeling the pulse of the planet.



CONTRAPUNTO

The only vegetables I eat are lettuce in a burger

-CHANCE THE RAPPER

Cereal Offenders

New diet guidelines for Indians show how unhealthy the love for carbs is. It's fruits and veggies that need to be No. 1

Instead of living to eat, how about eating to live healthier, longer? Because the most persuasive data point in *The Dietary Guidelines for Indians* released this week is that 56% of our total disease burden is thanks to unhealthy diets. But can this ICMR-NIN effort deliver gravely needed diet reforms? Only if it's widely disseminated and gets meaningful policy support.

Rice vice | That the guidelines are designed to be flexible and practical is important – to accommodate diverse food cultures of India and also diverse nutrition needs of, say, infants and athletes. But the general takeaways are loud and clear: And the primary one is that India is OD-ing on cereals. Leaving it short on essential macronutrients and micronutrients.

Pyramid recipes | For many if not most Indians, the food pyramid featured shown here would be news. It has fruits and vegetables occupying the biggest and bottom shelf. Cereals sit in the narrower second shelf, but they don't even have this all to themselves. They have to share it with nutri cereals, aka millets. Once upon a time, millets were a traditional diet. Govt policies and markets took decades to throw them out of our kitchen. Bringing them back cannot now happen at pace without bold changes in the MSP-PDS schema.

Contaminated choices | Against the recommendation of 500g, Indians eat just 100g to 200g of vegetables and fruits a day. But there is an anxiety common to even those who overcome the price and/or taste barriers to switching chawal for salad: is it overladen with pesticides? Dietary guidelines can help guide individuals to make better choices. But this effort has to be matched by regulators and other authorities, for it to truly pay off.

Protein trouble | The guidelines are dense and experts will debate them over time. One issue that has already raised eyebrows is how heavily they come down on protein powders. And sure, these should be used under medical guidance. On the other hand, share of calories from protein sources has been found to be only 6-8% in India compared to 29% in the EAT-Lancet reference diet. The guidelines do recommend increased intake of pulses/fish/poultry/meat/egg. Separately, on your way to work today what kind of food kiosks did you see? The way public licences keep flooding railway platforms to airports with junk food shows our heart is still in bread and bhatura, chawal and chowmein.



Coloured Questions

That not all Indians 'look' the same isn't news. But Pitroda's is a tone-deaf way to talk diversity

We, humans, trace our genetic ancestry to Africa. But, also, we "look" different. This looking-different business is, however, a minefield created by egregious bits of past and present. So, even minimally sensible public speaking avoids this when batting for – or even against – diversity. Why Sam Pitroda chose this way to talk of India's diversity can perhaps be answered only by him. But lost in the inevitable political din that followed were voices that could intelligently talk of India's many ethnicities. This country is a union of many ethnic groups, languages, religions and cultures, born out of waves of settlement and interaction. So, of course, there are regional variations in features and skin colour. The problem comes not from diversity, but hierarchy. India is also a highly stratified society. Having dark skin might have been celebrated in poetry, song and epics, but it is also a sensitive matter for many of us. Our appearance is judged through a lens tinted by caste and colonialism. Cinema and media images usually reflect dominant aesthetics. Many Indians still struggle to meet norms of beauty alien to their roots. Given this, remarks about resembling African, Chinese and Arab people could blunder into hurtful territory. They are not plain descriptors, they can remind people of slurs hurled at them. The words are not the problem, their associations and affiliations are. It's telling that nobody objected to being compared to white people – social power sets the beauty standard. There's a good way to talk about ethnic diversity, and it is based on civic respect and inclusion. Blunt comparisons like Pitroda's give ammo to those who belittle people outside the norm, on the basis of skin colour, features, disability, caste or region. Pitroda's is a celebration of diversity that diversity can do without.



Fusion India

In our speech, food, fashion, we mix and match to get the best of all possible worlds

Jug Suraiya

I notice an ad for a supermarket sale and automatically read the message: Full Paisa Vasool ke Offers! It takes me a millisecond to realise that the message is couched in two different languages, Hindi and English, intermixed to form a dialect all its own, Hinglish. The prime promoter of Hinglish is Bollywood, itself a Hinglish formation that combines Bombay with Hollywood. Whatever its source, increasingly Hinglish – or Hindlish as some call it – is the preferred language of communication, not just in movies or advertising but also in everyday conversation, particularly among young people who like to add some mirch-masala to their gup-shup. While purists might frown at what they perceive to be the mongrelisation of two languages, which does a disservice to both, advocates of Hinglish would urge such critics to chill karo. If what comes out of our mouths is a mixture of languages, what goes into our mouths is a combo of many foods and flavours. Hungry, kya? asks an ad for a brand of pizza. And where but in India could hunger pangs be sated with a butter masala pizza? Or an aloo tikki burger? Or a hakka noodle rawa masala dosa done to a turn in asli ghee? India is as eclectic in its fashion as it is in its language and its food. A unisex khadi kurta finds a perfect match in denim jeans and kohlapuri chappals. India's innate facility for fusion, combining the seemingly incompatible, is perhaps born out of the diverse ethnicities and genetic roots we have sprung from, with diversity itself our only commonality. This is an inconvenient fact, difficult to swallow for those who would like all of us to be cast in the one common mould that they would speak on our behalf. Instead of a multiplicity of language they want us to speak just the one they authorise, eat the foods they prescribe for everyone, and dress the way they deem appropriate for all. For those who would impose a one-size-fits-all uniformity on us, India's unregenerate hotch-potch heterogeneity is enough to make them blow a fuse. Or a fusion.



jugularvein

Blood Feud In Yellow & Blue

In Andhra, polls for assembly matter more than for LS. Jagan vs Naidu is a vicious enmity but both are friends with BJP. And parivar is everything on both sides

S V Srinivas

It's a state like no other: Campaigns for Andhra's simultaneous elections on May 13 are focused squarely on its assembly contests. In Parliament, both regional parties TDP and YSRCP have more or less aligned with BJP. If TDP's Chandrababu Naidu has been in-out, and in again, with NDA, CM Jagan Reddy's YSRCP has been voting with NDA in Parliament.

Andhra NDA – a triumvirate of TDP, film star Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP) and BJP – stands to challenge incumbent YSRCP. Congress, CPI and CPM are also in the fray. Leading Congress is YS Sharmila, Jagan's sister who is contesting from Kadapa, YSRCP's flagship LS constituency. Neither Modi nor any national issues, whether Ram Mandir, abrogation of Article 370 or CAA figure prominently in the campaign.

CM the campaign centre | BJP's a minor player, contesting only 6 of Andhra's 25 Lok Sabha seats, and 10 of its 175-seat assembly. That too reflects the clout of the central leadership rather than the low levels of local support. TDP's contesting on 17 LS seats and 144 in assembly. Much of the drama revolves around Jagan, India's wealthiest CM, and his party. In 2019, YSRCP won 22 LS seats, and 151 in the assembly. Jagan's return promises to weaken TDP, which won 3 LS and 23 assembly seats in 2019, and JSP. These two, on their return, promise to send Jagan, who has 26 criminal cases against him, to jail. INDIA allies, which didn't win any seats in 2019, hope for a return to the assembly.

Uneasy an alliance | The widely shared perception that Jagan enjoys a warm relationship with Modi and Shah has been reinforced by PM not making any direct attacks on the 51-year-old. A YSRCP victory may give NDA an ally in Parliament once again. NDA allies have little in common. It's an open secret most TDP and JSP leaders distrust BJP. In the past, both have criticised it for denying post-bifurcation Andhra 'Special Category' status and central govt funding. This

year, anti-Modi memes and cartoons are circulating among TDP, not just YSRCP, supporters. However, both TDP and JSP are suggesting an alliance with BJP is necessary for the state's development. Another reason for the uneasiness may be that while at the national level BJP opposes a Muslim quota, Naidu reassured Andhra's Muslims the 4% quota for the community will remain. TDP also promised the community – about 9.5% of state population (Census 2011) – a pension, a minority finance commission for loans, and land for *eidgahs* and graveyards.

Jagan's Indira-NTR-Modi move | At the centre of campaigns are welfare (*samkshema*) championed by YSRCP, and development (*abhiwruddhi*), by NDA. Jagan has a good track record of implementing welfare schemes, known as the



'nine gems' (*navaratnalu*), which include the popular direct cash transfers to all sections of people, from widows to the elderly to mothers of girls. Some 2.5 lakh paid ward and village volunteers played a critical role in the delivery of cash benefits. The volunteer system Jagan introduced is an advanced version of Indira Gandhi, NTR and Modi's models of direct appeal to the electorate, meant to render lower-level party leadership redundant. Jagan promises welfare and volunteers deliver it.

What lies in manifestos | Over the past five years, TDP had been arguing that these schemes were wasteful and reached only YSRCP supporters. The party also claimed,

not without justification, that the volunteers were in fact YSRCP cadres, paid for party work with public funds. Despite all this, the TDP-JSP joint manifesto promises to *increase*, not scrap, pensions and other benefits. It also promises to increase the volunteer honorarium from ₹5,000 to ₹10,000 per month. The TDP-JSP manifesto, not endorsed by BJP, aims at an increase of the ever-popular welfare schemes. It also promises to develop Amaravati as capital city, a move it expects will attract investments and industries, resulting in jobs. Another significant promise is the completion of the decades-old Polavaram irrigation project, and just compensation to those displaced. Still, no party is paying attention to the state's industrial development, which continues to lag behind Telangana.

Colour & code | Mainstream Telugu media, referred to derisively as 'yellow media' (TDP's colour) and 'blue media' (YSRCP's colour) by the parties' opponents, is openly partisan. Neither yellow nor blue has a monopoly over old or new media, but both parties launched the 2024 campaign with a number of pro-YSRCP and pro-TDP films attacking heads of rival parties.

Caste & clout | This election is not only about Jagan, his rivals, some new players and renewed alliances. It's also an old story of dominance of state politics by powerful agrarian castes: Reddys, Kammas and Kapus. NTR, YSR and 'Megastar' Chiranjeevi who founded his Praja Rajyam Party in 2008, later merging it with Congress, belong, respectively, to the Kamma, Reddy and Kapu castes. Andhra also remains a textbook case of political nepotism and *parivaarvad*. Ex-Congress CM of undivided Andhra, late YSR Reddy's children head YSRCP and Congress, while NTR's *parivaar* heads TDP (Naidu is his son-in-law) and BJP (state president Dagubati Purandeswari is NTR's daughter). Pawan Kalyan is Chiranjeevi's brother. Political *varasatvam* (inheritance, legacy) is floated openly in the state, where family ties remain the biggest political capital. The writer teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Views are personal

Andhra votes on May 13 for its 25 Lok Sabha seats and 175-seat assembly

Hills On Fire Can Destroy The Plains

Uttarakhand's burning forests have a domino effect. Forests buffer glaciers. But carbon in the soot from the flames will lead to more ice melts and eventual damage downstream

Priyadarshini Patel

When someone sets fire to the forest, the flames spread in a wreath and circles the mountain with a wreathing red garland by night. It fills the valley with smoke and haze. If one lives in the hills, the flames are visible from the window. If it gets close, one can call the forest officials – a team of five might show up with sticks to beat down a roaring, flaming slope. This can go on for a month, as one slope after the other is engulfed. What follows are days of extremely low-visibility, and an ashy burnt smell in the nostrils and palate. From one such blazing forest last year we saw a semi-conscious ghoral fawn (Himalayan antelope) emerge. Blinded in the left eye, its fur was singed and inner ears crisped to a wafer. Its hooves were bleeding from knocking against rocks. The trembling animal died in the district hospital a few days later.

Losing control over fires | Setting fire to forests is neither new nor very old. In the last 15-20 years or so, they've become more noticeable. In the last two years, they've rocketed out of control. While nearly all forest fires are man-made, dry and hot winters, and hotter summers caused by climate change now cause the fires to rage further and longer. Dry vegetation and increased temperatures make the area highly flammable. Fires used to occur only in May, but now they start in winter too. Uttarakhand's mountains are filled with longleaf pine (*chir*) whose slippery needles carpet the floor every summer, making it dangerous for women to walk narrow trails for grass and timber, especially with hefty loads on their back. That is one reason locals set fire to forests around their village. Another is the belief that burning provides new

grass for their grazing cattle. Villagers don't deny the fire is man-made. So far, no one has been too concerned: not the administration, nor the locals who have little idea of the consequences. In 2018, Union environment ministry formulated a national action plan on forest fires and shared this with all states. Nothing was done. This month helicopters were used to douse a fire. Only now, after decades of apathy, with nearly half of Uttarakhand's forests ablaze, has the issue exploded into a national emergency.



Cascading impact | The statistics are shocking. Over 50,000 hectares of forest land have been lost to fires in the last decade. Yet, even these numbers do no justice to the staggering domino effect. Uttarakhand's Himalayan forests are a critically sensitive ecosystem comprising six national parks and seven wildlife sanctuaries. In its higher reaches are glaciers from where major rivers including Ganga, Yamuna and Kali emerge. These forests bring rain and act as a buffer for the glaciers. Now these very forests

are causing high soot deposits on the glaciers. Carbon particles contained in soot darken the surface and increase the absorption of light and heat, eventually causing the glacier to melt. Apart from the loss of water springs, degradation of soil, weakening of slopes causing landslides, increased heat and loss of wildlife and ecosystems, studies have also linked the occurrence of cloudbursts to forest fires.

Blind spots of policies | Development policies have consistently ignored the fragility of the Himalaya. The Char Dham yatra, with over 1.1 million already registered this year, is an assault that the narrow valleys will not survive. It is unsustainable, reckless tourism at its worst. The Char Dham road widening to facilitate this influx ignored expert warnings, felling lakhs of trees, causing over 200 landslides and numerous slope failures, endangering lives, and turning valleys into dust bowls. Development for hills could have meant disaster-resilient roads, solar power, collecting slippery pine needles to make briquettes, thereby eliminating arduous treks that women must make for fuelwood. It could have brought orchards of kiwi that require minimum care, grow fast, need no pesticides and are not eaten by monkeys. It could have meant walking and cycling paths through pristine mountains. Or healthy local food in villages with earthquake-proof cottages of wood, stone and slate, instead of swanky resorts. It could have meant clean flowing rivers, waterfalls and springs, and thriving forests with native mahogany, deodar, horse chestnut, oak, rhododendron, white pine and hackberry. It could have meant harmony. Instead of a planet in flames, it could have meant the Vedic benediction of our rishis: 'Sarve bhavantu sukhinah'. May all creation be joyous. The writer is a conservationist

Calvin & Hobbes



Adinath's First Meal In 13 Months Marks Akshaya Tritiya

Bhagchand Jain


Baisakh Shukla Tritiya is highly significant in Indian culture. In common parlance, it is also called Akha Teej or Akshaya Tiritiya. In Jain philosophy, it is considered as the beginning of the shramana culture. During the third age of Hundavasarpini, Ayodhya was ruled by king Nabhiraj and queen Marudevi. A son, Rishabh Nath, was born to them. When Nabhiraj reached old age, he handed over Ayodhya's throne to Rishabh Nath, also called Adinath. At that time, Kalpavriksha fulfilled all the needs of human beings, but gradually, Kalpavriksha's powers started decreasing. Bhogbhoomi started disappearing, and karmabhoomi was created. At that time, due to rains, various grains and tree sprouts grew in the fields and gave suitable fruits. However, they were destroyed as people did not know what to

do with them. The land of enjoyment vanished, and the era of karma arrived, but people did not know how to do karma, action. Hence, they started suffering from hunger and thirst. Adinathji gave mankind the necessary knowledge. He taught six tasks to live life: asi, weaponry, military action for defence; masi, writing; agriculture, farming and growing food; vidya, actions related to gaining knowledge; commerce, business; crafts, making of statues, buildings and carvings, etc. He had taught people to do all kinds of work in a planned manner. By imparting the knowledge of scriptology and numerology to his daughters Brahmī and Sundarī, respectively, he spread this knowledge among people. For the first time, he established the governance system, rules-principles, and rights-duties in Ayodhya. Following this, everything started going according to the rules, and religion was established. According to Jain philosophy, in this way, the era changed in the Bharat region from the land of enjoyment to the land of action. When Adinath became detached from life following the death of Nratyangana, dancer Neelanjana, he did penance by fasting for six months. Seeing the sacrifice of Rishabhdevji, many kings and people who had taken sannyas, joined him. Since he was the first tirthankar, people did not know how to feed him or what to give him as food, and hence, they used to give him jewellery, diamonds, and pearls rather than food. Even after six months, when food was not offered, sannyasis with him suffered from hunger and thirst. It had been more than 13 months



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace



It is everywhere, though we see it not...the Self is everywhere, within all things, although we see it not. There is nothing that does not come from It. It is the truth; it is the Self supreme. You are That.

Eknath Easwaran

since Adinathji took food. One day, while travelling, he reached Hastinapur. Brothers Somprab and prince Shreyansh Kumar rushed to greet sage Rishabh Nathji. As soon as he saw Rishabh Nathji, Shreyansh Kumar remembered that in his previous life he had offered food to a muni. It was in the morning. Following padgahan, inviting with respect, Shreyansh Kumar along with Somprabha and Lakshminati arranged a meal for Rishabh Nathji. Adinathji was offered Ikshuras, the first food he had accepted after more than 13 months. This day was Vaishakh Shukla Tritiya, celebrated today as Akshaya Tritiya. Through his sermons, Adinathji instructed people to live a virtuous life by following truth, nonviolence, non-stealing, and non-possession. Only by adopting the principles of tirthankaras can we move towards a more peaceful world with human welfare at its core.



The IndianEXPRESS

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

TURBULENCE IN AIR

Air India's problems point to the need for management to ensure smooth transition during mergers

SINCE TUESDAY EVENING, over 100 crew members of the Tata Group-owned Air India Express called in sick, apparently objecting to the changes in the "carrier's HR policies". The absence of the senior cabin crew, in particular, led to disturbance across the carrier's network, forcing it to cancel multiple flights — reportedly, around 90 flights were affected on Wednesday. The employee discontent was simmering for some time. As per a report in this paper, a few weeks ago, the airline's employees union had written to N Chandrasekaran, chairman of Air India, claiming mismanagement, and a "lack of equality in treatment" of employees. Following this latest incident, Air India Express fired several of its senior cabin crew members. However, on Thursday evening, the airline "agreed to withdraw termination letters", while the crew members "ended their strike as the airline management also agreed to look into their issues". The protest was not an isolated incident. In the recent past, Vistara, another Tata group airline, also witnessed similar discontent among pilots over changes in their remuneration structure. The Tata group is in the midst of consolidating its four airlines — Air India Express and AIX Connect are being merged, and Vistara and Air India.

Mergers between companies, while expected to produce synergies, can also end up being extremely complex processes. More so if they involve a marriage between a public sector entity and a private sector firm. While several issues can crop up, the problems in many a merger can be traced to HR issues. Differences in organisational cultures and structures can create friction between the two sets of employees. As can the differing remuneration structures. Not to mention tensions between the employees of the firms over their career paths and possible redundancies. During such periods, management must try to ensure a smooth transition and provide avenues to employees so that their grievances can be aired and addressed.

The flight delays and disruptions inconvenienced a large number of passengers, as is evident in the complaints on social media. For consumers, this is compounded by the lack of options in the aviation sector. The airline sector in India is duopolistic. In the first quarter of this year (January–March), Indigo had a market share of 60.3 per cent, Air India was at 12.7 per cent, Vistara at 9.8 per cent and AIX Connect at 6 per cent. Put together, the two airline groups account for almost 90 per cent of the domestic aviation market. A high degree of market concentration, the absence of competition, can lead to higher prices for consumers and lower standards for consumer services, while also impacting innovation. However, aviation is not the only sector in India where such a market structure is visible. The goal of policy should be to enhance competition.

NO NEED TO PANIC

Covid vaccines helped save lives. Rare adverse reactions to them should be seen from scientific lens, not alarmist ones

TEN DAYS AFTER AstraZeneca admitted side effects of its Covid vaccine in rare cases, the UK-Dutch company has withdrawn the shots, renamed Vaxzveria in 2021, from the global market. It has cited a "surplus of available updated vaccines" that target new variants of the virus as the reason for its decision. The vaccine major's moves have generated negative sentiments bordering on panic, including among some people in India where AstraZeneca partnered with the Serum Institute of India to develop Covishield — the bulwark of the country's fight against Covid. Such responses might not be surprising given that social media is the prime source of information for a sizable section and the means to distinguish science from pseudoscience are not always at hand. But knee-jerk reactions from other quarters have also not helped. Especially unfortunate are the politically loaded comments about Covishield during the Lok Sabha election campaigns.

The emergency created by an unknown contagion required due procedures — including clinical trials — and schedules to be compressed. But the crisis also galvanised scientists, medical experts and policymakers to push the frontiers of their disciplines and domains. Vaccine hesitancy tested the persuasion skills of local officials and healthcare workers. It's a testimony to such initiatives that social and economic activities return to normalcy about two years after the virus unleashed its virulence. Vaccination ensured that the contagion took on a significantly less aggressive form after the lethal second wave in the summer of 2021 — when the bulk of the country's population had not received the shots. Hospitalisation and fatality rates remained low even during periods of spike in infection after the second wave.

Covid inoculation drives are now subjects of intensive research. That's how it should be. These studies help generate nuanced information about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines, that could not have been generated with the volunteer size of the trials. Scientists can today draw on databases that comprise inoculated people across nations and continents. Besides helping epidemiologists understand how the jabs work on diverse sections of people, and reaffirming the potency of the shots, such studies shine the light on rare adverse reactions, including thrombosis and thrombocytopenia Syndrome (TTS) — blood clots and low levels of platelets — associated with the AstraZeneca vaccine. Such research will help vaccine developers refine their methods. Technologies used in the Covid jabs — whether the viral vector of AstraZeneca or the mRNA technique of some other developers — are part of a larger battle against infectious diseases. Alarmist reactions against the Covid jabs could raise the head of vaccine hesitancy and hurt the fight against other contagions.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S GHOST

Plato's ideas have haunted or enlightened corridors of scholarship. AI-powered research could revive interest in him

HERE'S AN OVERSIMPLIFICATION of the essence of Plato's thought: Meaning is derived not from things as they are, but rather the idea of them. Take the word "chair". Plato thought that the various kinds of chairs fall into the category "chair" because there is an ideal world in which there is an ideal idea of a chair. Ironically, then, it now appears that the mundane empirical world — of science, research, computers and archaeology — is set to change much of what we know about the life and work of arguably the world's best-known idealist.

It's a bit like the plot of an Indiana Jones film, or another instalment of the *Da Vinci Code*. From the volcanic ash around Mount Vesuvius, there emerged a scroll, frayed and tattered with writing not spoken or seen for thousands of years. With the help of linguists, philologists, archaeologists and even AI and machine learning models, the papyrus scroll's inscrutable secrets have been uncovered. Earlier this week, information about where the philosopher was likely laid to rest was shared and the text even reveals that when ailing, before he died at 81, he found the energy to criticise the form of a musician. Those who know Plato would undoubtedly say, "how typical".

Plato's ideas have haunted or enlightened (depending on the point of view) the corridors of universities and minds of scholars for millennia. Recently, though, the essentialism he has come to be associated with has fallen out of fashion. The philosophical and literary canon he belongs to is politically suspect. It is considered part of a tradition that focused on "dead White men", ignoring diverse voices especially from the margins. Of course, to criticise a towering figure, to respond to him, it's important first to read the book. Perhaps, aided by AI and renewed interest in the details of his life, the Socratic method Plato bequeathed to the world can be applied again to his work.



ASHIMA GOYAL

THERE ARE TWO views on India's growth. The first argues that the fall in growth in the 2010s, worsened by the collapse during the pandemic, was because of fundamental flaws that persist. And that growth cannot sustain without an entirely new set of policies. An alternative interpretation is that sufficient reforms have been undertaken to set off a virtuous growth cycle. To sustain this, it is important that counter-cyclical policy smooths over the shocks, while cost-reducing supply-side actions continue. Whichever view is taken will affect future policies and outcomes. But, what is the evidence for each?

Continued robust growth for the fourth year after the pandemic, contained inflation and a reduction in poverty despite a fragile global environment support the latter view. So, why introduce disruptions to fix what isn't broken? Those who hold the first view are unwilling to concede. Their initial position was that as better data comes in, growth figures will be revised downward. Unfortunately for them, the revisions have been upwards.

A second argument was that since wholesale price index-based inflation had become negative in April 2023, high growth last year was spurious because CPI inflation was higher than the partially used WPI deflators. A lower inflation measure overestimates growth. But if low WPI overestimates growth, then high WPI inflation should underestimate growth. WPI inflation was in double digits for two years between April 2021 and March 2023. According to their logic, the average post-pandemic GDP growth over 2021–24, measured at 8.1 per cent, should actually be even higher.

Bogeys such as the absence of double deflation are raised. This is not feasible since India, along with other major countries, does not yet have a services price index. Research finds that the use of double deflation can either under- or over-estimate GDP. So it is not a solution to all problems. Of course, improvements in measurement and movement to global norms are and have to be a continuous process. But critics choose to question improvements also on grounds such as non-comparability with the past. This is inevitable. As India changes, so must measurement practices.

Third, there is an attempt to over-interpret

Robust growth, check on inflation, poverty reduction suggest success of reforms — despite what critics say

GDP measurement in India is more robust from the production side. The difference with the expenditure-side measurement is given as a discrepancy. Since these are independent measures of a complex total, other countries also have discrepancies. Nevertheless, critics had cast doubt on the first quarter growth figure because the expenditure side measurement was lower by 3.3 per cent of GDP. In the third quarter, the discrepancy was only 0.2 per cent, implying GDP growth from the expenditure side was close to that from the production side. Predictably, there was no mention of the discrepancy this time. A strategy of highlighting only data that supports priors and ignoring contrary evidence is itself suspect.



RINKU GHOSH

SOMETIMES WE HAVE to realise that the journey for women's equity in public discourse is not linear, measured by the steps taken, not taken or the two steps taken backwards. It is a constant churn in a systemic process that must squeeze out latent misogyny. Women around the world have begun to understand that. That's why, despite repression or regression, women's movements are only gathering steam on a slow burn.

The incarceration of many human rights activists before her didn't stop 29-year-old Saudi activist Manahel al-Otaibi from propagating women's equity or rejecting male guardianship through the hashtag #societyisready. As she spends her time in jail, support for her is bubbling up globally. Iranian women got support from marginalised women in Afghanistan as they resurrected the Kurdish women's chant of "Women, Freedom, Life!" Women in Mexico are helping their US counterparts negotiate abortion bans.

There will be comeuppance for the likes of Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer who is in jail for sexual assault following testimonies that spurred the #MeToo movement. But there will also be patriarchal mockery of the kind that legitimises former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Singh through the backdoor. His son just got a BJP ticket to contest the Lok Sabha elections from Kaiserganj in Uttar Pradesh, keeping the family's power privileges intact while riding roughshod over the concerns of champion women wrestlers. Yet every male-

TOGETHER, STEP BY STEP

For gender equity, women need to work collectively, not drop out of the fight

The scales can turn only when the redressal mechanism, be it at home or the workplace, treats the sexual harasser as both a social and economic liability. The lens has to change from 'protecting' women to 'punishing' abusive oppressors. An existing male leadership cannot turn the wheel as much. A female leadership is needed for that countervailing push.

dominated establishment will espouse women's equity.

The truth is that the term "women's empowerment" is the hand-me-down of an egotistical male largesse or guilt-tripping. The agency doesn't lie with the women, who are never asked what they want but merely given what men think they need as a dole. If anything, it only ingrains in women a sense of powerlessness. Besides, traditional cultures have always upheld inequity as a norm rather than the exception.

That's why women have to be more strategic than exceptional, stay within the system and earn leadership on their terms and never exit midway. If they quit, that would be the real end-of-the-road dreariness, worse, hopelessness. Nowhere else is this more apparent than in the workplace where sexual harassment, despite redressal mechanisms, has seen women survivors leave their jobs, unable to deal with mental scarring and sidelining, besides the judgmental gaze and curiosity of colleagues. However, by giving up, they would be relinquishing their stake in leadership. With just a handful of women in senior management, no form of harassment or discrimination will be acknowledged and addressed as an organisational problem. It will be seen as an aberration and, worse, a liability and will be used to justify the male argument about the muscle needed for the top job.

Sexual harassment is never about physical desire — it's a coercive tool to eliminate women competitors who, statistics show, are

outperforming men, even in bastions of male expertise. This pushback by sexualising women co-workers then is also about a reluctance to cede territory and reclaim it with greater ferocity. This represents a larger societal collision that already has disastrous consequences of not only browbeating the survivor but the ecosystem around her. The scales can turn only when the redressal mechanism, be it at home or the workplace, treats the sexual harasser as both a social and economic liability. The lens has to change from "protecting" women to "punishing" abusive oppressors. An existing male leadership cannot turn the wheel as much. A female leadership is needed for that countervailing push.

According to UN Women, decision-making processes around the world continue to be disempowering with just 27 per cent of parliamentary seats, 36 per cent of local government seats and 28 per cent of management positions held by women. Only 61 per cent of prime working-age women have jobs compared to 91 per cent of prime working-age men.

This is not just about the gender divide. Women are taking on a bigger battle of reversing normative behaviour, a far tougher climb that men have never had to negotiate or know about. And for that, women need to push back collectively, not become another dropout or a beneficiary.

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MAY 10, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN ON MT EVEREST

THE INDIAN TRICOLOUR proudly fluttered again atop the world's highest summit, 3,848 metre Mount Everest, after 19 years when 34-year-old Sikkim mountaineering instructor Phu Dorjee reached the peak. Dorjee created a new record for an Indian by going up from the South summit without oxygen and became the 10th Indian to scale the peak.

CPM LEADERS SHOT AT

THE LEADER OF the CPI-M group in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, Chand Singh Chopra, escaped unhurt when two unidentified ter-

rorists opened fire on him and his associate, Amarjit Singh, a sarpanch, at Barnala. Amarjit Singh received bullet injuries. The police, during its combing operations in Ferozepur district, claimed to have nabbed two more alleged terrorists.

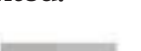
OLYMPIC BOYCOTT

THE SOVIET UNION defended its boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics and some of Moscow's Communist allies hinted they would snub the games in favour of an alternative "Red Olympics". "Soviet sportsmen do not wish to be accomplices in the gross violations of the Olympic charter, which/im-

pair the international Olympic movement and subvert its noble ideals and principles" the Soviet news agency Tass said. Bulgaria has also decided to pull out of the games.

DOWRY ACT

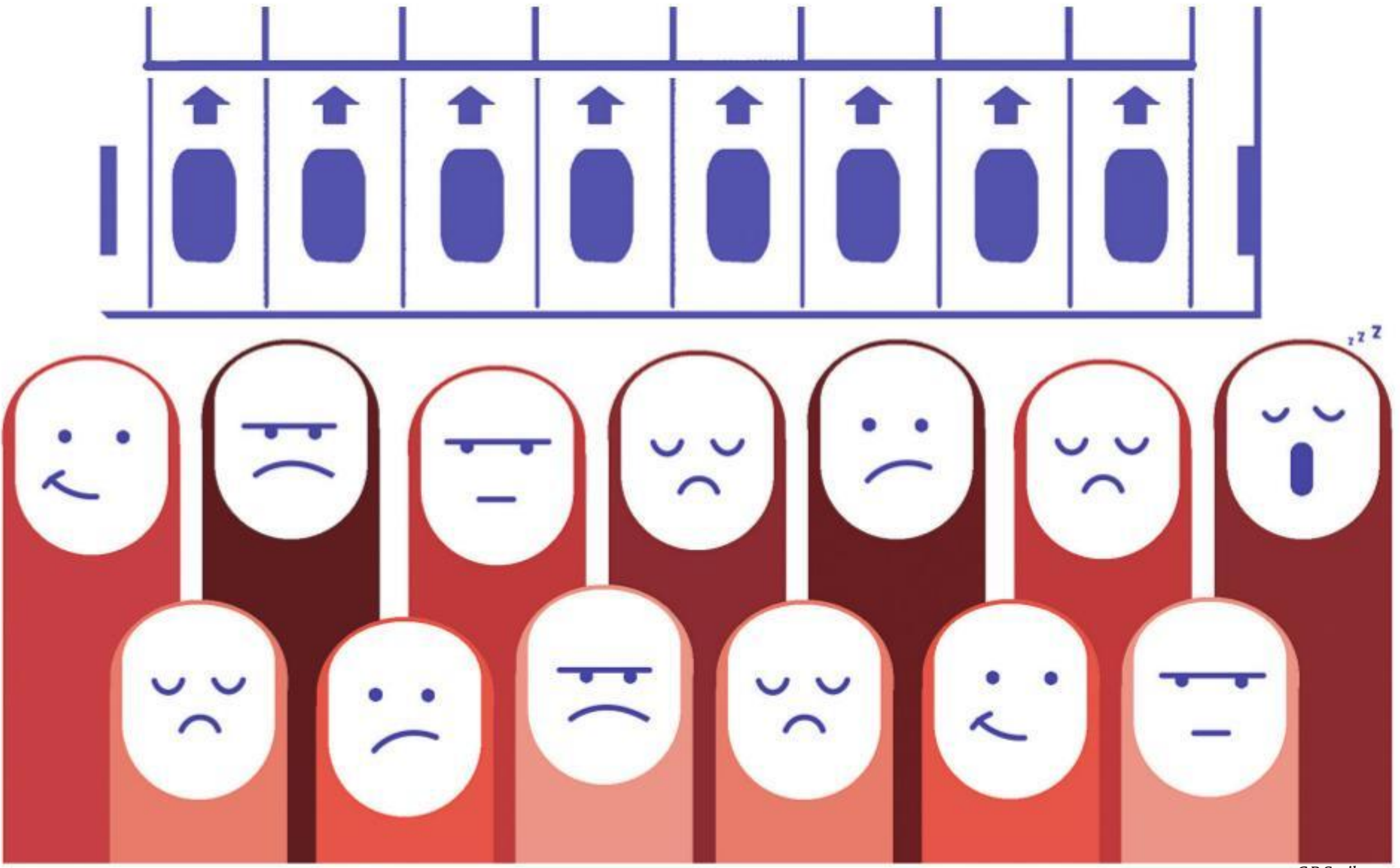
THE LONG-AWAITED BILL to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was introduced in the Lok Sabha just before it adjourned after the budget session. Though the bill seeks to enhance the maximum punishment for the acceptance of dowry from six months to two years, several vocal women members of the House, who had consistently campaigned for the legislation, were most disappointed.



THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



CR Sasikumar

Election Commission data released ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls shows low registration of first-time voters. What explains young people's lack of engagement with the electoral process?

Why young opt out of polls

Cushion of privilege ensures that some people feel largely disconnected from events in the country and across the globe



SHAMBHAVI GUPTA

IN THE 2014 general elections, I was extremely disappointed because I was unable to vote. If only they had been held in 2015, I would have been eligible. So, in 2019, after four years of waiting, I was beyond excited to be a first-time voter. Not wanting to blindly follow the candidate my family and friends preferred, I went through candidate profiles and party manifestos. I was determined to make an informed choice.

Now that I work with young people who are going to be eligible to vote in the next one to three years, I do not sense the same enthusiasm to exercise one's democratic duty. This is also reflected in recent statistics: The Election Commission of India claimed that 38 per cent of eligible first-time voters, which is 18 million out of 49 million, registered to vote in the 2024 national elections. Merely 17 per cent of the youth population of Bihar, the state with the highest concentration of youth, is registered to vote, with the percentage in Delhi being only 21 per cent. Has the system failed to inspire confidence, has the youth failed to engage with the system, or is it something completely different?

I find this pattern concerning because it has long-term effects for a democratic nation that has a large youth population. It means that the largest section of the population is not engaging with the electoral process. In the case of elite urban circles, the cushion of privilege ensures that some people feel largely disconnected with events within the country and across the globe.

As a teacher, I observe a lack of internal motivation to engage with national and international affairs, especially with students. Accompanying this is the pressure of meeting deadlines, engaging in extracurricular activities, going for tuition classes, and scoring marks to get into a good college. The burden of work and the pursuit of personal gain prevents people from moving beyond their bubbles of safety, to be part of a process that is larger than just them.

This atomised, hyper-individualistic mindset stands opposed to the principles of democracy. When someone asks, "What can one vote do?", it is evident that the absence

of a direct and instant consequence mechanism is responsible for a decline in engagement. This attitude may be sown early in life, but it continues throughout, where competitive work environments too, emphasise personal success. The capitalist drive to work tirelessly and to constantly be "productive" is ideal for turning people into apathetic citizens who have no time to spend on politics. Devices take up a major proportion of whatever little leisure time people have. Therefore, it is imperative to engage more meaningfully with our devices and social media. We should download apps and follow accounts that provide fact-checked news. The idea is to reduce as many barriers to knowledge and to integrate access to news with daily scrolling. At least this is a start. Unless people know what is going on, and identify the problem, it is near impossible to be part of the solution. However, there are additional layers to this notion.

For those who are aware of the issues, of the political rhetoric that has swept the nation — with the arrest of leaders and hate-filled speeches — it is perhaps the perceived lack of viable alternatives that has fuelled disengagement. There is no desire to be part of the solution. Because when one starts to identify how mouldy the state of affairs is, they also realise how difficult it is to change it. So, unfortunately, moving beyond atomism can also lead to dismay and disenchantment with the system. While discussing the elections, my students mentioned that the best option is just to go with NOTA. And to bring in the notion of privilege once again, instead of working towards changing the circumstances, many students aspire to move abroad, away from these issues.

Even for those who are politically engaged, actively voice their opinions on social media and believe in having important conversations, it is logistical impediments that come in the way of casting a vote. Associated with this, migration causes the biggest barrier — when people move, either for education or work, they often do not follow up on administrative tasks that can ensure a shift in constituency.

In dissecting the reasons behind low voter turnout and youth disengagement, it becomes apparent that our democracy grapples with a lack of civic education and logistical hurdles. Each factor plays a role in shaping the apathy observed among young voters. While I want to be optimistic, I also realise that there are immense challenges in bringing about systemic as well as personal development simultaneously, which are necessary to enrich the democratic ethos of the nation.

The writer is a Delhi-based teacher



THAJEB ALI HAZARIKA

ALARM BELLS START ringing when the world's biggest festival of democracy has very few young people proudly flashing an index finger marked with indelible ink — the booster shot to consolidate, nurture, and reaffirm Indian democracy. The early phases of polling this year had a low turnout, including from the youth, the future of the country and the main catchment source of political support of every political party. There needs to be honest introspection on what is holding Gen Z back from participating in the electoral process.

The number of young voters in the age group of 18 to 19 years in 2014 was 15 million compared to the present 18 million. It needs to be understood that the difference of this three million in terms of political participation, including the sacrosanct duty to cast the vote, will be vital. Much of the onus for mobilising this segment lies with political parties. Political socialisation and recruitments are crucial for parties to enhance and consolidate their base. Grassroot-level organisations and affiliated student wings have always been active in inducting young blood in political parties. The question to be asked here is which of these student-led organisations have a head start.

Another important factor in the low youth involvement is how parties mobilise

The onus for mobilising this segment lies with political parties... Grassroot-level organisations and affiliated student wings have always been active in inducting young blood in parties. The question to be asked is which of these student-led organisations have a head start.

social media. The way news is consumed has changed radically. Studies show that the youth turn to Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook for their political education. It is, therefore, also a test for political parties to see how they use these platforms to encourage the youth to ward off their lethargy and indifference.

The election of 2014 was a game changer for the BJP, which successfully managed to do this, aided by the charisma of Prime Minister Narendra Modi which created a political tsunami. The next election, in 2019, was no different and the wave continued. The BJP's focus on developing a youth connect yielded rich dividends, making it one of the top priorities for the party this year as well. Some of their beneficiaries remain loyal, especially young women. Not to be left behind, the Congress has attempted the same with the Bharat Jodo Yatra. There is a personal equation factor with the leader that matters here. The crowds, the selfies are all favourable indicators, but the question to be asked here is this: Does the crowd at a roadshow translate into actual votes or is it merely the curiosity factor that draws people in to see leaders and star campaigners? After all, veteran leaders, too, attract crowds.

In such a scenario, it is interesting to know the young cadre strength of each of the competing parties because this is what will indicate, in real terms, whether the crowd during the mega roadshow could translate into votes. Among the issues raised in this election are the core ones of unemployment, poverty, corruption and social security. These are issues that affect the youth at every level. When you are worried about getting or keeping a job, can you afford to take the time out to go vote? Think of a situation where a migrant from the north of the country working in a spice factory down south has to undertake a journey of anything between 24 to 72 hours to cast his vote. Even if he gets a day off with paid leave, would he undertake the journey? Would his tired question not be if it is "worth" it? Just as the outreach to youngsters has to be stronger, there should also be feasible alternative arrangements to encourage the youth to vote. Postal ballot is a possible answer. The ECI's efforts to make arrangements for home ballots, to facilitate voting by the sick and the elderly, is laudable. A sympathetic ear to the plight of the young would go a long way towards encouraging their participation.

The writer is a teacher at The Assam Valley School

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Politicians have mostly failed to make the case for change, and some experts believe that they often lag behind voters. If you want to make a difference, they say, back leaders who prioritise the climate crisis. A year with so many major elections around the globe offers a critical opportunity."
— THE GUARDIAN

BJP's missing guarantee

Increasingly, PM, ruling party's promises are a brand proposition that the consumer does not believe



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O' BRIEN

JANUARY 12, 2024. "Modi's guarantee begins where expectations from others ends". The launch of "Modi ki Guarantee" as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's key campaign slogan for the general elections 2024.

March 30, 2024. This column appears, with the headline, "No warranty for 'Modi Ki Guarantee'".

April 14, 2024. The BJP launches its manifesto. The cover page says "Modi ki Guarantee 2024".

April 27, 2024. The day after the second phase of elections conclude, the "Modi ki Guarantee" slogan is put away into the closet.

In the world of marketing, a brand proposition, as the term connotes, is a promissory note, that is, a promise of substance being made to the customer that will be fulfilled by the brand. It reiterates to consumers the key reasons to assess, reassess, buy or repurchase the brand.

Brand propositions should be conceived of with great thought and care, because you should not promise more than you can deliver. As the marketing adage goes, you can get someone to buy something once, or even twice, but eventually the consumer will see through you. Brand propositions should ideally last for years — even decades.

And finally, the success of the brand lies not in the proposition itself, but in its successful delivery, in all channels of customer engagement. This means that everyone, from the worker on the factory floor, to the quality control system, to the salesman, the outlet and the after-sales-service has to be focussed and committed to that goal. This is what delivers customer satisfaction and the ultimate prize, brand loyalty.

It is, therefore, not surprising but amusing — and a sobering lesson — that the BJP's brand proposition "Modi Ki Guarantee" for the Lok Sabha elections 2024, barely lasted a couple of months.

Here are 10 statements quoted verbatim from the BJP manifesto. The paragraphs accompanying each statement provide clues as to why the key proposition, propagated in January 2024, has virtually disappeared in the campaign by early May.

We will ensure the dignity of women: Hathras. Unnao. Kathua. Bilkis Bano. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Prajwal Revanna. Sandeshkhali.

We have gone from a nation that was in the top 5 economies of the world: Ten years ago, India was the tenth biggest economy in the world with household financial savings at 7.2 per cent of the GDP. Today, as the fifth largest economy, income inequality is even worse than it was during the British Raj. Net financial household savings are at a 50-year

low, at 5.1 per cent of the GDP in 2022-23. Fifty-plus crore citizens have joined the banking system through PM Jan Dhan Account: As of December 2023, one out of five Jan Dhan accounts created has been in-operative/dormant for over two years. This translates to 10.34 crore accounts not being used at all. An amount of Rs 12,779 crore is lying unused in these dormant accounts.

Four-plus crore families now have pucca houses under the PM Awas Yojana and other initiatives: As of January 2024, one out of three houses that were sanctioned under PMAY-U are yet to be completed.

Improved health care of women by making sanitary pads available at Rs 1: In 2019-21, one out of five women did not use hygienic methods of protection during menstruation. One out of four girls either misses school during periods or discontinues her education entirely due to inadequate facilities and other obstacles.

1.4-plus crore young citizens availed skill training under the PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana: As per the 2022-23 Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, the placement rate for the PMKVY 2 stood at 23 per cent. For PMKVY 3, it was even lower, at just 8 per cent. As of June 30, 2022, over half of the budget allocated was unutilised.

Unprecedented hike in MSP: Farmers protested to demand MSP as a guarantee. They were not allowed to enter Delhi, tear-gassed and sprayed with water cannons. In 2024, 19 farmers died and 40 got injured during the "Dilli Chalo" protest.

Unprecedented improvements in connectivity of the Northeast by expansion of roads, bridges, railways and airports: Out of 181 projects sanctioned under North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme, only 25 have been completed as of December 2023. In the last six years, the scheme utilised only 40 per cent of the allocated funds.

Constructed 3.7 lakh km of rural roads in villages under PM Gram Sadak Yojana: The scheme has four verticals of which none had completed all the sanctioned projects as of January 2023. Two of these verticals had a deadline of 2022. Road Connectivity Project on Left Wing Extremism Areas, which had a deadline of March 2023, has only completed half of the sanctioned kms.

Achieved 100 per cent electrification by providing electricity connection to 2.8-plus crore families under Saubhagya: According to the government's definition, a village is considered electrified if just 10 per cent of households in a village have electricity. In 2021, as per some states, nearly 12 lakh households were yet to be electrified. Moreover, according to a response by the Minister of Power in Rajya Sabha in December 2023, nearly five lakh households were left to be electrified in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

"Modi ki Guarantee" is a brand proposition that the consumer did not believe. No wonder it was quickly put to bed. A new brand proposition is now being brazenly propagated. But that's the subject of a column after the results.

The writer is MP, TMC. Additional research by Dheemunt Jain, Ayashman Dev

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN UNLIKELY MERGER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Congress plus, minus' (IE, May 9). Sharad Pawar's suggestion that regional parties should merge with the Congress is worth pondering as the ideology of the bloc members is similar. It will be in the nation's interest if there is a strong alternative in the political arena. Before this, however, the reasons for earlier splits must be analysed threadbare in order to achieve smoother integration. If thorough changes are required at the highest level in Congress, there should be no hesitation in bringing the required changes for better political, social, economic and other aspects of the governance of the nation.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Congress plus, minus' (IE, May 9). The lackadaisical voting patterns in the ongoing election phases indicate that the BJP may not dominate the poll outcome as thought earlier. However, to draw inferences of a Congress revival from this is wishful thinking. Sharad Pawar's belief that other political parties will get drawn towards Congress post elections is unlikely to happen. While the regional parties are, invariably, offshoots of the Congress, they are committed to guarding their turf, and, consequently, consider the big players like Congress and BJP a perennial threat to them.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

PITRODA, LIKE MANI

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Sam Pitroda quits Cong post after remarks on facial features of Indians' (IE, May 9). Some friends can be worse than enemies. Pitroda is a friend of the INC but he is a stranger to the mindset of Indians and the fact that loaded language during elections is ill-advised. Congress has never been short of albatrosses around its neck. Mani Shankar Aiyar was one such person when he made the objectionable "chaiwala" remark against the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP in 2014. Further, Pitroda didn't exactly help the poll prospects of his party when in the 2019 election, in response to a journalist's question about the 1984 anti-sikh riots, he said "hua to hua".

Narendra Dani, Lucknow

DISASTER IN MAKING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Blaze in hills' (IE, May 8). Nearly 95 per cent of forest fires in the country, including in Uttarakhand, are initiated by human activities. The disaster in Joshimath was a case in point. Strong river currents generated by dams built up for hydel energy projects, for human activities, ended up playing havoc with the lives of lakhs of people. We would do well to remember that all of our actions have consequences and disturbing nature cannot be taken lightly.

Shantanu Bhadra, via email

Meeting nutrition challenge: what new guidelines prescribe

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

WITH NONCOMMUNICABLE diseases (NCDs)—cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, etc.—rising, and affecting adolescents and even children, India’s premier nutrition research institute has published comprehensive guidelines on the diet of vulnerable groups, including pregnant and lactating women, and children and the elderly. The guidelines issued by the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), Hyderabad, which works under the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), also prescribe general principles such as reducing consumption of salt and highly processed foods (such as packaged chips, cookies, bread, ketchup, candy, etc.). The guidelines say an estimated 56.4% of India’s total disease burden can be attributed to unhealthy diets. A healthy diet and phys-

ical activity can prevent 80% of Type 2 diabetes cases, and significantly reduce the burden of heart disease and high blood pressure.

Focus on children, mothers

Optimal nutrition for mother and child from conception till the age of 2 years is linked to proper growth and development. It can prevent all forms of undernutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity. The report quotes the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2019, which showed high prevalence of lifestyle conditions even in children. Around 5% of children of ages 5-9, and 6% of adolescents, were overweight or obese, almost 2% of children and adolescents were found to have diabetes, and another 10% had pre-diabetes. The survey found high levels of bad cholesterol (LDL and triglycerides) in 37.3% of children ages 5-9, and 19.9% of pre-teens and teens ages 10-19. Levels of good cholesterol were low in a fourth of all children and adolescents.

EXPLAINED
HEALTH

YOUNG & UNHEALTHY			
	1-4 yrs	5-9 yrs	10-19 yrs
DISEASES OF OVERNUTRITION (%)			
Overweight	3.7	4.9	
Obesity	1.3	1.1	
Pre-diabetes	10.3	10.4	
Diabetes	1.2	0.6	
Hypertension		4.9	
High total cholesterol	3.2	3.7	
DISEASES OF UNDERNUTRITION (%)			
Anaemia	40.6	23.5	28.4
MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES (%)			
Iron	32.1	17.0	21.5
Vitamin D	13.7	18.2	23.9
Vitamin A	17.5	21.5	15.6
Vitamin B12	13.8	17.2	30.9
Zinc	19.0	16.8	31.7

Source: ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition Report on Dietary Guidelines for Indians

Dual nutrition challenge

Incidence of micronutrient (zinc, iron, vitamins) deficiencies ranged from 13% to 30% of children between ages 1 and 19. The recommended ideal diet charts for various groups of people takes into account both micronutrient deficiencies and diseases of overnutrition. While severe forms of undernutrition such as marasmus (a deficiency of macronutrients such as carbohydrates and proteins) and kwashiorkor (deficiency of proteins) have disappeared from the country, manifestations such as anaemia continue, the report says. It puts the prevalence of anaemia at 40.6%, 23.5%, and 28.4% in children under age 5, ages 5-9, and 10-19 respectively. A study on malnutrition published in The Lancet earlier this year said undernutrition continues to be high in India, but obesity has increased significantly over the last 30 years. The “faulty dietary pattern” in which unhealthy, highly processed, high-fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods have become more affordable and accessible than healthier alterna-

tives, “contributes to deficiencies in iron and folic acid, resulting in anaemia and in the higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among population groups,” the report says.

General dietary principles

The guidelines recommend getting required nutrients from at least eight food groups, including vegetables, leafy vegetables, roots and tubers, dairy, nuts, and oils. Consumption of cereals — the staple of Indian meals — should be restricted, so they contribute only 45% of the total energy (instead of the 50-70% now. Instead, more proteins (pulses, meat, poultry, fish) should be consumed, making up 14% of the total daily energy (instead of only 6-9% now). Achieving adequate levels of essential polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and B12 is a challenge for vegetarians. The guidelines recommend consumption of flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts, vegetables, and greens. The report says salt consumption should be restricted to 5g a day, and strongly recom-

mends against consuming highly processed foods that are typically high in fats, salt, sugar.

Group-specific guidelines
PREGNANT WOMEN: Small frequent meals for those experiencing nausea and vomiting. The guidelines recommend consumption of lots of fruit and vegetables, especially those high in iron and folate content.
INFANTS AND CHILDREN: For the first six months, infants should only be breastfed, and must not be given honey, glucose, or diluted milk. There is no need to give water, even during hot months. After age 6 months, complementary foods must be included.
ELDERLY: The elderly should consume foods rich in proteins, calcium, micronutrients, and fibre. Apart from pulses and cereals — with at least one-third as whole grains — at least 200-400 ml of low-fat milk or milk products, a fist full of nuts and oilseeds, and 400-500g of vegetables and fruit should be consumed. Exercise is important in order to maintain bone density and muscle mass.

EXPLAINED
CULTURE

HOW THE OLYMPIC GAMES GOT THE TORCH RELAY, WHAT IT SYMBOLISES

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

THE OLYMPIC torch arrived in France’s Marseilles on Wednesday, marking an important ceremonial moment in the run-up to the summer Games in Paris. It was first lit on April 16 in the Greek town of Olympia, the birthplace of the ancient Olympics. The flame was then carried around Greece and left Athens aboard a ship for Marseille. The torch will be relayed across France, and will reach Paris on July 26 — the day of the opening ceremony.

Origins in Greek mythology

The Olympic Games are said to be around 3,000 years old, beginning as sports contests in Olympia that were held every four years. According to the Olympics website, the date 776 BC is often cited in written sources. Despite the competitive spirit of the Games, they also signified the possibility of peace. Through a 9th century BC treaty, the tradition of Olympic Truce or *Ekecheiria* was established. Kings Iphitos of Elis, Cleosthenes of Pisa, and Icycurgus of Sparta signed a treaty allowing safe passage for athletes for their participation in the ancient Olympic Games. This was significant at a time when states were constantly warring with each other, the website says. However, “In 393 AD, the Christian emperor Theodosius I forbade the celebration of pagan cults, which included the Games,” the website says. The Olympics would only be revived In 1894, thanks to the efforts of French educator Pierre de Coubertin. The first modern-era Games were held in Athens in 1896. The idea of a torch relay came later.

Flame, mythology, continuity

A symbolic flame was used in the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, but the tradition became solidified with a proposal from Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Organising Committee of the Berlin Games. “Inspired by torch races that were held in ancient Greek times, Diem suggested that for the 1936 Summer Games a Flame be lit in Olympia and transported to Berlin for what would be the first Olympic torch



Ukrainian gymnast Maria Vysotschanska participates in the Olympic torch relay in Marseille on Thursday. AP/PTI

relay.” And so, the tradition began. More than 3,000 athletes from seven countries participated in the relay. In Greek mythology, fire was seen as a key element, and a fire was perpetually maintained in various Greek temples. In Olympia, “the flame was lit using the rays of the sun, to ensure its purity, and a skaphia, the ancestor of the parabolic mirror used today for lighting the Olympic flame. A flame burned permanently on the altar of the goddess Hestia, and such fires were also lit on the altars of Zeus and Hera, in front of whose temple the Olympic flame is lit today.” This mirror method continues to be used today.

Changing tradition

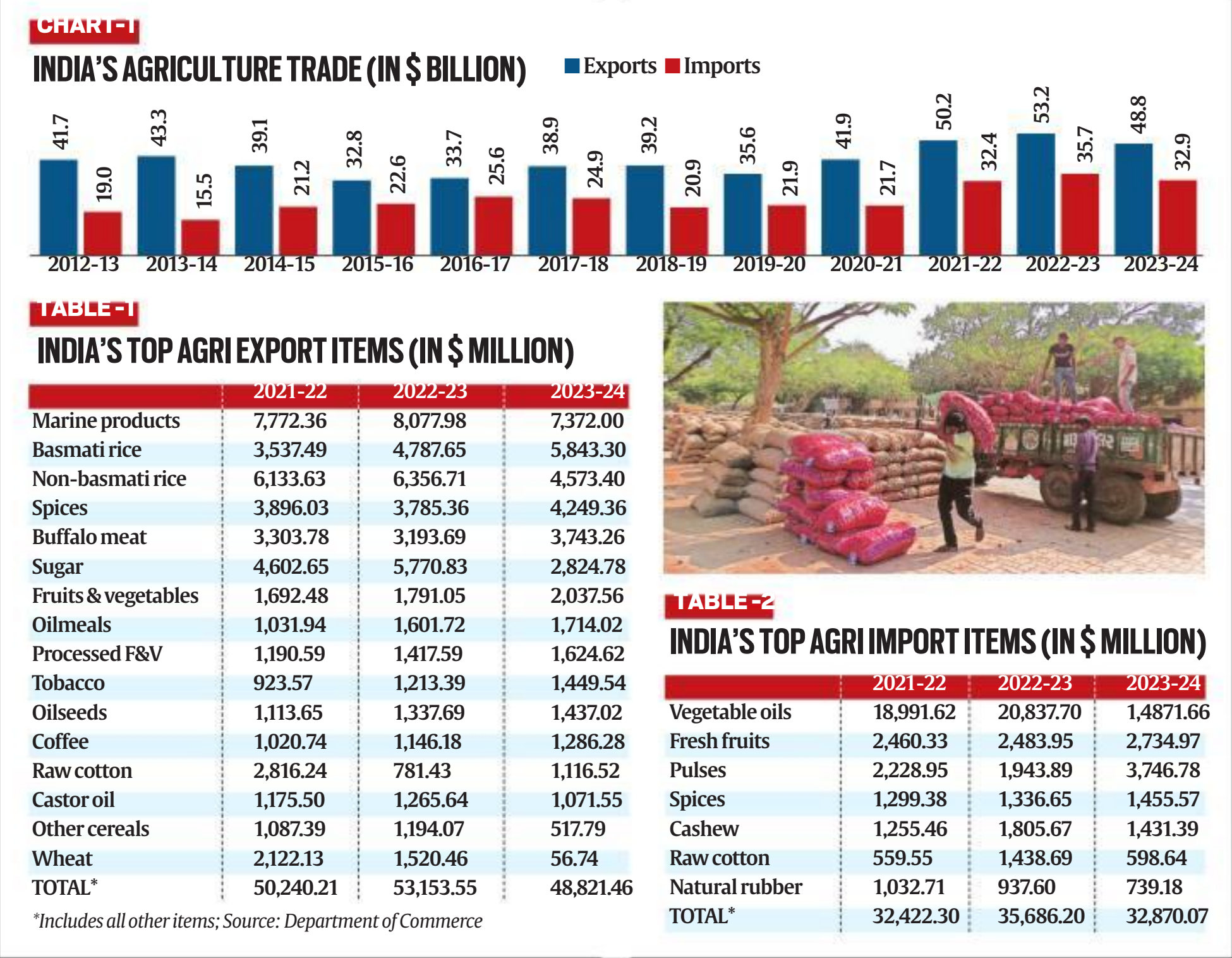
The torch is taken across cities and countries, carried by thousands of people for each edition of the Olympics. It travels on foot and on aeroplanes and ships. Nowadays, common people can choose to participate by reaching out to the organising committee. The identity of the last person to carry the flame to the opening ceremony is kept secret. They are usually figures from the world of sports or young leaders, who light the big cauldron-like structure kept in the stadium. The flame is only extinguished at the Games’ closing ceremony. For many years, torch-bearers were young, male athletes. It was only at the Munich Games in 1972 that women and people with disabilities were included among the torch-bearers.

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

INDIA’S AGRICULTURAL exports fell 8.2% in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024 on the back of shipment curbs on a host of commodities, from cereals and sugar to onions. The value of farm exports totaled \$48.82 billion in 2023-24, down from the record \$53.15 billion of 2022-23 and \$50.24 billion for the previous fiscal, according to Department of Commerce data. Exports declined during the initial years of the Narendra Modi government (from \$43.25 billion in 2013-14 to \$35.60 billion in 2019-20), while accompanied by an increase in imports (from \$15.53 billion to \$21.86 billion). That was largely courtesy of a crash in global agri-commodity prices, with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) food price index (base: 2014-16 =100) dipping from an average of 119.1 to 96.5 points between 2013-14 and 2019-20. Low international prices reduced the cost competitiveness of the country’s exports, while also making it more vulnerable to imports. But the global price recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (the FAO index soared to 140.8 in 2022-23) resulted in India’s farm exports and imports zooming to all-time-highs in 2022-23, before dropping in the fiscal just ended (see Chart 1).

Drivers of exports

Table 1 shows the fall in exports to have been led primarily by sugar and non-basmati rice. The government hasn’t allowed any sugar to go out of the country during the current production year from October 2023. Not surprisingly, exports of the sweetener were valued at only \$2.82 billion in 2023-24, after peaking at \$5.77 billion and \$4.60 billion in the preceding fiscals. Concerns over domestic availability and food inflation have similarly triggered a ban on exports of all white non-basmati rice since July 2023. Currently, only parboiled grain shipments are being permitted within the non-basmati segment, while also attracting a 20% duty. These restrictions have pulled down overall non-basmati exports from a record \$6.36 billion in 2023-23 to \$4.57 billion in 2023-24. Two other items that have borne the brunt of export restrictions — again triggered by domestic shortages and rising prices — are wheat and onion. Wheat exports were altogether stopped in May 2022, following which their value plunged to \$56.74 million in 2023-24, after reaching an all-time-high of \$2.12 billion in 2021-22. On May 4 — three days Maharashtra’s onion belt voted in the Lok Sabha polls — the Centre lifted a ban on exports of the bulb.



Simultaneously, a floor price of \$550 per tonne (below which no exports can take place), along with a 40% duty, was imposed. Official data reveals onion exports at only 17.08 lakh tonnes (lt), worth \$467.83 million, during April-February 2023-24, as against 25.25 lt (\$561.38 million) for the whole of 2022-23. Most other major agri export items — barring marine products, castor oil and other cereals (mainly maize) — have posted growth. Basmati rice exports fetched \$5.84 billion in 2023-24, surpassing the previous high of \$4.86 billion achieved in 2013-14. Spices exports, too, crossed the \$4 billion mark for the first time. However, exports of buffalo meat, oil meals and raw cotton, while up over 2022-23, were far from their corresponding records of \$4.78 billion, \$3.04 billion and \$4.33 billion touched in 2014-15, 2012-13 and 2011-12 respectively.

Drivers of imports

The trends in imports are equally interesting. Table 2 shows that the 7.9% dip in overall agri imports during 2023-24 was largely due to a single commodity: edible oils. India’s imports of vegetable fats topped \$20 billion in

2022-23. That was the year immediately after the Russia-Ukraine war, when the FAO index and the vegetable oil sub-index averaged 140.8 points and 168.5 points respectively. However, 2023-24 saw the average FAO index ease to 121.6 points and the vegetable oil sub-index to 123.4 points. Lower global prices, in turn, brought down the vegetable oil import bill to below \$15 billion during last fiscal. But even as the foreign exchange outflow on cooking oil has reduced, imports of pulses almost doubled to \$3.75 billion in 2023-24, the highest since the \$3.90 billion and \$4.24 billion levels of 2015-16 and 2016-17 respectively.

Policy takeaways

Farmers and agri-traders, like all businessmen, want policy stability and predictability. Onion growers, for instance, harvest around 10 tonnes per acre. A drop of Rs 5/kg in realisations means a revenue loss of Rs 50,000 on that produce. At the same time, a Rs 5/kg increase in prices for a household consuming 5-6 kg onions per month entails an additional outgo of only Rs 25-30. When governments resort to banning/re-

stricting agri exports, they usually privilege interests of consumers over producers. These actions hurt more when taken overnight, like with wheat exports. Building export markets takes time and effort. Many economists thus recommend a more predictable and rules-based policy — like introducing temporary tariffs instead of bans or quantitative restrictions. The same goes for imports. The Modi government has done away with import duties on most pulses — *arhar* (pigeon pea), *urad* (black gram), *masoor* (red lentils), yellow/white peas and, earlier this month, *chana* (chickpea) — and kept it at 5.5% for crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil. The above zero/low tariffs are at variance with the government’s own objective to promote crop diversification — weaning away farmers from rice, wheat and sugarcane to growing pulses and oilseeds, which are less water-guzzling and also significantly imported. The government taking over post the elections may have to come up with a more rational export-import policy, balancing interests of producers and consumers as well as the short- and long-term goals for the farm sector.

Unfeasible, illegal: Grounds of challenge to US law forcing TikTok sale

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

TIKTOK Inc and its Chinese parent company ByteDance Ltd have challenged the US Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, which stipulates that for the social media app to continue in the US, it must be sold to a company not controlled by a “foreign adversary” before January 19, 2025. The Act, which was signed into law by President Joe Biden on April 24, came after federal agencies and politicians raised concerns about data collection and surveillance through TikTok. The challenge at the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit argues

that this “qualified divestiture” is “simply not possible: not commercially, not technologically, not legally”. **‘Severing US ops not feasible’** The petition provides three reasons to justify why a sale to create a “standalone US TikTok platform” is not possible. First, TikTok is a globally integrated platform with content created by users around the world. A standalone US TikTok would be an “island” with a limited pool of content, which would “dramatically undermine the value and viability of the US TikTok business”. Second, the source code for the app would have to be “wrested” from ByteDance and given to an alternative team of engineers with no experience in running the platform — an impossible task within the

timeframe provided. This is a requirement under the Act to ensure there is no “operational relationship” between ByteDance and the new standalone US platform. Third, sale and export of TikTok’s proprietary “recommendation engine” is not possible without a licence from the Chinese government, which, the petition claims “has made clear that it would not permit a divestment of the recommendation engine that is a key to the success of TikTok in the United States”. **‘Alternatives tossed aside’** TikTok and ByteDance have submitted that they had drafted a National Security Agreement following negotiations with the US Committee on Foreign Investment in the

United States (CFIUS). This agreement, they claim, contained protections that were “more robust than those employed by any other widely used online platform in the industry”, with several measures to protect user data. These included the creation of a new subsidiary of TikTok, called TikTok US Data Security, which would have US government-approved Security Directors on its board. They also agreed to subject themselves to third-party verification and monitoring by companies approved by the CFIUS. Finally, the agreement included a “shut-down option” that would allow the government to suspend TikTok’s operations in specific cases where the agreement was not complied with. The petitioners have stated that they

have voluntarily begun implementing parts of the agreement that require action from TikTok and ByteDance, and have spent \$2 billion on this so far. But Congress disregarded this, and the Act was passed without giving any reasons or justification. **‘Hypothetical threats’** According to the petition, Congress enacted the law without providing any actual “legislative findings” on the threat posed by TikTok, and instead relied on hypothetical scenarios to explain how the platform could pose a threat in the future. This, according to the petition, falls short of the legal standard of “compelling interest” in the US, whereby a law must address real harms that are “not merely conjectural (based on incomplete information)” and show that it will “alleviate

these harms in a direct and material way”. The filing also claims that the law is “under-inclusive”, allowing other platforms that could pose similar problems to continue existing, while being “over-inclusive” by applying to all ByteDance-owned applications without showing that they pose risks for the Act to address. The petitioners claim that the Act turns ByteDance and TikTok into a “vilified class” by prohibiting all current and future operations in the US. While the Act automatically applies to TikTok and ByteDance, for other companies, a “presidential determination” would be needed which would include the issuance of a public report on specific national security concerns posed, and the assets that must be sold for the company to continue operating in the US.

EXPLAINED
LAW

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Decrease in equity mutual funds inflow in April

16 percent. Equity mutual funds attracted ₹18,917 crore in April, according to the Association of Mutual Funds in India. PTI

Number of countries to witness rise in exports from India

115 India's exports have increased to more than 100 countries during 2023-24 despite the economic uncertainties. PTI

Share of children to not receive measles vaccine in India

12 percent. Children receiving none of the double-dose, signals a "concerning gap" in immunisation coverage. PTI

Share of disease burden in India due to unhealthy diet

56.4 percent. Indian Council of Medical Research released 17 dietary guidelines to prevent diseases. PTI

Number of flights cancelled by Air India Express

85 Air India Express cancelled 23% of the total daily capacity as the cabin crew shortage continued for the third day. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Reservation within Constitutional bounds

How does the inclusion of Muslims in the OBC quota align with the Constitution's aim of social justice? Should India consider lifting the 50% cap on reservations to ensure fair representation for communities? Is it time for India to extend reservation benefits to Dalit Christians and Muslims to address historic discrimination?

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

A political slugfest has emerged over the reservation issues with the BJP making outlandish remarks about the Congress' demand for caste census by linking it to religion. The Opposition, meanwhile, had raised concern over the BJP's position on reservation, despite the latter's explicit denial of any change in policy.

Constitution and affirmative action

The Constitution aims to secure social justice while guaranteeing equality as a fundamental right. Articles 15 and 16 guarantee equality to all citizens in any action by the state (including admissions to educational institutions) and public employment respectively. To achieve social justice, they also enable the state to make special provisions for the advancement of OBC, SC and ST. OBC is a collective term to classify socially and educationally backward castes. Many States also classify certain castes as the Most Backward Classes (MBC). The reservation percentages vary from State to State.

In the *Indra Sawhney case* (1992), the Supreme Court upheld the 27% reservation for OBC. It opined that caste is a determinant of class in the Indian context and backwardness cannot be determined solely on economic criteria. However, to uphold the basic structure of equality, it fixed a cap of 50% for reservations unless there were exceptional circumstances. The reservation of OBC (27%), SC (15%) and ST (7.5%) resulted in a total reservation of 49.5%. The court also provided for excluding the creamy layer from OBC with an income limit currently at ₹8 lakhs per annum. Children of parents, either of whom entered the government service (Centre or State) as Group A/Class I officers and children of parents, both of whom entered as Group B/Class II officers are also excluded. In the *Janhit Abhiyan case* (2022), the court by a majority of 3:2 upheld the constitutional validity of the EWS reservation. It held that economic criteria could be a basis for reservation.

Affirmative action elsewhere

In the U.S., there is 'affirmative action'

Changes overview

A brief summary of important developments with respect to reservations at the central level



Year	Key development
1950 & 1951	Commencement of Constitution and First Amendment - Enabling provisions in Articles 15 and 16 to make special provisions for advancement of OBC, SC and ST
1982	Reservation for SC and ST fixed at 15% and 7.5% respectively, in central educational institutions and public sector undertakings
1990	27% reservation for OBC in central government employment introduced based on the recommendation of the Mandal Commission
2005	93rd Constitutional amendment inserted Article 15(5) that enabled reservation for OBC, SC and ST in educational institutions including private institutions
2019	103rd Constitutional amendment inserted Articles 15(6) and 16(6) that enabled up to 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among the unreserved category in educational institutions and public employment

that consists of government-approved and voluntary private programs granting special consideration to racial minorities like African-American and Latin-American. In *Fair admissions vs Harvard case* (2023), the U.S. Supreme Court, however, ruled that race-based affirmative action programs in college admissions violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. In the U.K., the law enables voluntary 'positive action' which allows employers to combat under-representation of disadvantaged groups. France does not have any affirmative action based on race or ethnicity. It provides educational measures designed to increase opportunities for low-income students.

Current debate

The Constituent assembly that framed our Constitution was against reservation solely based on religion. The Constitution guarantees the prohibition of discrimination only based on religion under Articles 15 and 16. The inclusion of all Muslim communities within the OBC

quota in Karnataka forms the basis for the BJP's campaign at present. However, it is pertinent to note that sub-categorisation for Muslims within the OBC quota has been present in Karnataka since 1995. The four per cent sub-categorisation for Muslims introduced in 1995 by the H. D. Deve Gowda-led government was removed by the previous government led by Basavaraj Bommai. This was redistributed amongst the OBC in the Hindu community. However, after observation by the court in the case challenging this order, the *status quo* continues. Muslim and Christian communities who are socially and educationally backward are provided reservations under the OBC/MBC category. There is also sub-categorisation within the OBC/MBC quota for Muslim communities in States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. This is because the term used in the Constitution is 'socially and educationally backward classes' and could encompass backward communities from all religions. It is only for being a member of a SC, 'The

Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950' specifies that the person should profess only Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism. There is no such requirement for being a member of a ST.

The Congress, meanwhile, in its manifesto has promised that they would work towards removing the 50% cap placed on reservations.

The way forward

Reservation is affirmative action meant to balance the historical discrimination faced by OBC, SC and ST communities. Rohini Commission was set up to provide recommendations on sub-categorisation amongst OBC castes. Though the findings of the report are yet to be made public, it has been estimated that 97% of reserved jobs and seats in educational institutions have been garnered by just around 25% of the OBC castes/sub-castes at the central level. Close to 1,000 of around 2,600 communities under the OBC category had zero representation in jobs and educational institutes. While sub-categorisation has been implemented in 11 different States, it has not been carried out at the central level. A similar issue of concentration of reservation benefits persists in the SC and ST categories. There is no exclusion based on the 'creamy layer' for these communities. The Dalit Christians and Muslims also suffer from considerable discrimination and lack of opportunities. The government has constituted a commission headed by former CJI K. G. Balakrishnan to study the question of extending SC reservation to Dalits who have converted to religions other than Sikhism and Buddhism.

Increasing the reservation limit beyond 50%, sub-categorisation among reserved categories, introducing appropriate creamy layers for SC and ST, and extending SC reservations to Dalit Christians and Muslims are matters that are sensitive with their set of pros and cons. There must be effort nevertheless to deliberate on these matters and frame suitable policies such that the benefits of reservation progressively reach the extremely marginalised sections. The aim should be towards the continuous pursuit of social justice while maintaining a harmonious balance with equality guaranteed in the Constitution.

(Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal)

THE GIST

Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution guarantee equality and provide for special provisions for the advancement of OBC, SC, and ST communities. The Supreme Court has upheld reservations for these communities, setting a cap of 50% unless under exceptional circumstances.

There's a debate over the inclusion of Muslims in the OBC quota in Karnataka. While some argue it's in line with the Constitution's aim of social justice, others oppose it, citing historical opposition to reservation solely based on religion.

Suggestions include sub-categorisation within reserved categories, addressing the concentration of reservation benefits, extending reservation to Dalit Christians and Muslims, and deliberating on increasing the reservation limit beyond 50%. These measures aim to ensure social justice while maintaining equality as guaranteed in the Constitution.

Why did Interpol issue a blue corner notice against Prajwal?

How is a blue corner Interpol notice different from a red corner notice? What does it mean for the SIT probe in the Prajwal Revanna sexual assault case? How does Interpol alert member countries about fugitives?

Sumeda

The story so far:

Amid a political storm in Karnataka over grave allegations of sexual abuse against Prajwal Revanna, sitting Hassan MP and grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, the International Criminal Police Organisation, commonly known as Interpol, has issued a blue corner notice against the absconding politician. The MP has been on the run since late last month following the leak of thousands of explicit video clips that allegedly show the 33-year-old sexually abusing multiple women, prompting the JD(S) to suspend him.

How does the Interpol alert countries?
The Interpol is an inter-governmental law

enforcement organisation which assists and facilitates cooperation between national law forces in 196 member countries to combat transnational crimes. The organisation shares information regarding crimes and wanted criminals globally, and provides technical, operational, and investigative support to locate fugitives.

It manages a database of critical data about wanted criminals, which member countries can use to trace such individuals.

The agency has a National Central Bureau in all member countries which is a single point of contact between law enforcement agencies of that country and Interpol.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is officially designated as the nodal agency for India.

The agency uses

a 'colour-coded' system to alert and share requests for crime-related information among member countries and global organisations. Notably, member countries are not bound by international law to abide by Interpol notices as they are entirely discretionary.

Why did Interpol issue a blue corner notice against Prajwal Revanna?

The international organisation issues a blue corner notice when the case is related to missing persons. Also called an "enquiry notice," such an alert is sent for additional information from member states about a person, to verify their identity, location, or criminal record concerning a criminal investigation.

It is different from a red corner notice, considering that the purpose of a blue notice is information about a person of interest in an investigation, while the

former is generally issued against a person wanted for extradition, or serve a sentence based on a court decision, or a similar lawful action.

Interpol issued a blue corner notice against Mr. Revanna after the Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed by the Karnataka government sought the help of the CBI for further inquiry.

The SIT first issued a look out circular against the Hassan MP after he failed to appear before the panel.

The request came days after the Hassan MP remained untraceable. As per reports, the MP left for Munich, Germany using his diplomatic passport a day after his constituency went to the polls in the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections on April 26, and hours before the SIT was constituted.

Mr. Revanna's advocate sought seven days for his client to present himself before the panel.

The investigating team, however, ruled out the possibility and moved for a blue corner alert against Mr. Revanna, considering that the investigation is in the early stages and the police are yet to file criminal charges.

The SIT officials told Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah that they intend to arrest the accused to expedite the investigation as soon as they receive information about his whereabouts.

THE GIST

Prajwal Revanna, sitting MP and grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, is accused of sexual abuse, prompting his suspension from JD(S).

Interpol has issued a blue corner notice against him. Blue corner notices are issued for missing persons to gather information about their identity, location, or criminal record for ongoing investigations.

The Special Investigation Team formed by the Karnataka government sought CBI's help in the case, leading to the issuance of the blue corner notice.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



Changing landscape: Banner advertising *Bridgerton* TV Series is displayed. GETTY IMAGES

Breaking boundaries: the cultural shifts in cinematic depictions of love and desire

Various films and series, ranging from classics to contemporary productions show the changing landscape of sex and sexuality in English cinema, spanning from the liberated '70s to the more conservative '90s and the recent resurgence of openness in the 21st century

Mini Anthikad Chhibber

A perusal of the English movies turning 50 this year, shows examples of classic and camp. Where 1974 saw the release of *China Town*, *The Godfather Part II*, two Mel Brooks comedies – *Young Frankenstein* and *Blazing Saddles*, two Agatha Christie adaptations – *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Ten Little Indians* and three disaster films – *The Towering Inferno*, *Airport 75* and *Earthquake*, incidentally all blockbusters, the year also featured R-rated comedies (*Flesh Gordon*, *Going Places* and *The Swinging Cheerleaders*), an erotic drama, *Julia* and the grindhouse gem, *Wide Open*. That was the lurid '70s, one can always say superiorly. By the late '80s, the fear of AIDS punished all forms of perceived deviant sexual behaviour with boiled bunnies and ice picks. The Michael Douglas triptych of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Disclosure* (1994) all figured a man paying dearly for a momentary lapse of reason. *Disclosure* incidentally is so much fun for all its delicious '90s tech stuff including Douglas' character being miffed at not heading the CD-ROM division!

Love and vengeance

Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*, apart from doing away with underwear during

interrogation scenes, was heteronormative with a vengeance – what with the psychopathic bisexual serial killer slicing up entitled rockstars.

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) won Oscars for its portrayal of a love that cannot be named.

The fact that the love was between two cowboys, that ultimate symbol of American masculinity, upped the ante several notches. Ten years later it was Todd Haynes' turn with *Carol*, based on Patricia Highsmith's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Price of Salt*.

However, both these movies and several others, still had that heteronormative slant. The lovers and their furtive love mostly did not have happy endings. Simultaneously, there was a depressing sexlessness in mainstream movies with Tom Cruise as its patron saint. And to think that Cruise had starred in Stanley Kubrick's exquisitely erotic *Eyes Wide Shut*!

As the millennium turned 21 and adult, sex was back on screen. The credited presence of intimacy coordinators on set ensures that no one is being exploited – Sharon Stone has repeatedly said she was not aware that she would be revealing quite as much in the infamous interrogation scene.

The second season of *The Deuce*, a show set in the porn industry in the 70s

and 80s, was the first to have an intimacy coordinator, and since then *Bridgerton*, exploring love and heaving bosoms in an alternate Regency period, and the cult teen drug and sex drama, *Euphoria*, have followed suit. Michaela Coel dedicated her BAFTA for the hard hitting *I May Destroy You* to her intimacy coordinator.

'All kinds of fun'

Apart from the much-needed weighty discourses on sex and sexuality, there have been films and shows that show sex as all kinds of fun. From *Sex Education*, which looks at horny British teenagers and their elders at Moordale High, to *Minx* set in the world of adult magazines, sex is out there and everyone is having a jolly time of it.

Shows like *Sex/Life*, which follows the fantasies of a suburban housewife and *Obsession*, where Richard Armitage stars as a respectable surgeon whose life gets derailed thanks to a pash for a mysterious young woman, follow the '90s erotic thriller template with sweat, grunts, groans and impossible contortions. *Fatal Attraction's* Adrian Lyne got into the act with another Highsmith adaptation, *Deep Water* (2022), with Ben Affleck and Ana de Armas playing weird games with each other when Affleck's character was not rhapsodising about snails.

And then there is the casual approach to sex on screen best embodied in the

blistering forehand delivered by Luca Guadagnino in *Challengers*.

The movie explores the life, love and sexualities of three tennis players, Tashi, Patrick and Art played by Zendaya, Josh O'Connor and Mike Faist respectively.

The tennis and the sex are explosive and interchangeable. Tashi leaning back to watch Patrick and Art make out, with a satisfied smile at her handiwork, sets the tone for the great looking film.

Realisation, normalisation

The Sandman spin off series, *Dead Boy Detectives*, while not about sex, features Edwin's sweet realisation of his sexuality and a not-so-nice dating experience for Jenny, who runs a niche butcher shop, when her date turns out to be a stone cold killer. The Cat King's attraction to Edwin is naughty and nice.

Highsmith was way ahead of her time, as always, by giving a somewhat happy ending to *The Price of Salt*.

We follow in her illustrious footsteps with the normalising of sex of all persuasions.

If, however, you wish to go old school there is always the '90s. *Fatal Attraction* was rebooted into a vaguely vanilla show and now there is a reboot of that other shocker from the '90s, *Presumed Innocent*, with Jake Gyllenhaal playing Harrison Ford's Rusty Sabich. Saucy does not begin to describe it.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subramanian

Valued customer (M. Ramachandran, Kochi)

'Valued' here means 'to have a high opinion of, attach importance to.' A valued customer is a customer who is held in high esteem. A valued friend; a valued officer. 'Valuable' generally goes with things. 'Valuable' means 'of great value, price or worth.'

It is a valuable painting.
He gave valuable advice to her.
His friendship is valuable.
'Valuables' means 'valuable things, especially small personal possessions.'

Peace breaks out (V. R. Moorti, Thiruvananthapuram)
" 'Cambodia – peace breaks out' was a headline shown in the morning news bulletin of Doordarshan. 'Break out' does not go with anything good or pleasant.

War broke out.
A fire broke out.
The thief tried to break out of prison.
He broke out in a rash last night, the doctor says that it is because of some allergy.

Permanent, eternal (S. K. Narang, Patiala)
'Permanent' is the opposite of 'temporary.' A permanent post is a post a person holds till his retirement or death. Permanent damage to something is damage that will remain as long as the thing lasts. That is eternal which has neither a beginning nor an end. The eternal God. 'Eternal' also means 'unchanging, not affected by time.' These are some eternal truths. It also means 'ceaseless, too frequent.'

I am tired of her eternal arguments.
He is sick of their eternal bickerings.
Plethora (A. Vaswani, Raichur)
'Plethora' means 'over-abundance.' It does not just mean 'a lot,' but means 'excessive amount.' It is followed by 'of.'

The report contains a plethora of details.
I don't have the time to plough through the plethora of details.
I had to listen to a plethora of complaints.

The 'e' in the word is pronounced like the 'e' in 'bed,' the 'o' and the 'a' like the 'a' in 'India.' The stress is on the first syllable.

The word is from the Greek 'pletho', be full. In medicine, 'plethora' is 'an abnormal excess of red corpuscles in the blood' or 'any excess of body fluid.'

Published in The Hindu on December 3, 1991

THE DAILY QUIZ

In May 1962, the popular superhero Incredible Hulk was introduced by Marvel comics. Here is a quiz on the scientist-cum-superhero who became a mainstay in pop-culture

K. Abhinava

QUESTION 1

Bruce Banner's attempts to save a teenager who runs on the test site of a bomb causing him to get exposed to the gamma rays and sparking his transformation into the Hulk. Name the teenager.

QUESTION 2

In his debut appearance, the Hulk had a different skin colour, but from the second issue, his skin was changed to the now iconic green colour due to certain printing issues. What was the original colour?

QUESTION 3

Bill Bixby, Lou Ferrigno, Eric

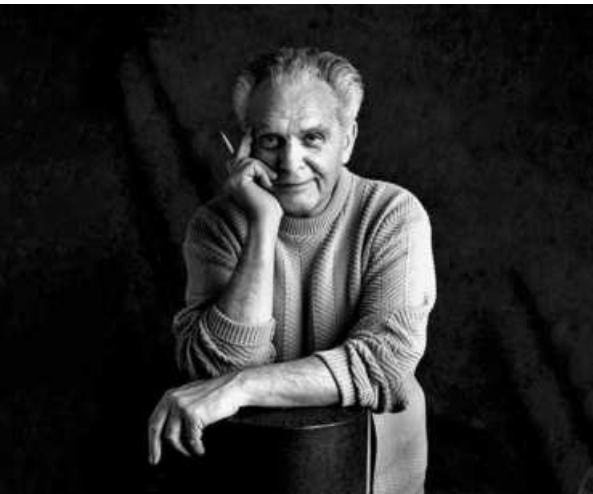
Bana, Edward Norton, Mark Ruffalo, Tim Roth. Who among them has not played the Incredible Hulk?

QUESTION 4

This iconic mutant character made his debut in Hulk issue 181. This character has also been a part of a successful film franchise. Name the character.

QUESTION 5

The name of the character was changed in the 1978 Television show titled The Incredible Hulk. Instead of Bruce Banner, the character was called _____ Banner.



Visual question:

Identify this artist who along with writer Stan Lee co-created the Incredible Hulk. He also earned the moniker King of comics.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- This poet from Ireland was Tagore's biggest promoter in the English-speaking world. Name this poet. **Ans: W.B Yeats**
- In 2021, there was outrage in India over the renovation of a memorial that was the site of one of the bloodiest incidents in the 1900s. Name this incident. **Ans: Jallianwala Bagh massacre**
- This Nobel Laureate who is known for his contributions to welfare economics was named by Tagore. **Ans: Amartya Sen**
- This place was recognised as a World Heritage Site last year. **Ans: Santiniketan**
- This magazine published several of Tagore's poems, including *Amar Sonar Bangla*, which became the national anthem of Bangladesh. **Ans: Bangadarshan**
- This film made by Satyajit Ray starring Soumitra Chatterjee competed for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. It is based on Tagore's novel of the same name. Name it. **Ans: Ghare Baire**
- Visual: Name the artist. **Ans: Abanindranath Tagore, his nephew**
- Early Birds:** Prashant Nain | Rajmohan V | K.N. Viswanathan | Jyot Prakash Gulati | Saheni George | Dipankar Baidya

Word of the day

Avarice:

extreme greed for material wealth

Synonyms: materialism, frugality, meanness

Usage: *He was rich beyond the dreams of avarice.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/avaricepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ævəˈrɪs/

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

Lost in the campaign

Water crisis, forest fires, health, education forgotten

Quite unlike the energy that coursed through the general elections of 2014 and 2019, this has so far been a tepid, ‘waveless’ election. To be sure, it would be inaccurate to say that no worthwhile issues have been raised. Inflation, income redistribution, unemployment and competitive welfarism are the topics of the day, even if the discussion around them has been of uncertain quality. What is also evident is that local concerns have not been highlighted, making it an election that is low on both national and local flavour.



Mud-slinging around themes of corruption and identity have overwhelmed relevant concerns — be it water shortage in peninsular India, forest fires in Uttarakhand or education and health. In Uttarakhand or north Karnataka, which are through with their polling, local issues were largely overlooked. Uttarakhand has seen a tunnel collapse, endless landslides and avalanches and the slow sinking of an entire town as a result of tunnelling for a hydel project. Yet, the discourse revolved largely around the Prime Minister. A debate on the pattern of development should have figured in a State that is constantly dealing with man-made natural calamities. Even the forest fires in the State, being heard by the Supreme Court and a regular occurrence now, were overlooked. Besides stubble burning, what has added fuel to the fire, quite literally, is the proliferation of pine trees (with their inflammable resin) as part of the afforestation drive. There are also reports of government agencies being hand in glove with vested interests to clear forests so that they can be sold as revenue land.

If Uttarakhand lurches from one ‘natural’ crisis to another amidst political indifference, north Karnataka’s water and drought woes too found scant mention in the elections. In the parched regions of Vijayapura and Bagalkot, the personalities of candidates held sway. The endemic drought in north Karnataka and its impact on agriculture-linked work has been taken for granted. Political parties do not seem to have applied themselves to the varied manifestations of climate change. In Maharashtra, local politicians make unrealistic promises on water, while national leaders skim over issues of drought, farming and livelihoods. Their conversations around ‘jobs’ are delinked from the nitty-gritty of creating sustainable livelihoods. The rhetoric of this election has been about ‘guarantees’ without a reference to what the model of development for a particular region should be. Local infrastructure needs have been neglected, amidst promises of grandiose schemes.

The infirmities in our health and education systems have not been raised, except in a superficial way. This is a serious failing of our political process, given that challenges of quality and access loom larger than ever. For a country that was scarred by Covid when our health systems were shown up, such indifference is simply unacceptable. It is for the people to stop this race to the bottom.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

The ECI must flex its muscle

Jayant Pankaj

Controversial remarks from political candidates have always been a part of Indian elections.

However, in the ongoing 2024 LS election, candidates are crossing ethical boundaries more than ever before.

Leaders from both the ruling and Opposition parties have been making intemperate remarks and the poll panel has sent notices to some of them.

These are glaring violations of the Election Commission of India’s (ECI) Model Code of Conduct.

In response, the ECI has issued general warnings and notified the concerned political parties to maintain the ethical standards of elections.

However, are mere warnings enough to ensure fairness during the election?

The ECI is expected to come down hard on any political party or candidate violating the law; and issuing mere warnings is not enough.

The ECI is one of the trustworthy institutions that has ensured fair elections since independence, so inaction on its part can dent its reputation.

The ECI is already facing a growing challenge in countering the criminalisation of politics during elections.

Hate speech among parliamentarians has unfortunately become a norm nowadays.

According to the Association for Democratic Reforms analysis, out of 4,768 MPs and MLAs in the last five years contested, 107 lawmakers have hate speech cases against them.

The BJP leads with 42 such lawmakers, followed by Congress with 15, and then AAP, DMK, and others.

The 2018 book *How Democracies Die* written by Harvard academics fellows Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky, says that democracies deteriorate not necessarily due to violent coups but because elected parliamentarians exploit the very institutions meant to uphold democratic processes in order to undermine them.



VIPIN SONDHI
MEGHA SINGH CHAUHAN

An organisation is essentially a group of individuals collaborating to accomplish a particular purpose. Thus, its core is primarily influenced by its people and structure, complemented by its culture, goals and processes. It is crucial to recognise that led by the CEO and the leadership team, people constitute the bedrock of any organization.

Studies have established that apparel is a part of the first impression that individuals convey about themselves to the world surrounding them. Therefore, what employees wear at the workplace becomes an important part of their identity. The concept of uniforms dates back centuries in the military and other disciplined forces from the Commanding Officer to the troops.

Over time, this idea found its way to many sectors, including industrial, healthcare, airlines and hospitality, but with one significant difference; only the front line staff and workers wore them.

The middle managers and the leadership team exempted themselves for some reason. There are honourable exceptions of course — the ubiquitous doctor’s white coat with a stethoscope slung around the neck.

Often the argument put forth by senior leadership in some departments in organizations for e.g. sales, marketing and finance that they be exempt can be quickly closed, if the CEO leads by example by wearing the company uniform. The leadership team and the middle managers then do not need to be mandated. They have little option, but to follow.

An organisation however, may have many uniforms — preferably by function and not by hierarchy — as that would defeat the very purpose of a uniform. For e.g. the shop floor and sales and marketing could have different uniforms based on collective choice and functionality, but within the department there would be no distinction. And the display of the organizational brand on the uniform, would be identical across the organization.

Uniforms not only instil a sense of discipline among people, but also foster so much more.

Establish a brand identity: Uniforms play a vital role in shaping the initial impression of both the organization and its people, establishing a consistent brand image of quality service that appeals to clients and customers. They effectively convey the organization’s core identity to a wider audience.

Ensure safety and functionality: Uniforms in various professions serve functional and aesthetic purposes, supporting tasks while presenting a professional image. Tailored uniforms enhance work environments ensuring



SOMASHEKARA GRN

The value of workplace uniforms

INCLUSIVE MOVE. It is important for CEOs to set an example by wearing uniforms to work

safety and productivity, especially on the shop floor and in service.

Foster an inclusive culture: When employees follow a consistent dress code, it reinforces inclusivity, a strong sense of belonging within the team, thereby enhancing employee performance and raising the standard of their work.

Become a conversation starter: As CEO, I wore the uniforms of the companies I represented for over two decades. Uniforms serve as a conversation starter in public interactions with customers, clients and people at large. Many CEOs do the same, though one always hopes that more would, else it does seem an opportunity lost.

IMPACT ON THE WORKFORCE
Fosters a sense of belonging and job satisfaction: Uniform work wear promotes group belonging and teamwork, crucial for organizations reliant on coordination. I was fortunate to experience this in my early career in an Indo-Japanese manufacturing joint venture, where all employees, from the CEO to factory workers, wore role-specific uniforms. Role-specific

Uniforms serve as a unifying force, harmonizing the workforce and reducing potential inequalities by standardizing attire

uniforms foster equality and inclusiveness within the company and is an important lesson for the young.

Enhances team unity and morale and also inspiration for the local community: Uniforms foster camaraderie and team spirit, leading to increased productivity and morale. Wearing high-quality work wear can also make employees feel valued. Young men and women wearing their company’s uniform can also be a source of inspiration for other youngsters in their community.

The curious case of the impact of uniforms: Diversity is crucial in every organisation, with employees from various socio-economic, cultural backgrounds and perspectives. However, these differences can sometimes lead to judgments and disparities. Uniforms serve as a unifying force, harmonizing the workforce and reducing potential inequalities by standardizing attire, particularly in industries with a large employee base. Yet, often executives as mentioned earlier, are often exempt from wearing uniforms creating a perceived stigma. To mitigate such disparities, CEOs could set the example by wearing the company uniform.

Relationship between uniforms, job satisfaction & productivity: A study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* introduced the concept of ‘enclothed cognition’, highlighting the synergistic influence of clothing on psychological processes. Uniforms play a significant role in employee happiness

and self-conception, with research from Coventry University and Murray Uniforms indicating that well-made uniforms can increase workplace happiness by over 20 per cent. Employees themselves believe that their work attire influences their professional image and appearance. A study of several hundred employees, titled “The Effect of Employee Uniforms on Job Satisfaction,” revealed that uniforms boost confidence and credibility. It is reasonable to assume they also influence individual and organizational productivity levels.

To leverage uniforms for improving employee performance, the senior leadership can take several proactive steps. This may include wearing uniforms themselves to promote unity and pride among the workforce. Additionally, organising workshops on the importance of uniforms within the organisation can be beneficial. Exploring the impact of uniforms on workforce dynamics, particularly on morale and productivity, presents an intriguing research opportunity.

However, taken together, it would synergistically benefit national productivity, as it seemingly has in Japan and South Korea. For many, the best part of having a uniform is that one does not have to make choices in selecting what to wear. It just is more efficient!

Sondhi is Chairperson National Board for Quality Promotion and Former MD & CEO, Ashok Leyland & JCB India; Chauhan is Policy Unit, Quality Council of India

Making sense of politics through oligopoly models

Such firms, whose number is fixed, produce identical products. This is also true of political parties

TCA Srinivasa Raghavan

It has been a matter of abiding mystery, at least to me, why political pundits don’t bother to check with economic theory to validate whatever they are saying. There is zero effort on their part to figure out the nature of political competition which is very similar, or even identical, to what economics calls oligopolistic competition.

Oligopolistic competition is when a few firms compete with each other. That’s exactly what happens in elections. Economists have been analysing the behaviour of such firms for around 150 years now.

The first of them was a 19th century French mathematician called Antoine Augustin Cournot. He said that usually firms decide how much they will produce independently of the other firms.

This is how political parties also behave. They decide the number of seats they will contest, independently of how many other parties will contest.

Cournot also said that these firms, whose number is fixed, produce

identical products. This is true of political parties also.

Nor do these firms collude because each has some market power. Their competition is in output, not prices. Most importantly each firm’s marketing strategy is based on that of its main competitor. Think manifestoes.

Later, another French economist called Francois Bertrand came up with the opposite theory. Firms compete on prices, he said, and consumers choose the quantities they will buy. In politics this happens at the constituency level. Each party in a constituency says here’s my candidate and the voters then vote in larger or smaller numbers for them.

In this sense, the Cournot and Bertrand models of oligopolistic competition are both applicable to political competition. They complement each other.

LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

But there is a third way suggested by the German economist, Friedrich von Stackleberg, in 1934. This comprises market leaders and followers. The leader makes the first move and the followers follow with their moves.

Some conditions apply such as the



POLITICAL PARTIES. Vying for powerSANJAY RITTI

leader must have enormous commitment power and can’t backtrack once committed. Ram Mandir was a case in point for the BJP and caste based reservation continues to be for the Congress and other parties.

The most interesting thing about this model is the ability of the follower to hurt the leader. This happens when, in order to hurt the leader the follower is willing to hurt itself. The Congress is a good example of this vis-a-vis say it’s refusal to go the Ram temple. But neither in economics nor in politics is this threat credible. I am aware that the analogy with

economics can’t be pushed too far. But on the whole the different theories of oligopolistic competition offer enough insights into political competition to enable a more coherent analysis than what our experts offer.

For example, in the 2024 general election, the competition is between two major formations, the NDA and the so-called INDIA alliance. Cournot-like, the BJP has set its ‘output’ at 300 seats. It is contesting around 450. The Congress is contesting around 325.

But given that the BJP has weak brand pull and distribution outlets in about 180-200 seats in the south and the east, this means it must win 300 out of 343 seats or, if it’s lucky, out of about 365 seats.

That’s a strike rate of around 80 or more per cent. For a party that’s been in power for a decade that is probably too high. Even a 70 per cent strike rate gives it only about 255. A strike rate of 60 will place it at a serious disadvantage.

We can see from this how economic analysis of oligopolistic competition allows us to get reasonably accurate forecast, give or take 10 per cent as error margin because of the dynamics of oligopolistic competition.

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No place for racist slurs

The news report ‘Pitroda sings Cong with racial remarks’ (May 9) has caused much anguish with Prime Minister Narendra Modi attacking the Congress over it. Such racist remarks are not only insulting to Indians but also to people of other nations. Sam Pitroda’s exit from the Congress was only expected. But his remarks were baffling given his important role in Congress policy-making over the decade. For the remaining phases, the political parties should focus on issues such as development, education, industrial growth, job

creation, healthcare, and environment.
Vinod Johri
New Delhi

Updating borrowers

With reference to the editorial ‘Borrower beware’ (May 9), banks tweak their deposit and lending rates based on the MPC’s policy rates. However several guidelines related to interests on advances/overdue interest/ penal charges etc are not given adequate importance. Banks must provide their customers at least half-yearly statements of loan accounts to their borrowers via mail. RBI’s diktat to lenders to issue a

standardised ‘Key Facts Statement’ is noteworthy. Borrowers need to updated regularly regarding the status of their borrowings.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

Vaccine worries

AstraZeneca’s recent statement in the High Court of London that their Covid vaccine, in very rare cases, cause deadly Thrombosis with Thrombocytopenia Syndrome, shocked the world. India’s Covishield is an AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India Pvt. Ltd (SII), Pune.

In November 2021, India initiated negotiations with Moderna and Pfizer to get their vaccines, without any headway. Recent reports reveal the government withheld consent to the terms of Moderna and Pfizer as to accountability and prosecution in cases of deaths after taking the vaccine. As of March 2023, India had administered over 220 crore doses of the Covid vaccines, of which 175 crore were Covishield. Nevertheless, it is not clear if AZ or SII could be held accountable for the side effects caused by Covishield.
Haridasan Rajan
Kozhikode

Catch them young

With reference to the article ‘Financial literacy must begin at school’ (May 9), children’s knowledge of technology must be channelised by their schools to prevent them from falling prey to financial frauds. It is here financial literacy in school curriculum plays a key role. As a teacher of economics, I have seen that students evince a lot of interest in monetary economics. It is imperative that schools teach them the significance of earning wealth through honest means and avoid greed.
S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Greening financial entities

Stumbling blocks to RBI roadmap must be removed

Neha Kumar

The Reserve Bank of India's draft guidelines for disclosure on climate risks and opportunities were released on March 28 for public feedback. The norms are a balanced response towards keeping the Indian financial system resilient in the face of climate shocks and helping regulated entities (REs) systematically steer financial resources to opportunities presented by green transition.

While the guidelines provide a time-bound practicable roadmap for REs, making them work will require some immediate challenges to be addressed.

Differentiated glide path: The guidelines follow a four year implementation glide path starting next financial year (FY26) catering to different kinds of REs. All REs except urban cooperative banks (UCBs) will start reporting next financial year on governance, strategy, risk management. Given that the level of disclosures would vary according to the size, scale and complexity of the operations of the REs, RBI further differentiates between baseline and enhanced disclosures, with the latter being optional for some entities. The guidelines make reporting on metrics and targets mandatory after the first year. By FY29, all REs will be reporting on all four parameters.

Climate focussed requirements and challenges: Three requirements contained in the guidelines and attendant challenges merit special mention. First, RBI requires that REs identify and quantify risk over the relevant time horizon — short, medium or long term — and link it with their planning timelines for effective strategic decision-making. Time horizons for physical climate risks such as floods, droughts and changes in rainfall pattern can vary, making risk modelling and exposure assessment a tricky business for REs without robust granular data.

Similarly, transition risks due to changes in policy, technology and consumer choices can manifest differently in different climate scenarios across different time horizons. While the guidelines suggest that REs use the available and applicable global or national guidance on plausible climate scenarios, and define time horizons as applicable to them, this is a huge undertaking. It will also make comparability in disclosures challenging.

Second, RBI requires REs to



CLIMATE SHOCKS. Financial system must be made resilient

report on reducing their financed emissions — the GHG emissions attributed to the loans and investments made by an RE to its investee or counterparty. Capturing financed emissions of banks when an intermediary is involved such as an NBFC that borrows from banks and on-lends to high carbon emitting entities will also be equally important given the interconnectedness between banks and NBFCs in the Indian financial ecosystem. How will this be captured is not entirely clear in the reporting requirements on financed emissions for banks.

Third, RBI requires REs to disclose transition plans. This could be a highly enabling aspect of the guidelines as it allows a multi-year approach beyond the usual financing or investment time horizons to facilitate a more comprehensive assessment of climate risks, and is a way to build accountable bank-borrower engagement to expedite shifts in capital allocation.

Need for enhanced capacities: Accurately capturing climate impact on REs' balance sheets will remain a challenge. REs will need to upgrade climate stress testing capacities; and technical and methodological skills will need to be ramped up rapidly within REs as well as within the RBI's relevant departments.

Appropriate steps and further coordination are needed for successful implementation of these guidelines. First, a sustainable finance taxonomy that includes definitions of transitional activities will help assess the greenness of RE portfolios. This awaits action by the Finance Ministry which had anchored the taxonomy process in 2021-22. And, second, forward looking disclosure requirements on climate, including on transition plans, for businesses will be needed for granular data to flow from the borrowers to REs. This is in the purview of SEBI.

The writer is Head, South Asia, Climate Bonds Initiative



ARUN KUMAR

The Central Board of Direct Taxes has announced that net direct tax collection has exceeded its target for 2023-24. It has increased 17.7 per cent over last year and much faster than the income increase of about 9 per cent. Analysis of this data is also important since the Prime Minister has set in motion the issue of redistribution in the economy.

Net direct tax collections of the Centre, at ₹19.58-lakh crore, are higher than the Budget estimate of ₹18.23-lakh crore for 2023-24. This was revised to ₹19.45-lakh crore in the Interim Budget 2024-25 and the actual has turned out to be even higher by 0.67 per cent. The net figure is arrived at by subtracting the refunds to taxpayers. The refunds have also increased substantially by 22.74 per cent over the last year's figure of ₹3.09-lakh crore to reach ₹3.79-lakh crore. What does it tell us about Indian economy's performance in 2023-24?

RIISING SHARE OF PIT

Direct tax collection by the Central government comes from incomes, wealth and transactions. Tax on wealth — wealth tax, estate duty and gift tax — has been negligible since it is largely eliminated. Income tax is collected both as personal income tax (PIT) and corporation tax.

PIT has sharply increased by 24.26 per cent. Corporation tax has increased by 10.26 per cent and is 46.53 per cent of the total direct tax collection, considerably less than its share of 49.64 per cent in 2022-23.

In 2018-19, revenue from corporation tax exceeded PIT by 40.3 per cent. In 2019-20 this excess declined to 13.05 per cent due to the sharp reduction in the corporation tax rate. In 2020-21, the excess turned into a deficit of 6.4 per cent but in 2021-22 corporation tax collection again exceeded that from PIT but after that PIT has been higher. Why these swings?

The increase in tax collection can occur for two reasons. First, an increase in the base of tax collection. That is, more entities come under the tax net. With inflation, nominal incomes rise and those who were not under the tax net also come under it. The number of people in the direct tax net has risen from 7,42,49,558 in FY17 to 9,37,76,869 in FY22. Further, those already in the tax net have a higher income. Second, if the government raises the rate of tax, collections increase. Both these factors are at play currently.

Direct tax collections reflect disparities

TAKING STOCK. The taxpaying citizens largely belong to the organised sector. Their incomes have risen substantially and they pay more tax



GETTY IMAGES

Income tax rate has been raised through a surcharge on tax payable while keeping the base rate unchanged at 30 per cent and education and health cess at 4 per cent. In 2014-15 a surcharge on income tax of 10 per cent was introduced for an income above ₹1 crore. In 2016-17, it was raised to 12 per cent and in 2017-18 to 15 per cent. In 2018-19, a surcharge of 10 per cent for income between ₹50 lakh and ₹1 crore was introduced while 15 per cent on incomes above ₹1 crore remained unchanged. In 2021-22, a levy of 25 per cent on incomes between ₹2 crore and ₹5 crore and 37 per cent on income above ₹5 crore was introduced. There was no change in surcharge for income below ₹2 crore.

In brief, while the corporation tax rate was reduced, the tax on incomes has been raised. Naturally, tax collection under PIT has increased faster than

While the corporation tax rate was reduced, the tax on incomes has been raised. Naturally, tax collection under PIT has increased faster.

from corporation tax. Further, the big increase in income tax collection is no indication of a rapidly growing economy. It could be claimed that the increase is a result of better tax compliance due to control of black economy but that does not appear to be the case.

NARROW BASE OF PIT

To know whether or not compliance has improved, there is need for more granular data on which entities are paying more of income tax. Detailed data is available for 2020-21 and some data for 2021-22. What does it reveal?

First and foremost, the base of tax payment in India is very narrow. Only those in the top rung of the income ladder in the country are in the income tax net. In 2020-21, 6.6 per cent of the population filed a tax return. But most of them did not pay any income tax since their income was below the taxable limit. Effectively, only 0.68 per cent of the population had high enough income to pay a significant amount of income tax, these are called the effective taxpayers. Further, 0.016 per cent declared an income above ₹1 crore with a share of 38.6 per cent of the declared taxable income.

It is this 0.68 per cent and 0.016 per cent which has had to pay a surcharge

and a higher tax rate. Even if their income did not rise, they had to pay a higher tax rate.

For income between ₹2 crore and ₹5 crore, there was an increase of 3 per cent in the tax rate and for an income above ₹5 crore the increase was 6.6 per cent. This rate increase explains a part of the increase in PIT.

The other part is due to a rise in inequality in the economy. The taxpaying citizens largely belong to the organised sector. Their incomes have risen substantially and they pay more tax. The unorganised sector incomes are mostly below the taxable limit.

Further, data on Q3 of GDP for 2023-24 shows a decline in the share of consumption. This indicates a shift in incomes' share from the poor to the well-off, since higher the income, smaller is the per cent of it consumed. So, as the income share of the well-off increases PIT would increase without compliance improving.

In brief, the rapid increase in PIT indicates increasing income disparity between the organised sector which falls in the tax net and the unorganised sector that lies largely outside the tax net. No wonder there is talk of redistribution.

The writer is retired Prof of Economics, JNU

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 10, 2004

ICAI eyes global enrolment

Overseas students training for the Indian chartered accountancy course under foreign accountants? This is one of the items on the agenda of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, which wants to spread its tentacles overseas. The ICAI has now approached the Government to allow overseas students doing articleship under recognised accountants practising in those countries to take the CA examinations offered in India by the institute.

HC fiat to Centre brings relief to 2 more FM players

The Delhi High Court has directed the Centre not to demand till May 17, the licence fee of over ₹7.15 crore each from two private FM Radio players for the third year after the broadcasters informed that they have made a representation about their grievances before the TDSAT.

Bharti group eyes overseas acquisition

Telecom major Bharti group has indicated that it would look for acquiring companies in overseas markets such as East Asia, West Asia and Africa. Mr Sunil Mittal, Chairman and Managing Director, told newspersons in Jaipur that the company would concentrate on at least one more buy-out within India this year.

Sanjay Kumar
Chirag Chopra

Innovation stands as the cornerstone for attracting investments and creating high-quality jobs. Increased R&D spend can spur productivity and efficiency, boosting economic growth ultimately.

India more than doubled its R&D spend to ₹1,27,000 crore in 2021 from ₹60,000 crore in 2011, but as a percentage of GDP it has come down to 0.64 from 0.76 during the period. Clearly, R&D spend has not grown commensurately with GDP growth. Going by 2021 DST data, the R&D spend is driven mainly by the Central Government, at 43.7 per cent, followed by the private sector, at 36.4 per cent. In countries like Japan, the US and Korea, the R&D spend by businesses is around 70 per cent, and in most emerging countries it is more than 50 per cent. Obviously, the private sector in India needs to increase its share quickly.

If we look at the R&D spend by higher education institutions as a percentage of total country R&D spend,

India's spend is far lower than that of Australia (36 per cent), the UK (24 per cent), Canada (39 per cent) and the US (11 per cent). So, the spend by educational institutions also need to go up substantially to harness the key learnings in these institutions. One good example is development of India Stack for 5G technology, and the Maglev train design being done at IIT Madras. These efforts can help develop the technology within the country rather than rely on foreign firms.

RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

Coming to research publications, India contributed to nearly 6 per cent of all such publications in 2023 (3 per cent in 2016); China's contribution was 22 per cent in 2023 (up from 10 per cent in 2016), followed by the EU (14 per cent) and the US (11 per cent).

As for manufacturing sector R&D spend, drugs and pharmaceuticals leads by some distance at 33.6 per cent, followed by textiles (13.7 per cent), defence (7.3 per cent), and biotechnology (4 per cent). In the services sector, the IT sector accounts



R&D. Private sector must step up

for only 10 per cent of the total R&D spend and transportation (7.7 per cent). The DRDO accounts for about 30 per cent of the Centre's R&D spend, followed by space, at about 18 per cent.

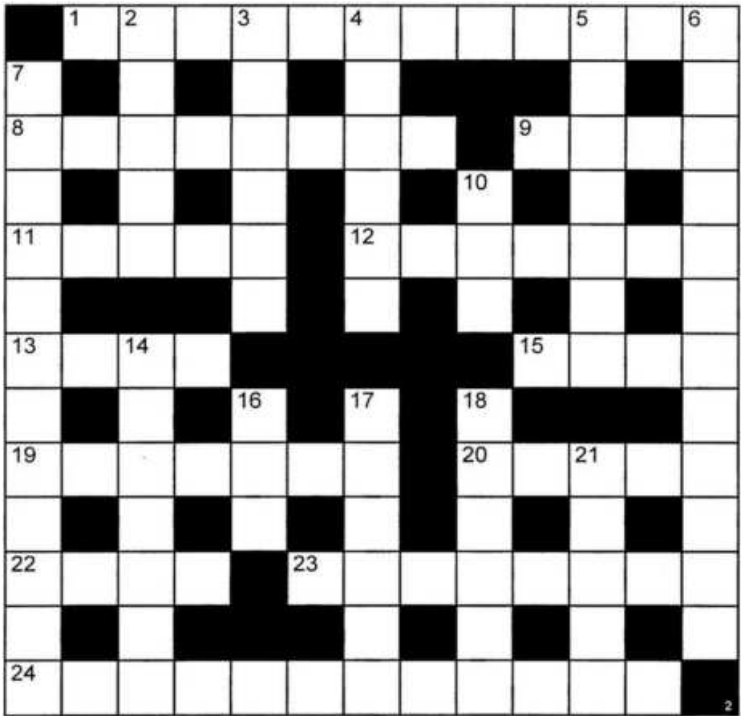
The government created a ₹50,000-crore fund in 2021 for the National Research Foundation (NRF) under the office of Principal Scientific Advisor. NRF is intended to catalyse and channelise interdisciplinary research. While the initiative is laudatory, the fund should be considered only as seed money. The NRF definitely needs more funds with clear goals and outcomes. The augmentation effort will need private

sector participation. Augmentation can also happen via public funds lying unutilised in different schemes. For example, the Universal Service Obligation Fund has around ₹77,000 crore. Only 5 per cent, that is ₹3,850 crore, of that is to be spent on telecom R&D via the Telecom Technology Development Fund scheme. The USOF has now been rechristened Digital Bharat Nidhi, with the intent to support R&D in telecom services, and related technologies and products.

The reliance on government funding, coupled with a comparatively low contribution from the private sector and educational institutions, underscores the need for a more balanced and robust approach to R&D investment. R&D tax debits for private sector should of course be with adequate guardrails and adequate cost-benefit analysis. All efforts must be with the objective of fostering innovation and achieving *atmanirbharta* in key technological domains.

Kumar is Partner, and Chopra is Manager, Deloitte India

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2436



EASY

ACROSS

- Helpful, as criticism (12)
- Not doing anything (8)
- Cease (4)
- Unseemly speed (5)
- One receiving instruction (7)
- Proboscis (4)
- Steering-gear (4)
- Ministers in office (7)
- Shellfish (5)
- In the same place (abbr) (4)
- Synthetic resin (8)
- Night-time drug (8-4)

DOWN

- Stones (5)
- Type of dog (6)
- Abuse (6)
- Concentrated (7)
- Tried out different things (12)
- Traditional British fare (4,3,5)
- Evening-flier (3)
- Die down (7)
- Cuttlefish fluid (3)
- Remove water (6)
- Maintenance (6)
- Spirit in 'The Tempest' (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- I have to build first to be of help in criticism (12)
- Doing nothing at home, I have to follow the deed (8)
- The point in print is to get return of heaps of money (4)
- Speed with which the alteration is made, as inside (5)
- Ran around in a backward sort of dance, he being a tyro (7)
- Bouquet of wine one recognises, one is told (4)
- The elm tops being removed, this may turn craft (4)
- This maker, skilled in joinery, might be the PM (7)
- Shellfish that isn't cooked in a pan without a middle (5)
- One to make an offer in the same place shortly (4)
- Like beat that's different for a synthetic material (8)
- Slumbering quietly when unwell? It's a knock-out! (8-4)

DOWN

- Jewels to knock up : ring first (5)
- The person who devises examinations is a dog (6)
- Bitterly assail the Sappers - quite horrid! (6)
- One sent packing in the North-east for being strained (7)
- Had a go with Ernie, ex-PM Ted perhaps (12)
- Original takeaway of spinach if she's lost direction maybe? (4,3,5)
- Flutter an eyelid for the man at the wicket (3)
- U-boat flank will sink down (7)
- With which to write 'family' with the first last (3)
- It's over-exertion for the Saint, somehow, when about right (6)
- Down to let go the antithesis of maintenance (6)
- Shakespearean character that is in early contents (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2435

ACROSS 1. Trusts 8. Learn 9. Puritan 11. Yearling 12. Heads 15. Tame 16. Try 17. Army 19. Twice 21. Flattery 24. Earthen 25. Deter 26. Nurses

DOWN 2. Rouge 3. Swindler 4. Slay 5. Alert 6. Mali 7. Snag 10. Nevermore 12. Hate 13. Tap-water 14. Byre 18. Story 20. Crete 21. Fade 22. Ante 23. Yawn



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

Meeting nutrition challenge: what new guidelines prescribe

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

WITH NONCOMMUNICABLE diseases (NCDs)—cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, etc.—rising, and affecting adolescents and even children, India's premier nutrition research institute has published comprehensive guidelines on the diet of vulnerable groups, including pregnant and lactating women, and children and the elderly.

The guidelines issued by the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), Hyderabad, which works under the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), also prescribe general principles such as reducing consumption of salt and highly processed foods (such as packaged chips, cookies, bread, ketchup, candy, etc.).

The guidelines say an estimated 56.4% of India's total disease burden can be attributed to unhealthy diets. A healthy diet and phys-

ical activity can prevent 80% of Type 2 diabetes cases, and significantly reduce the burden of heart disease and high blood pressure.

Focus on children, mothers

Optimal nutrition for mother and child from conception till the age of 2 years is linked to proper growth and development. It can prevent all forms of undernutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity.

The report quotes the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2019, which showed high prevalence of lifestyle conditions even in children. Around 5% of children of ages 5-9, and 6% of adolescents, were overweight or obese, almost 2% of children and adolescents were found to have diabetes, and another 10% had pre-diabetes.

The survey found high levels of bad cholesterol (LDL and triglycerides) in 37.3% of children ages 5-9, and 19.9% of pre-teens and teens ages 10-19. Levels of good cholesterol were low in a fourth of all children and adolescents.

YOUNG & UNHEALTHY			
	1-4 yrs	5-9 yrs	10-19 yrs
DISEASES OF OVERNUTRITION (%)			
Overweight	3.7	4.9	
Obesity	1.3	1.1	
Pre-diabetes	10.3	10.4	
Diabetes	1.2	0.6	
Hypertension		4.9	
High total cholesterol	3.2	3.7	
DISEASES OF UNDERNUTRITION (%)			
Anaemia	40.6	23.5	28.4
MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES (%)			
Iron	32.1	17.0	21.5
Vitamin D	13.7	18.2	23.9
Vitamin A	17.5	21.5	15.6
Vitamin B12	13.8	17.2	30.9
Zinc	19.0	16.8	31.7

Source: ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition Report on Dietary Guidelines for Indians

Dual nutrition challenge

Incidence of micronutrient (zinc, iron, vitamins) deficiencies ranged from 13% to 30% of children between ages 1 and 19. The recommended ideal diet charts for various groups of people takes into account both micronutrient deficiencies and diseases of overnutrition.

While severe forms of undernutrition such as marasmus (a deficiency of macronutrients such as carbohydrates and proteins) and kwashiorkor (deficiency of proteins) have disappeared from the country, manifestations such as anaemia continue, the report says. It puts the prevalence of anaemia at 40.6%, 23.5%, and 28.4% in children under age 5, ages 5-9, and 10-19 respectively.

A study on malnutrition published in The Lancet earlier this year said undernutrition continues to be high in India, but obesity has increased significantly over the last 30 years.

The "faulty dietary pattern" in which unhealthy, highly processed, high-fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods have become more affordable and accessible than healthier alterna-

tives, "contributes to deficiencies in iron and folic acid, resulting in anaemia and in the higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among population groups," the report says.

General dietary principles

The guidelines recommend getting required nutrients from at least eight food groups, including vegetables, leafy vegetables, roots and tubers, dairy, nuts, and oils. Consumption of cereals—the staple of Indian meals—should be restricted, so they contribute only 45% of the total energy (instead of the 50-70% now. Instead, more proteins (pulses, meat, poultry, fish) should be consumed, making up 14% of the total daily energy (instead of only 6-9% now).

Achieving adequate levels of essential polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and B12 is a challenge for vegetarians. The guidelines recommend consumption of flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts, vegetables, and greens.

The report says salt consumption should be restricted to 5g a day, and strongly recom-

mends against consuming highly processed foods that are typically high in fats, salt, sugar.

Group-specific guidelines

PREGNANT WOMEN: Small frequent meals for those experiencing nausea and vomiting. The guidelines recommend consumption of lots of fruit and vegetables, especially those high in iron and folate content.

INFANTS AND CHILDREN: For the first six months, infants should only be breastfed, and must not be given honey, glucose, or diluted milk. There is no need to give water, even during hot months. After age 6 months, complementary foods must be included.

ELDERLY: The elderly should consume foods rich in proteins, calcium, micronutrients, and fibre. Apart from pulses and cereals—with at least one-third as whole grains—at least 200-400 ml of low-fat milk or milk products, a fist full of nuts and oilseeds, and 400-500g of vegetables and fruit should be consumed. Exercise is important in order to maintain bone density and muscle mass.

EXPLAINED CULTURE

HOW THE OLYMPIC GAMES GOT THE TORCH RELAY, WHAT IT SYMBOLISES

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

THE OLYMPIC torch arrived in France's Marseilles on Wednesday, marking an important ceremonial moment in the run-up to the summer Games in Paris.

It was first lit on April 16 in the Greek town of Olympia, the birthplace of the ancient Olympics. The flame was then carried around Greece and left Athens aboard a ship for Marseille.

The torch will be relayed across France, and will reach Paris on July 26—the day of the opening ceremony.

Origins in Greek mythology

The Olympic Games are said to be around 3,000 years old, beginning as sports contests in Olympia that were held every four years. According to the Olympics website, the date 776 BC is often cited in written sources.

Despite the competitive spirit of the Games, they also signified the possibility of peace. Through a 9th century BC treaty, the tradition of Olympic Truce or *Ekecheiria* was established. Kings Iphitos of Elis, Cleosthenes of Pisa, and Ilycurgus of Sparta signed a treaty allowing safe passage for athletes for their participation in the ancient Olympic Games. This was significant at a time when states were constantly warring with each other, the website says.

However, "In 393 AD, the Christian emperor Theodosius I forbade the celebration of pagan cults, which included the Games," the website says.

The Olympics would only be revived in 1894, thanks to the efforts of French educator Pierre de Coubertin. The first modern-era Games were held in Athens in 1896. The idea of a torch relay came later.

Flame, mythology, continuity

A symbolic flame was used in the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, but the tradition became solidified with a proposal from Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Organising Committee of the Berlin Games.

"Inspired by torch races that were held in ancient Greek times, Diem suggested that for the 1936 Summer Games a Flame be lit in Olympia and transported to Berlin for what would be the first Olympic torch



Ukrainian gymnast Maria Vysotschanska participates in the Olympic torch relay in Marseille on Thursday. AP/PTI

relay." And so, the tradition began. More than 3,000 athletes from seven countries participated in the relay.

In Greek mythology, fire was seen as a key element, and a fire was perpetually maintained in various Greek temples. In Olympia, "the flame was lit using the rays of the sun, to ensure its purity, and a skaphia, the ancestor of the parabolic mirror used today for lighting the Olympic flame. A flame burned permanently on the altar of the goddess Hestia, and such fires were also lit on the altars of Zeus and Hera, in front of whose temple the Olympic flame is lit today." This mirror method continues to be used today.

Changing tradition

The torch is taken across cities and countries, carried by thousands of people for each edition of the Olympics. It travels on foot and on aeroplanes and ships. Nowadays, common people can choose to participate by reaching out to the organising committee.

The identity of the last person to carry the flame to the opening ceremony is kept secret. They are usually figures from the world of sports or young leaders, who light the big cauldron-like structure kept in the stadium. The flame is only extinguished at the Games' closing ceremony.

For many years, torch-bearers were young, male athletes. It was only at the Munich Games in 1972 that women and people with disabilities were included among the torch-bearers.

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

INDIA'S AGRICULTURAL exports fell 8.2% in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2024 on the back of shipment curbs on a host of commodities, from cereals and sugar to onions.

The value of farm exports totaled \$48.82 billion in 2023-24, down from the record \$53.15 billion of 2022-23 and \$50.24 billion for the previous fiscal, according to Department of Commerce data.

Exports declined during the initial years of the Narendra Modi government (from \$43.25 billion in 2013-14 to \$35.60 billion in 2019-20), while accompanied by an increase in imports (from \$15.53 billion to \$21.86 billion).

That was largely courtesy of a crash in global agri-commodity prices, with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index (base: 2014-16=100) dipping from an average of 119.1 to 96.5 points between 2013-14 and 2019-20. Low international prices reduced the cost competitiveness of the country's exports, while also making it more vulnerable to imports. But the global price recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (the FAO index soared to 140.8 in 2022-23) resulted in India's farm exports and imports zooming to all-time highs in 2022-23, before dropping in the fiscal just ended (see Chart 1).

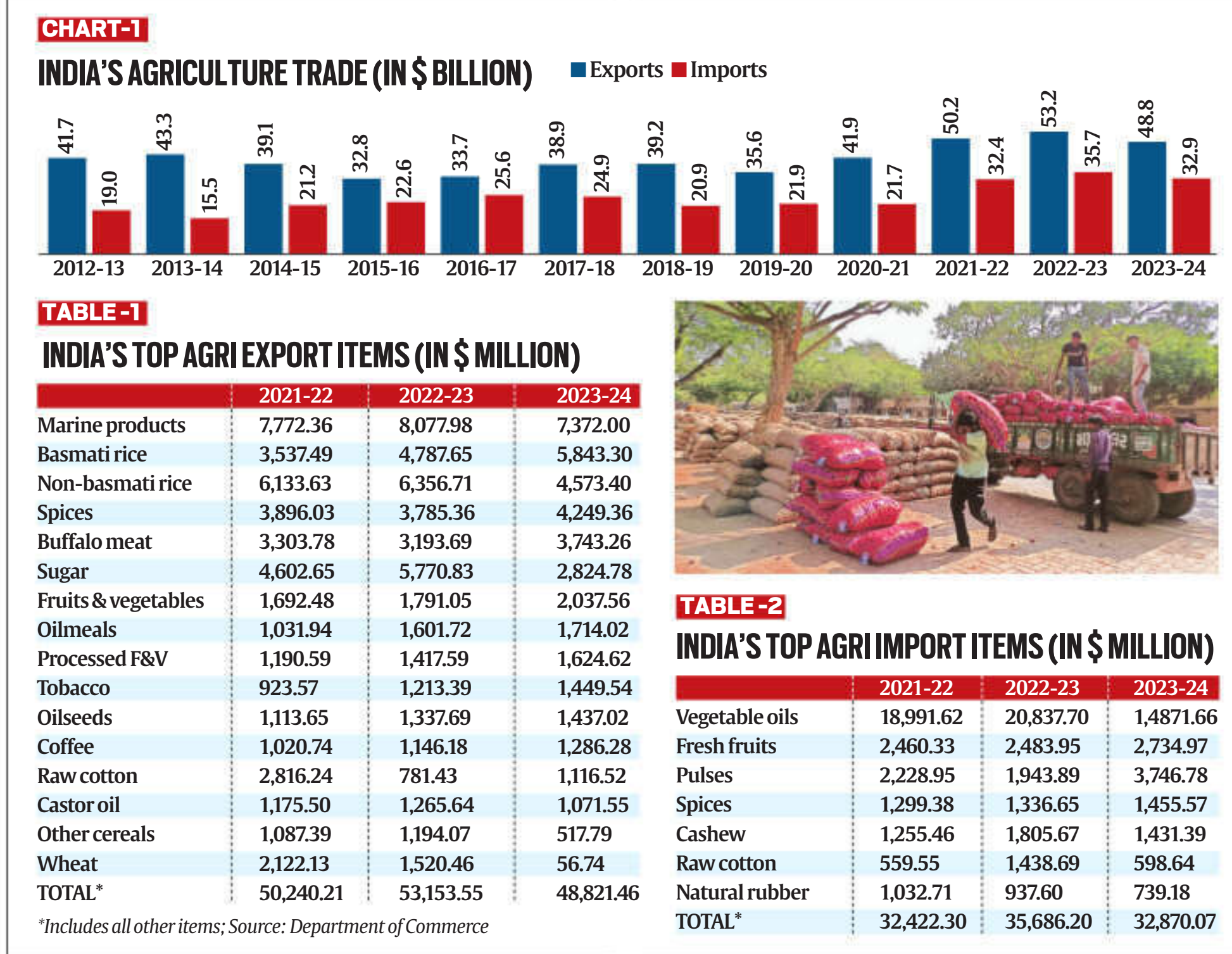
Drivers of exports

Table 1 shows the fall in exports to have been led primarily by sugar and non-basmati rice. The government hasn't allowed any sugar to go out of the country during the current production year from October 2023. Not surprisingly, exports of the sweetener were valued at only \$2.82 billion in 2023-24, after peaking at \$5.77 billion and \$4.60 billion in the preceding fiscals.

Concerns over domestic availability and food inflation have similarly triggered a ban on exports of all white non-basmati rice since July 2023. Currently, only parboiled grain shipments are being permitted within the non-basmati segment, while also attracting a 20% duty. These restrictions have pulled down overall non-basmati exports from a record \$6.36 billion in 2023-23 to \$4.57 billion in 2023-24.

Two other items that have borne the brunt of export restrictions—again triggered by domestic shortages and rising prices—are wheat and onion. Wheat exports were altogether stopped in May 2022, following which their value plunged to \$56.74 million in 2023-24, after reaching an all-time-high of \$2.12 billion in 2021-22.

On May 4—three days Maharashtra's onion belt voted in the Lok Sabha polls—the Centre lifted a ban on exports of the bulb.



Simultaneously, a floor price of \$550 per tonne (below which no exports can take place), along with a 40% duty, was imposed. Official data reveals onion exports at only 17.08 lakh tonnes (lt), worth \$467.83 million, during April-February 2023-24, as against 25.25 lt (\$561.38 million) for the whole of 2022-23.

Most other major agri export items—barring marine products, castor oil and other cereals (mainly maize)—have posted growth. Basmati rice exports fetched \$5.84 billion in 2023-24, surpassing the previous high of \$4.86 billion achieved in 2013-14. Spices exports, too, crossed the \$4 billion mark for the first time. However, exports of buffalo meat, oil meals and raw cotton, while up over 2022-23, were far from their corresponding records of \$4.78 billion, \$3.04 billion and \$4.33 billion touched in 2014-15, 2012-13 and 2011-12 respectively.

Drivers of imports

The trends in imports are equally interesting. Table 2 shows that the 7.9% dip in overall agri imports during 2023-24 was largely due to a single commodity: edible oils. India's imports of vegetable fats topped \$20 billion in

2022-23. That was the year immediately after the Russia-Ukraine war, when the FAO index and the vegetable oil sub-index averaged 140.8 points and 168.5 points respectively. However, 2023-24 saw the average FAO index ease to 121.6 points and the vegetable oil sub-index to 123.4 points. Lower global prices, in turn, brought down the vegetable oil import bill to below \$15 billion during last fiscal.

But even as the foreign exchange outflow on cooking oil has reduced, imports of pulses almost doubled to \$3.75 billion in 2023-24, the highest since the \$3.90 billion and \$4.24 billion levels of 2015-16 and 2016-17 respectively.

Policy takeaways

Farmers and agri-traders, like all businessmen, want policy stability and predictability. Onion growers, for instance, harvest around 10 tonnes per acre. A drop of Rs 5/kg in realisations means a revenue loss of Rs 50,000 on that produce. At the same time, a Rs 5/kg increase in prices for a household consuming 5-6 kg onions per month entails an additional outgo of only Rs 25-30.

When governments resort to banning/re-

stricting agri exports, they usually privilege interests of consumers over producers. These actions hurt more when taken overnight, like with wheat exports. Building export markets takes time and effort. Many economists thus recommend a more predictable and rules-based policy—like introducing temporary tariffs instead of bans or quantitative restrictions.

The same goes for imports. The Modi government has done away with import duties on most pulses—*arhar* (pigeon pea), *urad* (black gram), *masoor* (red lentils), yellow/white peas and, earlier this month, *chana* (chickpea)—and kept it at 5.5% for crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil.

The above zero/low tariffs are at variance with the government's own objective to promote crop diversification—wearing away farmers from rice, wheat and sugarcane to growing pulses and oilseeds, which are less water-guzzling and also significantly imported.

The government taking over post the elections may have to come up with a more rational export-import policy, balancing interests of producers and consumers as well as the short- and long-term goals for the farm sector.

Unfeasible, illegal: Grounds of challenge to US law forcing TikTok sale

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, MAY 9

TIKTOK Inc and its Chinese parent company ByteDance Ltd have challenged the US Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, which stipulates that for the social media app to continue in the US, it must be sold to a company not controlled by a "foreign adversary" before January 19, 2025.

The Act, which was signed into law by President Joe Biden on April 24, came after federal agencies and politicians raised concerns about data collection and surveillance through TikTok.

The challenge at the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit argues

that this "qualified divestiture" is "simply not possible: not commercially, not technologically, not legally".

'Severing US ops not feasible'

The petition provides three reasons to justify why a sale to create a "standalone US TikTok platform" is not possible.

First, TikTok is a globally integrated platform with content created by users around the world. A standalone US TikTok would be an "island" with a limited pool of content, which would "dramatically undermine the value and viability of the US TikTok business".

Second, the source code for the app would have to be "wrested" from ByteDance and given to an alternative team of engineers with no experience in running the platform—an impossible task within the

timeframe provided. This is a requirement under the Act to ensure there is no "operational relationship" between ByteDance and the new standalone US platform.

Third, sale and export of TikTok's proprietary "recommendation engine" is not possible without a licence from the Chinese government, which, the petition claims "has made clear that it would not permit a divestment of the recommendation engine that is a key to the success of TikTok in the United States".

'Alternatives tossed aside'

TikTok and ByteDance have submitted that they had drafted a National Security Agreement following negotiations with the US Committee on Foreign Investment in the

United States (CFIUS). This agreement, they claim, contained protections that were "more robust than those employed by any other widely used online platform in the industry", with several measures to protect user data.

These included the creation of a new subsidiary of TikTok, called TikTok US Data Security, which would have US government-approved Security Directors on its board. They also agreed to subject themselves to third-party verification and monitoring by companies approved by the CFIUS. Finally, the agreement included a "shut-down option" that would allow the government to suspend TikTok's operations in specific cases where the agreement was not complied with.

The petitioners have stated that they

have voluntarily begun implementing parts of the agreement that require action from TikTok and ByteDance, and have spent \$2 billion on this so far. But Congress disregarded this, and the Act was passed without giving any reasons or justification.

'Hypothetical threats'

According to the petition, Congress enacted the law without providing any actual "legislative findings" on the threat posed by TikTok, and instead relied on hypothetical scenarios to explain how the platform could pose a threat in the future. This, according to the petition, falls short of the legal standard of "compelling interest" in the US, whereby a law must address real harms that are "not merely conjectural (based on incomplete information)" and show that it will "alleviate

these harms in a direct and material way".

The filing also claims that the law is "under-inclusive", allowing other platforms that could pose similar problems to continue existing, while being "over-inclusive" by applying to all ByteDance-owned applications without showing that they pose risks for the Act to address. The petitioners claim that the Act turns ByteDance and TikTok into a "vilified class" by prohibiting all current and future operations in the US.

While the Act automatically applies to TikTok and ByteDance, for other companies, a "presidential determination" would be needed which would include the issuance of a public report on specific national security concerns posed, and the assets that must be sold for the company to continue operating in the US.



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TURBULENCE IN AIR

Air India's problems point to the need for management to ensure smooth transition during mergers

SINCE TUESDAY EVENING, over 100 crew members of the Tata Group-owned Air India Express called in sick, apparently objecting to the changes in the "carrier's HR policies". The absence of the senior cabin crew, in particular, led to disturbance across the carrier's network, forcing it to cancel multiple flights — reportedly, around 90 flights were affected on Wednesday. The employee discontent was simmering for some time. As per a report in this paper, a few weeks ago, the airline's employees union had written to N Chandrasekaran, chairman of Air India, claiming mismanagement, and a "lack of equality in treatment" of employees. Following this latest incident, Air India Express fired several of its senior cabin crew members. However, on Thursday evening, the airline "agreed to withdraw termination letters", while the crew members "ended their strike as the airline management also agreed to look into their issues". The protest was not an isolated incident. In the recent past, Vistara, another Tata group airline, also witnessed similar discontent among pilots over changes in their remuneration structure. The Tata group is in the midst of consolidating its four airlines — Air India Express and AIX Connect are being merged, and Vistara and Air India.

Mergers between companies, while expected to produce synergies, can also end up being extremely complex processes. More so if they involve a marriage between a public sector entity and a private sector firm. While several issues can crop up, the problems in many a merger can be traced to HR issues. Differences in organisational cultures and structures can create friction between the two sets of employees. As can the differing remuneration structures. Not to mention tensions between the employees of the firms over their career paths and possible redundancies. During such periods, management must try to ensure a smooth transition and provide avenues to employees so that their grievances can be aired and addressed.

The flight delays and disruptions inconvenienced a large number of passengers, as is evident in the complaints on social media. For consumers, this is compounded by the lack of options in the aviation sector. The airline sector in India is duopolistic. In the first quarter of this year (January–March), Indigo had a market share of 60.3 per cent, Air India was at 12.7 per cent, Vistara at 9.8 per cent and AIX Connect at 6 per cent. Put together, the two airline groups account for almost 90 per cent of the domestic aviation market. A high degree of market concentration, the absence of competition, can lead to higher prices for consumers and lower standards for consumer services, while also impacting innovation. However, aviation is not the only sector in India where such a market structure is visible. The goal of policy should be to enhance competition.

NO NEED TO PANIC

Covid vaccines helped save lives. Rare adverse reactions to them should be seen from scientific lens, not alarmist ones

TEN DAYS AFTER AstraZeneca admitted side effects of its Covid vaccine in rare cases, the UK-Dutch company has withdrawn the shots, renamed Vaxzveria in 2021, from the global market. It has cited a "surplus of available updated vaccines" that target new variants of the virus as the reason for its decision. The vaccine major's moves have generated negative sentiments bordering on panic, including among some people in India where AstraZeneca partnered with the Serum Institute of India to develop Covishield — the bulwark of the country's fight against Covid. Such responses might not be surprising given that social media is the prime source of information for a sizable section and the means to distinguish science from pseudoscience are not always at hand. But knee-jerk reactions from other quarters have also not helped. Especially unfortunate are the politically loaded comments about Covishield during the Lok Sabha election campaigns.

The emergency created by an unknown contagion required due procedures — including clinical trials — and schedules to be compressed. But the crisis also galvanised scientists, medical experts and policymakers to push the frontiers of their disciplines and domains. Vaccine hesitancy tested the persuasion skills of local officials and healthcare workers. It's a testimony to such initiatives that social and economic activities return to normalcy about two years after the virus unleashed its virulence. Vaccination ensured that the contagion took on a significantly less aggressive form after the lethal second wave in the summer of 2021 — when the bulk of the country's population had not received the shots. Hospitalisation and fatality rates remained low even during periods of spike in infection after the second wave.

Covid inoculation drives are now subjects of intensive research. That's how it should be. These studies help generate nuanced information about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines, that could not have been generated with the volunteer size of the trials. Scientists can today draw on databases that comprise inoculated people across nations and continents. Besides helping epidemiologists understand how the jabs work on diverse sections of people, and reaffirming the potency of the shots, such studies shine the light on rare adverse reactions, including thrombosis and thrombocytopenia Syndrome (TTS) — blood clots and low levels of platelets — associated with the AstraZeneca vaccine. Such research will help vaccine developers refine their methods. Technologies used in the Covid jabs — whether the viral vector of AstraZeneca or the mRNA technique of some other developers — are part of a larger battle against infectious diseases. Alarmist reactions against the Covid jabs could raise the head of vaccine hesitancy and hurt the fight against other contagions.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S GHOST

Plato's ideas have haunted or enlightened corridors of scholarship. AI-powered research could revive interest in him

HERE'S AN OVERSIMPLIFICATION of the essence of Plato's thought: Meaning is derived not from things as they are, but rather the idea of them. Take the word "chair". Plato thought that the various kinds of chairs fall into the category "chair" because there is an ideal world in which there is an ideal idea of a chair. Ironically, then, it now appears that the mundane empirical world — of science, research, computers and archaeology — is set to change much of what we know about the life and work of arguably the world's best-known idealist.

It's a bit like the plot of an Indiana Jones film, or another instalment of the *Da Vinci Code*. From the volcanic ash around Mount Vesuvius, there emerged a scroll, frayed and tattered with writing not spoken or seen for thousands of years. With the help of linguists, philologists, archaeologists and even AI and machine learning models, the papyrus scroll's inscrutable secrets have been uncovered. Earlier this week, information about where the philosopher was likely laid to rest was shared and the text even reveals that when ailing, before he died at 81, he found the energy to criticise the form of a musician. Those who know Plato would undoubtedly say, "how typical".

Plato's ideas have haunted or enlightened (depending on the point of view) the corridors of universities and minds of scholars for millennia. Recently, though, the essentialism he has come to be associated with has fallen out of fashion. The philosophical and literary canon he belongs to is politically suspect. It is considered part of a tradition that focused on "dead White men", ignoring diverse voices especially from the margins. Of course, to criticise a towering figure, to respond to him, it's important first to read the book. Perhaps, aided by AI and renewed interest in the details of his life, the Socratic method Plato bequeathed to the world can be applied again to his work.



ASHIMA GOYAL

THERE ARE TWO views on India's growth. The first argues that the fall in growth in the 2010s, worsened by the collapse during the pandemic, was because of fundamental flaws that persist. And that growth cannot sustain without an entirely new set of policies. An alternative interpretation is that sufficient reforms have been undertaken to set off a virtuous growth cycle. To sustain this, it is important that counter-cyclical policy smooths over the shocks, while cost-reducing supply-side actions continue. Whichever view is taken will affect future policies and outcomes. But, what is the evidence for each?

Continued robust growth for the fourth year after the pandemic, contained inflation and a reduction in poverty despite a fragile global environment support the latter view. So, why introduce disruptions to fix what isn't broken? Those who hold the first view are unwilling to concede. Their initial position was that as better data comes in, growth figures will be revised downward. Unfortunately for them, the revisions have been upwards.

A second argument was that since wholesale price index-based inflation had become negative in April 2023, high growth last year was spurious because CPI inflation was higher than the partially used WPI deflators. A lower inflation measure overestimates growth. But if low WPI overestimates growth, then high WPI inflation should underestimate growth. WPI inflation was in double digits for two years between April 2021 and March 2023. According to their logic, the average post-pandemic GDP growth over 2021–24, measured at 8.1 per cent, should actually be even higher.

Bogeys such as the absence of double deflation are raised. This is not feasible since India, along with other major countries, does not yet have a services price index. Research finds that the use of double deflation can either under- or over-estimate GDP. So it is not a solution to all problems. Of course, improvements in measurement and movement to global norms are and have to be a continuous process. But critics choose to question improvements also on grounds such as non-comparability with the past. This is inevitable. As India changes, so must measurement practices.

Third, there is an attempt to over-interpret

Robust growth, check on inflation, poverty reduction suggest success of reforms — despite what critics say

GDP measurement in India is more robust from the production side. The difference with the expenditure-side measurement is given as a discrepancy. Since these are independent measures of a complex total, other countries also have discrepancies. Nevertheless, critics had cast doubt on the first quarter growth figure because the expenditure side measurement was lower by 3.3 per cent of GDP. In the third quarter, the discrepancy was only 0.2 per cent, implying GDP growth from the expenditure side was close to that from the production side. Predictably, there was no mention of the discrepancy this time. A strategy of highlighting only data that supports priors and ignoring contrary evidence is itself suspect.

quarterly results that are subject to seasonal and base effects as well as measurement issues, to declare growth is collapsing. The steep fall in growth to — 23.2 per cent in the first quarter of 2020–21 created a base effect that made first-quarter growth relatively higher in the following years. Growth rebounded to 23 per cent in Q1 2021–22, 12.8 per cent in Q1 2022–23, and 8.2 per cent in Q1 2023–24. The lower growth in the quarters that followed does not mean growth is decelerating. The base effect is fading. In Q3 2023–24, growth exceeded Q1 for the first time at 8.4 per cent, implying growth is accelerating, not the reverse.

The fourth strategy is to question the data. The lower third-quarter gross value added (GVA) growth of 6.5 per cent was said to be more reliable since the sharp rise in product taxes minus subsidies that led to the difference was suspect. By definition, net product taxes have to be added to GVA to get GDP, since these taxes are applied after the production process. Else it would not fully capture the government's contribution to GDP.

GST and other product taxes and subsidies on food, fuel and fertiliser are well measured. From the expenditure side, despite product taxes rising and subsidies falling in the third quarter, consumption rose by 3 per cent of GDP implying a strong compensating rise. Consumption is derived from the gross disposable income of households that nets out the share of government. Once households are provided with assets they need less of continual subsidies to sustain consumption.

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Fifth, data in India is often subject to "small tests", highlighting any evidence that can be found to question the veracity of growth measurement. But, so much high-frequency data, not subject to the problems in measurement of aggregates, is available now. Instead of deceleration, all kinds of indicators show strong economic activity.

Sixth, it is argued that India did better than expected because global growth was higher. But India did not do well in 2019 despite good global growth. Appropriate domestic policy is essential.

Seventh, fingers are pointed at the fall in household financial savings arguing that a fall in investment and a rise in current account deficits (which must equal investment minus savings) will follow. This ignores the rise in household physical savings, which is measured as identical to household investment. Households include informal enterprises and they are borrowing to invest. But, liabilities are rising to finance investment more than consumption. This is healthier and more sustainable, unlike the borrowing financed consumption binge of the 2010s. Moreover, the current account deficit has fallen below 1 per cent of GDP, partly because financial savings are better intermediated and available for domestic investment.

There is healthy investment and credit-led growth supported by a strong financial sector that will raise savings as incomes rise. India's private credit ratios are much below its peers. The view that private investment is not rising is because of an expectation of a 2008-type infrastructure boom that turned out to be unsustainable. This will thankfully not happen under better bank independence, regulation and risk-based pricing today. Gross capital formation was 32.2 per cent of GDP in 2022–23. This is not low and is mostly contributed by private capex, which is rising sustainably in a virtuous cycle that will become clearer after the elections. Policy continuity is important for private capex. CMIE data shows new private sector projects in Q4 2023–24 were at Rs 9.8 trillion — the second-highest level ever.

The writer is emeritus professor, IGIDR and member, Monetary Policy Committee

TOGETHER, STEP BY STEP

For gender equity, women need to work collectively, not drop out of the fight



RINKU GHOSH

SOMETIMES WE HAVE to realise that the journey for women's equity in public discourse is not linear, measured by the steps taken, not taken or the two steps taken backwards. It is a constant churn in a systemic process that must squeeze out latent misogyny. Women around the world have begun to understand that. That's why, despite repression or regression, women's movements are only gathering steam on a slow burn.

The incarceration of many human rights activists before her didn't stop 29-year-old Saudi activist Manahel al-Otaibi from propagating women's equity or rejecting male guardianship through the hashtag #societyisready. As she spends her time in jail, support for her is bubbling up globally. Iranian women got support from marginalised women in Afghanistan as they resurrected the Kurdish women's chant of "Women, Freedom, Life!" Women in Mexico are helping their US counterparts negotiate abortion bans.

There will be comeuppance for the likes of Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer who is in jail for sexual assault following testimonies that spurred the #MeToo movement. But there will also be patriarchal mockery of the kind that legitimises former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Singh through the backdoor. His son just got a BJP ticket to contest the Lok Sabha elections from Kaiserganj in Uttar Pradesh, keeping the family's power privileges intact while riding roughshod over the concerns of champion women wrestlers. Yet every male-

The scales can turn only when the redressal mechanism, be it at home or the workplace, treats the sexual harasser as both a social and economic liability. The lens has to change from 'protecting' women to 'punishing' abusive oppressors. An existing male leadership cannot turn the wheel as much. A female leadership is needed for that countervailing push.

dominated establishment will espouse women's equity.

The truth is that the term "women's empowerment" is the hand-me-down of an egotistical male largesse or guilt-tripping. The agency doesn't lie with the women, who are never asked what they want but merely given what men think they need as a dole. If anything, it only ingrains in women a sense of powerlessness. Besides, traditional cultures have always upheld inequity as a norm rather than the exception.

That's why women have to be more strategic than exceptional, stay within the system and earn leadership on their terms and never exit midway. If they quit, that would be the real end-of-the-road dreariness, worse, hopelessness. Nowhere else is this more apparent than in the workplace where sexual harassment, despite redressal mechanisms, has seen women survivors leave their jobs, unable to deal with mental scarring and sidelining, besides the judgmental gaze and curiosity of colleagues. However, by giving up, they would be relinquishing their stake in leadership. With just a handful of women in senior management, no form of harassment or discrimination will be acknowledged and addressed as an organisational problem. It will be seen as an aberration and, worse, a liability and will be used to justify the male argument about the muscle needed for the top job.

Sexual harassment is never about physical desire — it's a coercive tool to eliminate women competitors who, statistics show, are

outperforming men, even in bastions of male expertise. This pushback by sexualising women co-workers then is also about a reluctance to cede territory and reclaim it with greater ferocity. This represents a larger societal collision that already has disastrous consequences of not only browbeating the survivor but the ecosystem around her. The scales can turn only when the redressal mechanism, be it at home or the workplace, treats the sexual harasser as both a social and economic liability. The lens has to change from "protecting" women to "punishing" abusive oppressors. An existing male leadership cannot turn the wheel as much. A female leadership is needed for that countervailing push.

According to UN Women, decision-making processes around the world continue to be disempowering with just 27 per cent of parliamentary seats, 36 per cent of local government seats and 28 per cent of management positions held by women. Only 61 per cent of prime working-age women have jobs compared to 91 per cent of prime working-age men.

This is not just about the gender divide. Women are taking on a bigger battle of reversing normative behaviour, a far tougher climb that men have never had to negotiate or know about. And for that, women need to push back collectively, not become another dropout or a beneficiary.

rinku.ghosh@expressindia.com

MAY 10, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN ON MT EVEREST

THE INDIAN TRICOLOUR proudly fluttered again atop the world's highest summit, 3,848 metre Mount Everest, after 19 years when 34-year-old Sikkim mountaineering instructor Phu Dorjee reached the peak. Dorjee created a new record for an Indian by going up from the South summit without oxygen and became the 10th Indian to scale the peak.

CPM LEADERS SHOT AT

THE LEADER OF the CPI-M group in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, Chand Singh Chopra, escaped unhurt when two unidentified ter-

rorists opened fire on him and his associate, Amarjit Singh, a sarpanch, at Barnala. Amarjit Singh received bullet injuries. The police, during its combing operations in Ferozepur district, claimed to have nabbed two more alleged terrorists.

OLYMPIC BOYCOTT

THE SOVIET UNION defended its boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics and some of Moscow's Communist allies hinted they would snub the games in favour of an alternative "Red Olympics". "Soviet sportsmen do not wish to be accomplices in the gross violations of the Olympic charter, which/im-

pair the international Olympic movement and subvert its noble ideals and principles" the Soviet news agency Tass said. Bulgaria has also decided to pull out of the games.

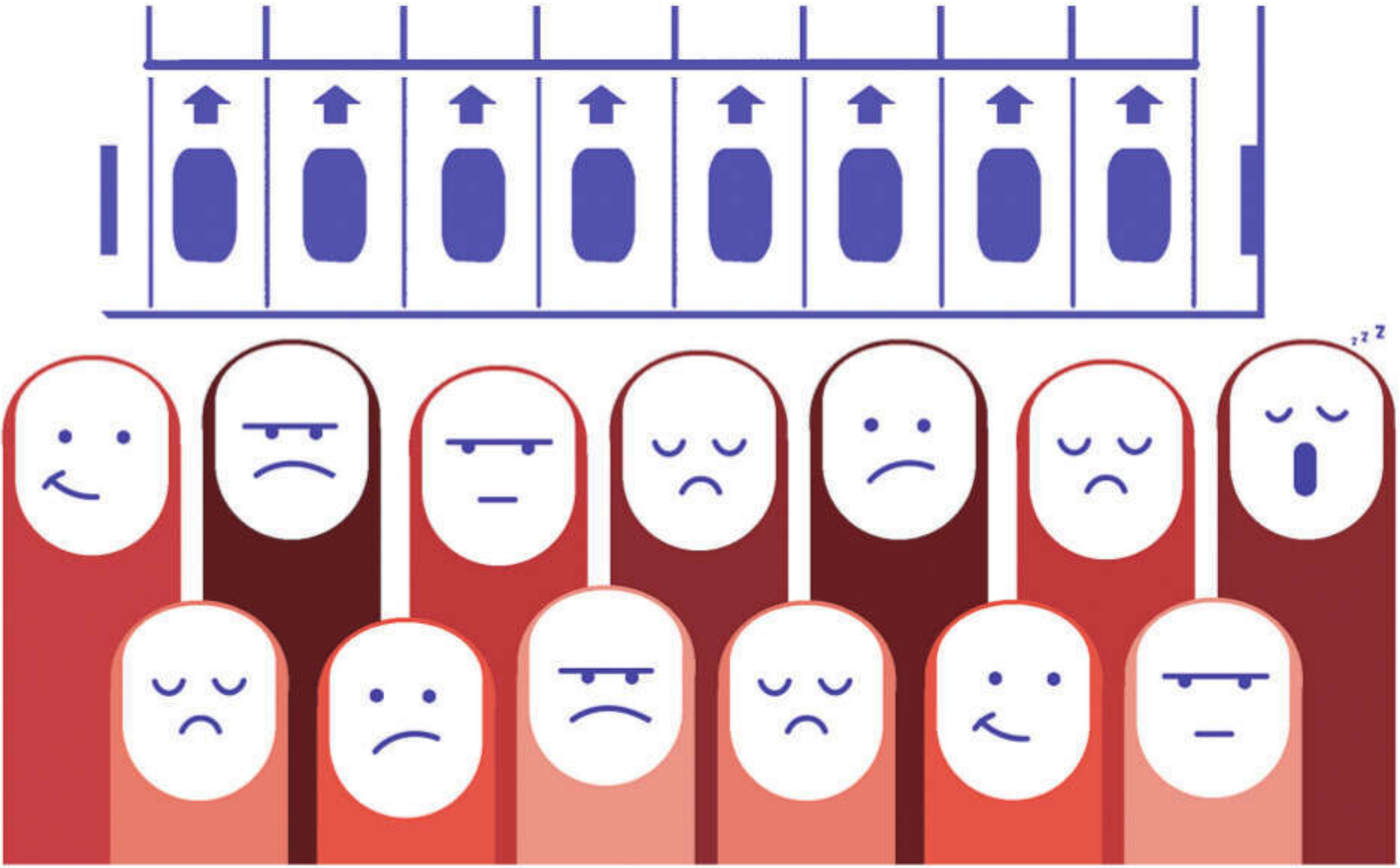
DOWRY ACT

THE LONG-AWAITED BILL to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was introduced in the Lok Sabha just before it adjourned after the budget session. Though the bill seeks to enhance the maximum punishment for the acceptance of dowry from six months to two years, several vocal women members of the House, who had consistently campaigned for the legislation, were most disappointed.

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

Election Commission data released ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls shows low registration of first-time voters. What explains young people's lack of engagement with the electoral process?

Why young opt out of polls

Cushion of privilege ensures that some people feel largely disconnected from events in the country and across the globe



SHAMBHAVI GUPTA

IN THE 2014 general elections, I was extremely disappointed because I was unable to vote. If only they had been held in 2015, I would have been eligible. So, in 2019, after four years of waiting, I was beyond excited to be a first-time voter. Not wanting to blindly follow the candidate my family and friends preferred, I went through candidate profiles and party manifestos. I was determined to make an informed choice.

Now that I work with young people who are going to be eligible to vote in the next one to three years, I do not sense the same enthusiasm to exercise one's democratic duty. This is also reflected in recent statistics: The Election Commission of India claimed that 38 per cent of eligible first-time voters, which is 18 million out of 49 million, registered to vote in the 2024 national elections. Merely 17 per cent of the youth population of Bihar, the state with the highest concentration of youth, is registered to vote, with the percentage in Delhi being only 21 per cent. Has the system failed to inspire confidence, has the youth failed to engage with the system, or is it something completely different?

I find this pattern concerning because it has long-term effects for a democratic nation that has a large youth population. It means that the largest section of the population is not engaging with the electoral process. In the case of elite urban circles, the cushion of privilege ensures that some people feel largely disconnected with events within the country and across the globe.

As a teacher, I observe a lack of internal motivation to engage with national and international affairs, especially with students. Accompanying this is the pressure of meeting deadlines, engaging in extracurricular activities, going for tuition classes, and scoring marks to get into a good college. The burden of work and the pursuit of personal gain prevents people from moving beyond their bubbles of safety, to be part of a process that is larger than just them.

This atomised, hyper-individualistic mindset stands opposed to the principles of democracy. When someone asks, "What can one vote do?", it is evident that the absence

of a direct and instant consequence mechanism is responsible for a decline in engagement. This attitude may be sown early in life, but it continues throughout, where competitive work environments too, emphasise personal success. The capitalist drive to work tirelessly and to constantly be "productive" is ideal for turning people into apathetic citizens who have no time to spend on politics. Devices take up a major proportion of whatever little leisure time people have. Therefore, it is imperative to engage more meaningfully with our devices and social media. We should download apps and follow accounts that provide fact-checked news. The idea is to reduce as many barriers to knowledge and to integrate access to news with daily scrolling. At least this is a start. Unless people know what is going on, and identify the problem, it is near impossible to be part of the solution. However, there are additional layers to this notion.

For those who are aware of the issues, of the political rhetoric that has swept the nation — with the arrest of leaders and hate-filled speeches — it is perhaps the perceived lack of viable alternatives that has fuelled disengagement. There is no desire to be part of the solution. Because when one starts to identify how mouldy the state of affairs is, they also realise how difficult it is to change it. So, unfortunately, moving beyond atomism can also lead to dismay and disenchantment with the system. While discussing the elections, my students mentioned that the best option is just to go with NOTA. And to bring in the notion of privilege once again, instead of working towards changing the circumstances, many students aspire to move abroad, away from these issues.

Even for those who are politically engaged, actively voice their opinions on social media and believe in having important conversations, it is logistical impediments that come in the way of casting a vote. Associated with this, migration causes the biggest barrier — when people move, either for education or work, they often do not follow up on administrative tasks that can ensure a shift in constituency.

In dissecting the reasons behind low voter turnout and youth disengagement, it becomes apparent that our democracy grapples with a lack of civic education and logistical hurdles. Each factor plays a role in shaping the apathy observed among young voters. While I want to be optimistic, I also realise that there are immense challenges in bringing about systemic as well as personal development simultaneously, which are necessary to enrich the democratic ethos of the nation.

The writer is a Delhi-based teacher



THAJEB ALI HAZARIKA

ALARM BELLS START ringing when the world's biggest festival of democracy has very few young people proudly flashing an index finger marked with indelible ink — the booster shot to consolidate, nurture, and reaffirm Indian democracy. The early phases of polling this year had a low turnout, including from the youth, the future of the country and the main catchment source of political support of every political party. There needs to be honest introspection on what is holding Gen Z back from participating in the electoral process.

The number of young voters in the age group of 18 to 19 years in 2014 was 15 million compared to the present 18 million. It needs to be understood that the difference of this three million in terms of political participation, including the sacrosanct duty to cast the vote, will be vital. Much of the onus for mobilising this segment lies with political parties. Political socialisation and recruitments are crucial for parties to enhance and consolidate their base. Grassroot-level organisations and affiliated student wings have always been active in inducting young blood in political parties. The question to be asked here is which of these student-led organisations have a head start.

As their aspirations to go up the ladder surface, the face-off with seasoned veterans inside the party comes as a stumbling block for the young Turks. Most parties are unwilling to change the status quo, leading to these young aspirants feeling increasingly lost and isolated. Many jump ship, others are disillusioned enough to move out of active politics altogether, becoming independent analysts, among other things. Their prospects also discourage other youngsters from joining in college politics.

Another important factor in the low youth involvement is how parties mobilise

social media. The way news is consumed has changed radically. Studies show that the youth turn to Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook for their political education. It is, therefore, also a test for political parties to see how they use these platforms to encourage the youth to ward off their lethargy and indifference.

The election of 2014 was a game changer for the BJP, which successfully managed to do this, aided by the charisma of Prime Minister Narendra Modi which created a political tsunami. The next election, in 2019, was no different and the wave continued. The BJP's focus on developing a youth connect yielded rich dividends, making it one of the top priorities for the party this year as well. Some of their beneficiaries remain loyal, especially young women. Not to be left behind, the Congress has attempted the same with the Bharat Jodo Yatra. There is a personal equation factor with the leader that matters here. The crowds, the selfies are all favourable indicators, but the question to be asked here is this: Does the crowd at a roadshow translate into actual votes or is it merely the curiosity factor that draws people in to see leaders and star campaigners? After all, veteran leaders, too, attract crowds.

In such a scenario, it is interesting to know the young cadre strength of each of the competing parties because this is what will indicate, in real terms, whether the crowd during the mega roadshow could translate into votes. Among the issues raised in this election are the core ones of unemployment, poverty, corruption and social security. These are issues that affect the youth at every level. When you are worried about getting or keeping a job, can you afford to take the time out to go vote? Think of a situation where a migrant from the north of the country working in a spice factory down south has to undertake a journey of anything between 24 to 72 hours to cast his vote. Even if he gets a day off with paid leave, would he undertake the journey? Would his tired question not be if it is "worth" it? Just as the outreach to youngsters has to be stronger, there should also be feasible alternative arrangements to encourage the youth to vote. Postal ballot is a possible answer. The ECI's efforts to make arrangements for home ballots, to facilitate voting by the sick and the elderly, is laudable. A sympathetic ear to the plight of the young would go a long way towards encouraging their participation.

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The writer is a teacher at The Assam Valley School

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Politicians have mostly failed to make the case for change, and some experts believe that they often lag behind voters. If you want to make a difference, they say, back leaders who prioritise the climate crisis. A year with so many major elections around the globe offers a critical opportunity."
— THE GUARDIAN

BJP's missing guarantee

Increasingly, PM, ruling party's promises are a brand proposition that the consumer does not believe



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O' BRIEN

JANUARY 12, 2024. "Modi's guarantee begins where expectations from others ends". The launch of "Modi ki Guarantee" as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's key campaign slogan for the general elections 2024.

March 30, 2024. This column appears, with the headline, "No warranty for 'Modi Ki Guarantee'".

April 14, 2024. The BJP launches its manifesto. The cover page says "Modi ki Guarantee 2024".

April 27, 2024. The day after the second phase of elections conclude, the "Modi ki Guarantee" slogan is put away into the closet.

In the world of marketing, a brand proposition, as the term connotes, is a promissory note, that is, a promise of substance being made to the customer that will be fulfilled by the brand. It reiterates to consumers the key reasons to assess, reassess, buy or repurchase the brand.

Brand propositions should be conceived of with great thought and care, because you should not promise more than you can deliver. As the marketing adage goes, you can get someone to buy something once, or even twice, but eventually the consumer will see through you. Brand propositions should ideally last for years — even decades.

And finally, the success of the brand lies not in the proposition itself, but in its successful delivery, in all channels of customer engagement. This means that everyone, from the worker on the factory floor, to the quality control system, to the salesman, the outlet and the after-sales-service has to be focussed and committed to that goal. This is what delivers customer satisfaction and the ultimate prize, brand loyalty.

It is, therefore, not surprising but amusing — and a sobering lesson — that the BJP's brand proposition "Modi Ki Guarantee" for the Lok Sabha elections 2024, barely lasted a couple of months.

Here are 10 statements quoted verbatim from the BJP manifesto. The paragraphs accompanying each statement provide clues as to why the key proposition, propagated in January 2024, has virtually disappeared in the campaign by early May.

We will ensure the dignity of women: Hathras. Unnao. Kathua. Bilkis Bano. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Prajwal Revanna. Sandeshkhali.

We have gone from a nation that was in the "fragile five" to a nation that is one of the top 5 economies of the world: Ten years ago, India was the tenth biggest economy in the world with household financial savings at 7.2 per cent of the GDP. Today, as the fifth largest economy, income inequality is even worse than it was during the British Raj. Net financial household savings are at a 50-year

low, at 5.1 per cent of the GDP in 2022-23. Fifty-plus crore citizens have joined the banking system through PM Jan Dhan Account: As of December 2023, one out of five Jan Dhan accounts created has been in-operative/dormant for over two years. This translates to 10.34 crore accounts not being used at all. An amount of Rs 12,779 crore is lying unused in these dormant accounts.

Four-plus crore families now have pucca houses under the PM Awas Yojana and other initiatives: As of January 2024, one out of three houses that were sanctioned under PMAY-U are yet to be completed.

Improved health care of women by making sanitary pads available at Rs 1: In 2019-21, one out of five women did not use hygienic methods of protection during menstruation. One out of four girls either misses school during periods or discontinues her education entirely due to inadequate facilities and other obstacles.

1.4-plus crore young citizens availed skill training under the PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana: As per the 2022-23 Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, the placement rate for the PMKVY 2 stood at 23 per cent. For PMKVY 3, it was even lower, at just 8 per cent. As of June 30, 2022, over half of the budget allocated was unutilised.

Unprecedented hike in MSP: Farmers protested to demand MSP as a guarantee. They were not allowed to enter Delhi, tear-gassed and sprayed with water cannons. In 2024, 19 farmers died and 40 got injured during the "Dilli Chalo" protest.

Unprecedented improvements in connectivity of the Northeast by expansion of roads, bridges, railways and airports: Out of 181 projects sanctioned under North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme, only 25 have been completed as of December 2023. In the last six years, the scheme utilised only 40 per cent of the allocated funds.

Constructed 3.7 lakh km of rural roads in villages under PM Gram Sadak Yojana: The scheme has four verticals of which none had completed all the sanctioned projects as of January 2023. Two of these verticals had a deadline of 2022. Road Connectivity Project on Left Wing Extremism Areas, which had a deadline of March 2023, has only completed half of the sanctioned kms.

Achieved 100 per cent electrification by providing electricity connection to 2.8-plus crore families under Saubhagya: According to the government's definition, a village is considered electrified if just 10 per cent of households in a village have electricity. In 2021, as per some states, nearly 12 lakh households were yet to be electrified. Moreover, according to a response by the Minister of Power in Rajya Sabha in December 2023, nearly five lakh households were left to be electrified in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

"Modi ki Guarantee" is a brand proposition that the consumer did not believe. No wonder it was quickly put to bed. A new brand proposition is now being brazenly propagated. But that's the subject of a column after the results.

The writer is MP, TMC. Additional research by Dheemunt Jain, Ayashman Dev

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN UNLIKELY MERGER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Congress plus, minus' (IE, May 9). Sharad Pawar's suggestion that regional parties should merge with the Congress is worth pondering as the ideology of the bloc members is similar. It will be in the nation's interest if there is a strong alternative in the political arena. Before this, however, the reasons for earlier splits must be analysed threadbare in order to achieve smoother integration. If thorough changes are required at the highest level in Congress, there should be no hesitation in bringing the required changes for better political, social, economic and other aspects of the governance of the nation.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Congress plus, minus' (IE, May 9). The lackadaisical voting patterns in the ongoing election poses indicate that the BJP may not dominate the poll outcome as thought earlier. However, to draw inferences of a Congress revival from this is wishful thinking. Sharad Pawar's belief that other political parties will get drawn towards Congress post elections is unlikely to happen. While the regional parties are, invariably, offshoots of the Congress, they are committed to guarding their turf, and, consequently, consider the big players like Congress and BJP a perennial threat to them.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

PITRODA, LIKE MANI

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Sam Pitroda quits Cong post after remarks on facial features of Indians' (IE, May 9). Some friends can be worse than enemies. Pitroda is a friend of the INC but he is a stranger to the mindset of Indians and the fact that loaded language during elections is ill-advised. Congress has never been short of albatrosses around its neck. Mani Shankar Aiyar was one such person when he made the objectionable "chaiwala" remark against the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP in 2014. Further, Pitroda didn't exactly help the poll prospects of his party when in the 2019 election, in response to a journalist's question about the 1984 anti-sikh riots, he said "hua to hua".

Narendra Dani, Lucknow

DISASTER IN MAKING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Blaze in hills' (IE, May 8). Nearly 95 per cent of forest fires in the country, including in Uttarakhand, are initiated by human activities. The disaster in Joshimath was a case in point. Strong river currents generated by dams built up for hydel energy projects, for human activities, ended up playing havoc with the lives of lakhs of people. We would do well to remember that all of our actions have consequences and disturbing nature cannot be taken lightly.

Shantanu Bhadra, via email