

# DECCAN Chronicle

17 JUNE 2024

## A lot of gains for India and Ukraine at G-7 Italy meet

There is a lot to be said for continuity as Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have gleaned from his meeting with the leaders of the rich G-7 nations and the Pope. Familiarity seems to have spurred even more of the bonhomie that India's leader has built up and sustained with the leaders of the free world as was seen in the happy images rolling out of the luxury resort of Borgo Egnazia in Italy where a set of the world's most influential leaders met and deliberated.

India was only one of the partner countries of the summit — Senegal, South Africa and Argentina were others — and there was a host of invitees from other countries too. This was, however, another conclave at which the Prime Minister could bask in key interactions with leaders signifying how much the world needs the now economically powerful India as a partner and ally.

Whatever may be the compulsions of a reduced mandate in the Lok Sabha polls and its effect on the Modi 3.0 government, it is clear India's image is intact abroad and useful too as in the G-7 emphasising on the India-Europe Corridor, formally known as the India-Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) when announced on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in New Delhi last year, and deciding to act on the need to improve strategic ties amid West Asia tensions. The Prime Minister's warm meeting with Pope Francis was another positive takeaway from the G-7 summit even as Mr Modi's prominent central place in the G-7 "family photo op" and his joy at an affable meeting with the host, Ms Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy, was not to be missed. Given the greater inclusiveness and diversity of his NDA government and his own overtures to the Christian community in Kerala before the polls, the outreach to the head of the Catholic Church and an invitation to visit India portends well though it is the pontiff's health that might determine if he can make the trip.

The two-day summit was so crammed with meetings and hectic bilateral activity that PM Modi could only get to shake hands with the US President Joe Biden as well as greet the Canadian PM Justin Trudeau. There may be pressing issues with the US and Canada on purported extraterritorial killings by India, but they may be taken up at lower official levels rather than in face-to-face meetings among leaders.

The other visiting leader who had substantial takeaways from the summit in Italy was Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy whose forces have lost considerable ground in the east to Russian invasion. The G-7 agreed to use frozen Russian assets exceeding \$325 billion that are in European banks to raise \$50 bn for Ukraine to fight the Russian forces.

Mr Zelensky also signed a 10-year bilateral security deal with the US by which Washington and Kyiv will work to build and maintain Ukraine's defence and deterrence capability as well as support its economic security. Of course, Russia's President Vladimir Putin views this move by which the interest on Russia's frozen assets would help pay the interest on the G-7 \$50 bn loan to Ukraine as "theft".

## Show of unity by Opp. in Maha

One of the key states that stopped the BJP from getting a simple majority in the Lok Sabha elections is Maharashtra where the unity of purpose paid for the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA), the Opposition alliance of three major parties. The MVA has now decided to fight the Assembly elections, due for later this year, in a similar way. The move could make it difficult for Mahayuti, the ruling alliance, to return to power, if the voting pattern of the Lok Sabha elections offers an indication.

Two of the major constituents of the MVA — the Shiv Sena of Uddhav Thackeray and the NCP of Sharad Pawar — each had a score to settle with the BJP which, they believe, engineered splits in their parties to form the state government, led by Eknath Shinde. To add insult to their injuries, the Election Commission had recognised the rebels as the real party though their legacies lay with those in the Opposition. The results of the Lok Sabha elections, however, offered the parties a sense of legitimacy. The combined Opposition won 31 of the 48 seats leaving only 17 to the NDA. While the Congress bagged 14 seats including that of a rebel who returned to the party fold, Mr Thackeray's Sena won nine seats and Mr Pawar's party eight against seven and one, respectively, by the two other factions.

Now that the Opposition has learned that it pays to take on the mighty enemy united, the alliance partners have decided that the three parties and their potential allies will share seats mainly on the winnability factor with "no big brother" among them. On the other side of the divide, the NDA in the state, led by the BJP, will have to go the extra mile if it wants to keep the flock together, as reports of the rebels returning to their parent parties have already started appearing. The negotiating skills of the parties in the two fronts will be put to test in coming days which will play a substantial role in deciding who wins the Assembly race.

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## Time to steer Delhi-Dhaka ties out of troubled waters



Debatri Dhar

### Animal Instincts

Last month a video of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the leader of the Awami League party, went viral, in which she was seen questioning the "boy-cott Indian products" social media campaign that was launched by the country's main Opposition, the BNP. In the video, the Prime Minister was scathingly reminding male members of the Opposition about their wives' Indian saris. "Why are they not taking away their wives' saris and setting them on fire?" she asked at a party meeting, leading to an Opposition leader's reply that his wife had a quilt made out of hers. Analysts have pointed to how the sari has since become a political football.

India-Bangladesh bilateral ties span defence, trade and investments, water and energy, and go back a long way. The 1947 Partition of India, which led to the creation of West and East Pakistan, would soon witness allegations of cultural discrimination and human rights abuses inflicted on the Bengali population by West Pakistan. In 1970, the Bengali Awami League won a decisive majority in Pakistan's general election. Refusing a democratic transfer of power, the Pakistan Army launched a brutal crackdown. In March 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman issued a call to the Bangladeshi nationalist movement; in retaliation, the Pakistani Army launched Operation Searchlight, leading to the killing of an estimated 300,000 to 3,000,000 Bengali civilians. The operation led to a large refugee influx into India, with the numbers swelling to 10 million. A reprehensible aspect of the war were camps for the systematic rape and forced impregnation of Bengali women. Thousands of these "birangonas", or warrior women, caught in the big battles between men, later gave testimony about their month-

long sexualised torture, even as many were abandoned by their community.

Like the people and products of various countries, such as the "Indian sari", nations themselves too sometimes become political footballs. This was the challenge the birth of Bangladesh faced, becoming as it had a football not so much between India and Pakistan, but between two greater powers, the United States and the People's Republic of China. New Delhi made repeated attempts to reach out to Washington for help, especially since the refugee influx, while welcome on moral grounds, was becoming economically unsustainable for India, given the latter's already extremely high population and density per capita. However, Washington chose to support Islamabad and to deny the Bengali genocide, terming it as an exaggeration, if not a lie. A key reason for this was that Pakistan was America's only channel to China, as Henry Kissinger noted in his White House papers. At that time, then US President Richard Nixon and Kissinger, who would later be his secretary of state, were trying to build relations with Beijing to negate the Soviet influence by taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The Nixon administration even sent the Seventh Fleet led by the nuclear-powered aircraft-carrier *USS Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal to aid Pakistan against India.

Ultimately, India negotiated a Friendship treaty with Soviet Union and, following a December attack by Pakistan, provided military support to the Mukti Bahini. Under the instructions of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the strategic leadership of Army chief Gen. (later Field-Marshal) Sam Manekshaw, the Indian Army helped bring about a quick victory, leading to Pakistan's surrender on December 16, 1971.

Recently, US ambassador

Beijing has proposed financing large development projects on the Teesta, which have drawn criticism from environmentalists... New Delhi must find a durable water-sharing solution

to India Eric Garcetti acknowledged that America's "tilt" towards Pakistan and China in the 1970s had led to "India thinking of America as not a trustworthy partner". Taking a principled stand, New Delhi repatriated, without retaliation, nearly one lakh Pakistani prisoners of war under the 1972 Shimla Agreement. Later considered by Bangladesh's Constitution as father of the nation, Sk Mujibur Rahman, "Bangabandhu", also became a friend to India. After his assassination in 1975, his daughter has continued that friendship.

Now back in power for a third term, Sheikh Hasina alleged American interference in Bangladesh's general election, claiming the US wants a regime change, arguably to bring in the conservative BNP. Meanwhile, many are aware that the Bangladeshi anti-India hashtags are similar to the "India Out" ones in the Maldives backed by China (no arguments here), a bulk of these hashtags originating from the social media handles of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the US and other Western nations. Given these impending geopolitical realities, outstanding bilateral issues with Dhaka need to be diplomatically addressed on a priority basis.

A critical one pertains to the Teesta water-sharing, as the agreement has been stalled since 2011. The Teesta flows out from India's Sikkim, and through West Bengal, before entering Bangladesh. It's the fourth largest river system shared with Bangladesh after the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna. During the drafting of the 1947 Boundary Commission Report demarcating the boundary between India and then-East Pakistan, the Muslim League had asked for

Darjeeling and other districts in Teesta's catchment area, the bulk of which was given to India.

Despite subsequent efforts under the India-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission and the Ganga Water Treaty, and visits by successive Indian Prime Ministers, the water issues are yet to be resolved.

Beijing has proposed financing large development projects on the Teesta, which have drawn criticism from environmentalists. Some hydropower is needed in this context, so New Delhi must remain proactively engaged in Bangladesh's sustainable development, and to find a durable water-sharing solution. Since releasing more water to Bangladesh can adversely impact irrigation in some poorer districts in West Bengal, chief minister Mamata Banerjee should be invited to the consultative process, for the Centre and the state to collaborate in the interest of the nation. The renewal of the Ganga Water Treaty should also be on the agenda.

In accordance with its "neighbourhood first" policy, New Delhi was right to invite the Bangladesh Prime Minister to the G-20 summit hosted by India last year and, more recently, to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third-term swearing-in ceremony. Bangladesh will no doubt evaluate China's debt-and-encirclement traps. Geopolitical equations do change, so India on its part must hold on strongly to this friendly nation, whose national anthem 'Amar Sonar Bangla' was composed by none other than our own Rabindranath Tagore, who also composed India's national anthem. Meanwhile, I am visiting Kolkata, preparing for a lecture and enjoying wearing saris, including Benarasi and Dhakai. Footballs, even political ones, can sometimes have a mind of their own, and the timeless sari that has always beckoned with its beauty is not fading out of sight anytime soon.

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### LETTERS

#### A WINNER NEVER QUILTS

From 1967, Tamil Nadu has been ruled only by the two Dravidian parties DMK and ADMK intermittently with either of them at the helm of affairs. The national parties have been playing secondary role only. AIADMK, under the stewardship of Edappadi Palanisamy, continues to bite the dust in all the elections despite said to be having huge number of cadres. It has drawn blank in the recent parliament election. The party must introspect and analyse the reasons for its debacle. Withdrawing from the fray citing flimsy reasons will weaken the party and demoralise the cadre. The clueless cadres will cast their votes to PMK only. This will dent its image severely besides giving room to confirm the opposition's accusation of having secret understanding with BJP alliance. EPS must know "a winner never quits and a quitter never wins".

**M. Govindaraj, Gudiyatham**

#### IN FEAR OF RESULT

The reasons adduced by Mr.EPS of AIADMK for not contesting in Vikravandi by election are funny and frivolous. He says that he has no trust that the bypoll will be fair and impartial since it will take place fully with the state government officers and employees conducting and managing them at all levels. Has he forgotten that all general and byelections were conducted in the same manner previously too? People think EPS is saddened by the results of Lok Sabha elections and hence is running away from the battlefield.

**Muthu Srinivasan, Coimbatore**

#### GOING TICKETLESS

Last week, ticketless passengers crowded reserved coaches on the Vande Bharat train from Lucknow to Dehradun, with most of them packed tightly in the aisles. There is one more opportunity for these men coming their way. At the G7 summit, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has assured his Indian counterpart that all uncertainties about the Bullet Train project had been removed and that the high-speed train would become a reality in India soon. The ticketless passengers, however, are advised not to hurry but wait till the bonhomie dies down, as has happened in the case of Vande Bharat.

**P.G. Menon, Chennai**

Devi Kar



## Encourage kids to think, raise questions: Vital for democracy

India's recent Lok Sabha elections unfolded very dramatically and though we couldn't quite trust the print media and TV channels, we were vastly engaged as well as entertained by the social media. I was in New York during this entire period and was drawn by the political story that was simmering there around Donald Trump's trial over the "hush money cases". It was like an addictive mini serial and finally the former US President was declared guilty on all 34 counts for which he had been charged. This is the first time in history that a felon would be a candidate for the White House.

Another arena of theatre was the issue of the Gaza war, while Americans were supplying potent weapons to Israel. I read about the unrest in different US campuses and the fiery speeches of valedictorians being shouted down at graduation ceremonies. Next, I saw a prominent opinion piece titled "Harvard Should Say Less, Maybe All Schools Should" (written by Noah Feldman and Alison Feldman, professors of law and philosophy at Harvard).

Now there is a big controversy around this as colleges and universities jealously guard their right to speak freely, to dissent and to speak or write publicly against their school's as well as the nation's policy. Till recently, any criticism of the Indian central government's policy was deemed "seditious" and "anti-national", but the very definition of democracy implies discussion, differences of opin-

ion, argument and activism. Notwithstanding the earlier protests, Harvard has decided that in the absence of a formal policy governing the issue of an official statement, university leaders "can and should speak out publicly to promote and protect the core function of the university, which is to create an environment suitable for pursuing truth through research, scholarship and teaching". However, it is not their business to side with Israel or Ukraine or Russia or to show sympathy for Gaza. Universities understand the need to exist meaningfully in a polarised world.

So far as our schools in India are concerned, the media never publishes the discussions and arguments that take place in schools, and I am sure such conversations are not discouraged in the schools that want their students to think for themselves. The pursuit of truth is the central pillar of education and a school should not limit its teachings to the prescribed course material.

I am afraid that when it comes to social science subjects such as history, civics, sociology or even political science, students are usually taught only facts that are relevant to the topics prescribed in their syllabus and the comments are restricted to those mentioned in the prescribed course books. If at all there is any discussion of different views, students tend to present what they hear at home. If there are different viewpoints in class, the teachers prefer to appear neutral. They explain things diplo-

matically, keeping different sides happy. I have not yet heard of school teachers trying to present their own political views forcefully nor school students arguing powerfully with their teachers. The total absence of discussion of significant or disputed policies is a big flaw in our approach to teaching and learning. If, broadly speaking, education is taken as the pursuit of truth, discussion and differences of opinion must be accommodated, otherwise we end up nurturing students who have passively received knowledge that has been established and conveyed by others and they have not been encouraged to process knowledge independently.

Thus, it is important for people, young and old, to keep questioning, reflecting and pursuing the truth for themselves. While thinking about this, I sometimes, come to the conclusion that the most important virtue one can have is courage – courage to stand up to people, courage to say something different, courage to not join the herd and courage (and basic common sense) to not be brainwashed by people in authority.

In the school context, it is perhaps important to include an important caveat. We have to make sure that these discussions and arguments take place in an environment that is conducive to thinking and learning. Perhaps it is the worry that classrooms would be transformed into battlegrounds, that factions would emerge and the ultimately harmony would be destroyed that makes schools extra cau-

tious about allowing political discussions in school. However, if the whole exercise is taken as part of the education system and teachers are adept at managing conflict as well as facilitating discussions, the school would become a rich learning ground where children don't receive information passively or accept the beliefs of the adults around them unquestioningly.

Nation building in a democracy starts with the development of responsible citizens and the building blocks are discussion, argument, consensus and the acceptance of differences. If these practices are not adopted in school, we will not have a mature nation where civilised arguments take place in Parliament, political opponents are not looked upon as enemies, personal attacks are not made and hate speeches are not resorted to.

We should be proud of our democracy and proud of our ordinary citizens who are, in many cases, given attention only before elections. However, it is imperative that young people should be educated to become responsible citizens not only by observing Independence Day and Republic Day or supporting the Indian team in sports competitions but many of them should want to participate in the actual governance of the country. India needs able and upright political leaders.

*The writer is a veteran school educator based in Kolkata*



## Quit, but speak up

The VIP episode sets a good example for independent directors who walk out of company boards silently

**I**N HER LETTER to the VIP Industries board a few days back, Nisaba Godrej cited differing views on leadership accountability and succession planning as the reason for her decision to resign as an independent director (ID) of the company. A day after VIP disclosed her letter to the stock exchanges, VIP chairman Dilip Piramal said Godrej felt the board needed to have a better control on its operations and undertake drastic changes including in the management, in contrast to his stance of a plan which may seem slow but focused on getting the brand in a good space. India Inc and its IDs should take lessons from the dignified way both Godrej and Piramal explained their positions. Two lessons, actually: One, IDs don't need to walk into the sunset quietly; and two, the management doesn't have to treat such resignations as some kind of a sacrilege.

That's the way corporate governance should be practised. In recent times, IDs of two other prominent companies — Zee Entertainment Enterprises and PTC Financial Services — gave something other than personal reasons for their exits. While two IDs in Zee had listed out seven reasons for their resignations, most of which pertain to related-party transactions, two IDs of PTC cited governance lapses. There is no doubt that regulatory diktat also played a big role in the detailed reasons given by Godrej and the IDs of Zee and PTC for resigning. According to the directives issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India in February this year, IDs citing “personal reasons” for their resignations will be required to explain the logic behind staying on the boards of other companies.

This proposed change is part of new corporate governance norms being finalised by the regulator for listed companies, which will come into force beginning October this year. It's a much-needed move as too many IDs still leave companies without giving any reasons for doing so, leaving shareholders in the dark about what actually led to such departures. Data support this: So far this year, only four out of 180 IDs who resigned citing personal reasons have mentioned issues such as corporate governance or lack of transparency for doing so. Hopefully, the trend would reverse from October to remove the perception about a cosy nexus between promoters and IDs. In any case, shareholders, who appoint IDs and trust them, have every right to know what may have transpired when IDs resigned mid-way.

There are many reasons for directors disguising their true motives for resigning, such as not wanting to damage business relationships and potentially future employment opportunities, or to suffer material consequences from adverse market reaction if they own stock options. But IDs, who are supposed to bring an unbiased view and a commitment to ethical standards, just can't be allowed to ignore accountability. The point, however, is regulations can only do so much. Promoters have an equal stake in ensuring that IDs are not merely passive participants in boardroom discussions but active contributors whose voices are valued and heard. This necessitates a culture where IDs feel empowered as custodians of corporate integrity and articulate their expectations regarding governance, transparency, and ethical conduct. Otherwise, Warren Buffet would continue to be proven right. In one of his letters to shareholders, the famed investor had written, “When seeking independent directors, CEOs don't look for pit bulls. It's the cocker spaniel that gets taken home.”

## Republicans are inventors, Democrats are innovators

**DOES IT MATTER** which political party your urologist belongs to? Or that inventors are more likely to be Republicans than Democrats?

Not everything is political, of course, but everything has a politics, including the professions. Knowing which kinds of partisans tend to dominate which sectors can help you manage expectations not only as you go about your own life, but also as you try to understand trends in the broader economy.

Evidence from campaign contributions, for example, indicates that some professions are more right- or left-leaning than others. And more recent research shows that partisanship matters for inventors too, first in the choice to become one and then about what to make.

The data shows that oil workers and petroleum engineers are more likely to give to Republican candidates, while professional environmentalists, librarians and bartenders are more likely to support Democrats. Given disputes over climate change, the breakdown in the fossil-fuel sector may be obvious — but what explains the Republican lean of truck drivers, farmers and urologists, or the Democratic lean of pediatricians and bartenders?

Causality undoubtedly runs both ways. If you are a bartender, you might be younger and rank somewhat higher in the personality trait of openness. Those traits are correlated with support for Democrats. So it's not necessarily the case that working as a bartender causes you to evolve into a Democrat, or that Democratic loyalties per se push you into bartending jobs.

In other cases, the profession itself may influence political leanings. Many small-business people are sensitive about the taxes they pay, since often they do not have the cash flow or profit margins of larger corporations. So business owners and insurance agents lean more Republican, and some of that relationship may be causal. Academics lean Democratic, and some of that inclination may come from the perception that Democrats support science and the academy more.

It turns out that partisanship matters for inventors, too. A study released last month shows that the modal or typical inventor in 2020 was Republican, accounting for 37% of the database of more than 250,000 US inventors, with Democrats making up 34% and independents 30%. In part, this may stem from the desire of many inventors to become small-business owners.

And yet inventors have become more Democratic and less Republican since 2019, perhaps because educational polarisation means that more educated people are trending in the Democratic direction. Furthermore, those shifts are strongest in Democratic-leaning states such as Washington.

The partisan views of inventors are also correlated with what they invent. Republicans are more likely to develop innovations for guns (the patent category is called “blasting weapons”), while Democrats are more likely to get new patents related to climate change. These kinds of partisan effects are much stronger when the relevant work is done in teams, which is becoming more important. So invention may well become more partisan.

How should partisans view all this research? Well, conservatives who worry about the liberal domination of academia can console themselves that they have one area where they still hold sway — coming up with new and patentable ideas. Furthermore, the stronger Republican presence influences which kinds of innovations get made. Some people might gladly give up a bigger presence in academia for a greater hand in invention.

At the same time, it is widely believed that patents can be a misleading measure of some kinds of innovation, as many new sectors of the US economy rely less on patents to protect their new ideas and advances. Tech firms may well take out patents, but their actual competitive advantage comes from network effects, talent, the ability to maintain and revise their software, and other factors.

But there is another way to look at it. In the economy of the future, would you rather be developing the next generation of guns, or of artificial intelligence? I know which field I would prefer. Perhaps we should ask the AIs.

**JOB CREATION CHALLENGE**  
THE ELECTION RESULTS HAVE PROVEN THAT “MODI'S GUARANTEE” IS NO LONGER ENOUGH

# Modi 3.0 and employment

**F**OR THE PAST decade, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) enjoyed an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament. This time, it has fallen well short of that mark. Its diminished numbers likely reflect its failure over its previous terms to address the economic distress of a sizeable section of society, particularly young people and farmers.

The next government in New Delhi must change its approach towards increasing employment, especially youth employment, by making direct interventions. The most effective starting point for such a process would be adopting a National Employment Policy that was on the fringes of policy discussions when the Congress-led government was in power before 2014. By 2022, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government said in parliament that there was no plan to develop a National Employment Policy.

The most enduring feature of India's labour market is the high level of informality. More than 90% of the workforce is in the informal economy. It needs a holistic look to allow everyone to participate in talks on concrete measures that can be taken to create jobs and provide social security to workers. Alongside this, the government must recalibrate the incentives extended to the private sector, linking these to their ability to create jobs.

Possibly the most troubling aspects of the NDA government's economic policies pertain to its dealing with the farm sector.

Agriculture remains the mainstay of India's workforce. According to the Economic Survey of 2022-23, 65 per cent (2021 data) of the country's population lives in rural areas and 47% of the population depends on agriculture for livelihood. There is a lack of adequate income for them, which is a major problem for rural workers.

In 2020, the government brought in

**BISWAJIT DHAR**  
Distinguished professor, Council for Social Development

three controversial farm laws, which would have facilitated the entry of large traders for procuring agricultural produce. This was an attempt to replace government agencies that have been procuring all the major commodities from farmers since the 1960s. Though farmers' agitations forced the government to withdraw the legislation, the farmers' demands to address the problems faced by India's crisis-ridden agriculture were never given any attention.

One of the most intriguing anomalies of Indian policy-making during the past 80 years has been the lack of political will to formulate a National Agricultural Policy. It is ironic that, while the United States and the members of the European Union have been adopting the Farm Act and the Common Agricultural Policy respectively, every Indian government since independence has avoided enacting a domestic equivalent, even though agriculture employs a very small share of the workforce in the US and Europe.

Doing so would ensure that everyone, including the farmers' organisations and the state governments, are fully involved in making policies in agriculture. A comprehensive policy aimed at improving the viability of Indian agriculture, improving the lives and livelihoods of 47% of the country's workforce, can provide the impulses necessary for sustaining high and inclusive growth.

India has a relatively young population. The country can trigger a strong development cycle by engaging young people in its workforce. The benefits of the demographic dividend, which has long been discussed in the context of the Indian economy, can then be reaped. But this demographic dividend seems a long way off given the high levels of youth unemployment. Over the past few years, and particularly

after the Covid-19 pandemic, this has been a major pain point for the Indian economy. While the official statistics show high levels of growth, this growth has not been employment augmenting to the desirable extent.

India's labour market shows two disquieting features. Firstly, official statistics show that the country's young people (15-29 years) have consistently higher unemployment rates than the overall workforce. Secondly, there are high levels of gender inequity and the employment opportunities available for women have not shown any signs of improvement.

The youth unemployment rate during the first quarter of 2024 was 17%, two and a half times higher than the corresponding figure for the working-age population. The unemployment rate for young female workers was even higher at 22.7%. These figures suggest that India is wasting a large share of its labour

**Instead of addressing these problems, the NDA government created a “dole economy” by extending freebies to the distressed**

## Growth drivers for the new govt



**SUMANT SINHA**

Founder, Chairman, & CEO, ReNew

After moving beyond policy paralysis and economic management in the first two terms, the next five years of the Modi regime are crucial for India's growth journey

**AFTER THE LARGEST** electoral exercise in the world, congratulations are in order for the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for emerging as the party with the largest number of seats by a significant margin. Globally, this achievement is noteworthy as very few incumbent governments have managed to secure victories in elections held so far in 2024.

The first term of the Modi government was necessary to move beyond the policy paralysis of the previous 10 years. It was visionary, spurred by initiatives such as Make in India, which among other things resulted in establishing a \$100-billion electronics manufacturing industry in less than a decade. Digital India was another important step. We are a digital payments superpower now. The Jan Dhan scheme, which catalysed financial inclusion, crossed 50 crore bank accounts in August 2023; 56% of them are of women. As part of its climate pledge, India's target was revamped to 175 gigawatts (Gw) by 2022 from a mix of clean energy sources; in 2021, the PM raised the target to 500 Gw by 2030.

The second term of the Modi government was about efficient economic management. Its handling of an exceptionally challenging period characterised by the pandemic, along with that of soaring inflation and inflation rates at multi-decadal highs, was praiseworthy. The term was focused on the ambitious goal of becoming a \$5-trillion economy by 2025 on the foundation of unprecedented infrastructure development and a vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat. India's

pace of infrastructure development was terrific, with the construction of 28 km of national highways every day, the doubling of port capacity and the number of operational airports, and a tripling of solar power capacity. This growth has been fiscally prudent too, unlike emerging and developed economies now grappling with huge public debt. India is set to retain its tag of the fastest-growing economy among the G20 nations, with estimates pushing FY24 growth to 8.2%.

We are now entering the third term of the PM Modi-led National Democratic Alliance. The next five years are crucial for India's journey towards becoming a developed nation by 2047. India would benefit from unlocking the potential of six cross-cutting drivers of growth, having already fared well in addressing sectoral challenges.

### Focus on green infrastructure development

While we are rapidly heading in this direction, we must have a very strong alignment between the Centre and states on policy reforms and associated enablers in the future. We must tap the potential of clean energy as much of a geopolitical tool as a strategic, economic, and environmental one. This will need stepping up efforts domestically, while calibrating our trade partnerships and diplomatic relationships.

### Manufacturing as a bigger economic contributor

This is critical to create the jobs we want and the internal capability needed to leverage the opportunities arising from the current geopolitical environment. The production-linked incentive scheme has been a vital enabler. We need simpler regulatory processes, investment in targeted infrastructure to meet the requirements of manufacturing hubs, and investment in research and development.

**We need stronger corporates that have the resources and execution capabilities to deliver at scale and pace**

### A stronger thrust towards \$1 trillion exports by 2030

We have done well to shift our exports away from traditional commodities to higher-value products like IT services, chemicals, electronics, and refined oil. In addition to improved manufacturing capabilities, we will need regulatory reforms around the recalibration of input tariffs; improving efficiency and accountability of trade promotion agencies; financing support to exporters that can match those provided by other countries; and new trade agreements with geographies like the European Union, Middle East, Latin America, and the US.

### Deepening capital markets to finance growth

This will need norms/mandates to channel the funds of large institu-

tional investors towards sectors of importance like clean energy; a stronger investor protection regime; and focused initiatives towards improving India's rating to attract more foreign investments.

### Tax reforms for efficient corporate capital structures

We need stronger corporates that have the resources and execution capabilities to deliver at scale and pace in India and globally. Tax reforms are a priority area to enable that, especially through measures like group taxation and a regime that incentivises companies to locate their holding firms in India while still enjoying the benefits derived from locating them in countries like Singapore, the US, the UK, etc.

### Boosting human capital for long-term growth

According to the International Monetary Fund, like several other economies, India will need to reverse the declining total factor productivity to achieve high economic growth over a sustained period. To this end, we must continue to invest in health, education, and skills. Implementing the National Education Policy with greater urgency will be a good step.

The new government will have the full support of industry in our growth story. We are ready to assist with our entrepreneurial drive, financial resources, and robust execution capabilities to drive forward the ambitious goals needed to make India fully viksit (developed) by 2047.

● Write to us at [feletters@expressindia.com](mailto:feletters@expressindia.com)



# EMPTY VESSELS MAKE MORE NOISE

It is time our politicians, at least those who are fast turning old like AICC former president Rahul Gandhi, develop some scientific temper. When Space X and Tesla CEO Elon Musk stated that electronic voting machines (EVMs) can be hacked and should be eliminated, Rahul instantly reacted, saying EVMs in India are a “black box” which nobody is allowed to scrutinise, and asserted that “serious concerns” are being raised about transparency in the country’s electoral process. Congress’ ally and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav also questioned the credibility of EVMs and demanded that all future elections should be conducted through ballot papers. This reminds me of the Telugu adage “Adugo Puli - Idugo Thoka,” (One says there is panther, another says hey here is its tail).

Rahul and Congress party first

need to explain why the Congress government, which was in power between 2004 and 2014 when the UPA government led by Congress party was in power, did not abolish it. Rahul who tore off an ordinance which was brought by the UPA government in 2013 to shield convicted lawmakers from immediate disqualification from the House should have given the call to dump EVMs. The parliament then could have amended the Constitution again and done away with the EVMs. It has become a fashion for political parties to praise EVMs when they win and blame them when they lose. What is more, whether it is Rahul or anyone else who blames EVMs has so far failed to provide evidence that they can be tampered with. But they don’t stop making noise.

“We should eliminate electronic voting machines. The risk of being

hacked by humans or AI, while small, is still too high,” Musk said, quoting a post by US presidential contender Robert F Kennedy Jr who initially wrote about EVM irregularities during elections in Puerto Rico. This is what Musk said and Rahul reacted. But the big question is whether our EVMs can be connected to Bluetooth. Experts say no. Then how can one hack them using Bluetooth or AI? The history of EVMs dates back to 1977 when CEC Sham Lal Shakhder asked ECIL to develop a prototype of a voting machine. In 1980, ECIL developed the prototype and demonstrated it to political parties. In 1982, it was used in Paravur assembly election in Kerala. In 1983, EVMs were made based on common design. The Supreme Court in 1984 said they cannot be used without change of law and the then the government in 1998 made

amendments to the law based on consensus. The Congress was also part of the consensus. They were used in 15 legislative constituencies of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. During the same year, the Parliament lowered the voting age. Their use was expanded to more places in 1999 and in the 2004 general elections they were used across the country. The Congress came to power when people voted through EVMs. It was in power for 10 years. If EVMs are black boxes, why didn’t the Congress government scrap them? Why did he not make a demand that they be scrapped? Why did the Congress use them again in 2009 elections? When will these double standards stop in this country? There is a point in what former BJP minister Chandrasekhar said. He said Musk’s assertion was a “huge sweep-

ing generalisation.” He said Musk’s concerns might apply to countries where voting machines were built using standard computing platforms with Internet connectivity; whereas, they do not apply to India. “Indian EVMs are custom designed, secure and isolated from any network or media. There is no connectivity, no Bluetooth, wifi, Internet, i.e., there is no way in. Factory-programmed controllers cannot be reprogrammed.” If at all, any debate has to take place it should be on the technology used and the Rahul-led INDIA bloc should come up with proper scientific evidence, not sweeping statements. They should not resort to ruckus in Parliament, which has become a routine practice for the opposition. It is time Rahul and Akhilesh kind of leaders emulate L K Advani or Atal Behari Vajpayee who used to refer to several books and take opinion of experts before speaking in Parliament. Now, the situation is one of empty vessels make more noise.

## LETTERS

### Revanth’s vendetta against KCR worrisome

The CM, A Revanth Reddy, has become unfathomable in his political vendetta towards erstwhile BRS regime. The appointment of Justice L Narsimha Reddy Commission to probe PPA deals with Chhattisgarh government is an instance. The power situation before 2014 was precarious, with huge power cuts in industrial, agricultural and domestic usage. The power situation improved resulting in industrial and agricultural growth. It is unbecoming of a CM to probe on a deal by a State government with another State government under the directions of Power Grid Corporation, a Central PSE.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

### ‘World-class capital city’ not a feasible idea

It is surprising to see the fertile land of 34,000 acres around Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh being planned to be converted into a concrete jungle (i.e. so-called world-class capital city of AP). Please stop this at once, to save environment. Also by law stop felling of trees there. IT, AI, internet are enough to do all types of online “world class business transactions” with the whole world, sitting in a small room. No need of showoffs, big buildings causing environmental damage, (also: increase in pollution, global warming, weather catastrophes, loss of lives and properties. Wasting thousands of crores of rupees to build a new capital Amaravati city for AP state could take decades to cross the “breakeven point (BEP)” and earn profits.

P V Srinivas Sreelekha, Secunderabad

### AP edn system a role model for nation

The governments failed to allot sufficient funds for the education sector while the population explosion in the country continued to play havoc with the economy. As a result, education got converted into a profitable business even as the private sector entering the scene and making quality education costlier beyond the reach of the poor and the weaker sections. This explains high dropout rate among students after school education. Recently in AP, a genuine attempt was made by the YSRCP ruled government to provide free or affordable and quality English medium education from LKG to PG. Entire India should emulate this example in order to reduce dropouts after school education.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

### Prosecuting Arundhati Roy a sinister move

The sanction of prosecution against Arundhati Roy after a lapse of 14 years, over her comments about Kashmir in 2010, is a glaring case of gross misuse of power against one of India’s finest writers of whom we must all be proud. In fact, we should salute her for her passionate opposition to systems, relations and conditions in which human beings are discriminated against, despised, humiliated, robbed of their dignity and dehumanized and denied their freedom to live the way they want. The state should not hound her, but honour her. She is a free citizen of a free country and she is entitled to her own opinion.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

### Focus on what led to war on Gaza

Reg: Gaza Genocide: US faces more global isolation. June 16, 2024. The attacks on Gaza are continuing and the suffering of Palestinians is growing beyond any imagination, in terms of suffering and starvation in the wake of precision bombings and ground attack by Israel on Hamas terror locations. But, the world has conveniently forgotten the role of Hamas in triggering the chain of events that have culminated in the present state of affairs in Gaza. The Palestinians have already lost their voice in their appeal to the world as they have become silent lambs before the diktats of Hamas. Blaming the US for supporting Israel is only part of the story. The world must focus on the terror aspects which led to the present imbroglio in Gaza.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

### Sad state of affairs in Manipur

One of the critical issues fuelling the violence in Manipur is the uneven disarmament process. While one group has been disarmed, militias with political patronage continue to wield power and terrorise. RSS’s Mohan Bhagwat ignited the need to resolve issues of Manipur in the most amicable way. The less said the better. It appears to me that all sides of the political spectrum are interested in keeping this pot boiling issue without any concrete effort to resolve the same. The fact that the state is far removed from the main cities and states gives it a sense of distance and deniability, except when you see those ghastly and gory images. Clearly the government has failed to contain the ongoing mayhem.

C K Subramaniam, Mumbai

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Private transport union warns of K’taka Bandh

BENGALURU: The Karnataka State Private Transport Association has condemned the increase in petrol price by Rs 3 and diesel price by Rs 3.50 in the state. Karnataka State Union of Private Transporters has decided to protest across the state.

We condemn the petrol and diesel price hike. Nataraj Sharma, state president of Karnataka Private Transport Union, said that if petrol and diesel prices are not reduced, they will protest across the state. Speaking at a press conference in Bengaluru, he said that if the petrol price is not reduced, we will call for Bangalore Bandh first. He warned that Karnataka bandh will be made later.

Private transport industry has been disrupted by Shakti Yojana. Petrol-diesel price hike has taken a big blow. How to serve customers if fuel price increases? He said that if the tax on road tax, petrol and diesel is increased, the passengers will have to pay more.

The government is highlighting its bankruptcy. The government did not increase the rates because it was afraid that people would not vote if the tax was increased during the elections. If the government does not abandon the Shakti scheme we will be hit in a big way. He lashed out that the government is ready to hit the last nail when the private transport industry is dying.

If the tax is not refunded, 31 private transport organisations will protest similar to the September 11, 2023 protest. First we will call Bangalore Bandh.

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

# Famine looms on war-torn Sudan

## Local researcher unpacks scale of the disaster and what action is needed

OLIVER KIPTOO KIRUI

THE UN recently warned of the risk of famine in Sudan. The war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has killed civilians and devastated livelihoods on a massive scale. A civil war between two rival factions of the military government of Sudan, the Sudanese Armed Forces under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces under the Janjaweed leader, Hemedti, began during Ramadan on 15 April 2023.

Around 18 million people are already acutely hungry, including 3.6 million children who are acutely malnourished. Oliver Kiptoo Kirui, who co-authored the Sudan National Household Survey – conducted in the midst of war – provides insights on the scale of the country’s food emergency.

What’s the food crisis situation in Sudan?

Acute food security is measured on a widely accepted 5-stage classification. It increases in severity from “minimal” through “stressed”, “crisis”, “emergency” and “famine”. This scale is intended to help governments and other humanitarian actors quickly undertake a situation and take action. Sudan’s food security has dramatically worsened due to ongoing conflict and economic decline. As of mid-2024, over 20.3 million people (more than 42% of the population) are facing high levels of acute food insecurity.

Some are in the crisis stage. Others have slipped into the emergency phase. This indicates severe food shortages

and widespread hunger. Rural households are especially hard hit due to disrupted agricultural activities, limited access to markets and soaring food prices. Together, these factors have severely affected household food security, particularly in conflict areas.

The conflict has disrupted agricultural production and trade routes. At the same time, the economic crisis fuelled by the war has led to hyperinflation, with food prices being 350% above the five-year average. Many people can’t afford food.

Rural areas have been particularly hard hit. As many as 40% of farming households did not till their land for planting. And those who did have been unable to plant or harvest crops because of insecurity. Food has become much scarcer.

The conflict has displaced people, too, placing Sudan in the highest displacement crisis in the world. This has further strained food resources as displaced populations seek refuge in regions where resources are already scarce.

What do we know about the scale of the emergency? The latest UN reports indicate a humanitarian crisis. Around 9.2 million people have been displaced since mid-2023. Access to food remains a critical need, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan. Rising levels of hunger and severe acute malnutrition are expected to lead to more deaths if there isn’t urgent action.

In a recent IFPRI-UNDP analysis, more than half of rural households reported consuming less food – for example, skipping meals or reducing meal sizes. This un-



The conflict between the Army and the RSF has disrupted agricultural production and trade routes. Sudan’s food security has dramatically worsened due to ongoing conflict and economic decline. As of mid-2024, over 20.3 million people (more than 42% of the population) are facing high levels of acute food insecurity

derscores the urgent need for immediate and sustained humanitarian assistance.

Displacement and food insecurity in Sudan are worse than ever before. The disruption of livelihoods and markets has left millions in desperate need of help.

The UN emphasises the need for urgent and comprehensive humanitarian interventions to prevent a full-scale famine. The high prevalence of severe acute malnutrition among children is particularly alarming. It’s a warning of a looming public health disaster.

What were Sudan’s food vulnerabilities before the war? Before the current conflict, Sudan already faced food security challenges. These included economic instability, high inflation and frequent climate shocks such as droughts and floods. Agricultural production was often

below average. Many regions depended on food imports, which were easily disrupted by logistical challenges.

Before the war, rural households had to deal with poor infrastructure, lack of agricultural inputs and limited extension services. The current conflict has made them even more vulnerable. Sudan’s agricultural sector struggled with numerous problems, like outdated farming practices, lack of investment and inadequate infrastructure. Frequent climate shocks, such as droughts and floods, added to these issues, leading to chronic food production deficits.

Economic policies and political instability had already weakened the country’s ability to import food, making it heavily reliant on erratic local production.

What should a local and international response look

like? Improved access to credit, better farming techniques, broadened and deepened social protection, and resilient infrastructure could help build long-term food security.

Well-coordinated humanitarian assistance that reaches the most vulnerable populations is crucial for immediate relief and recovery. Both local and international responses need to be robust and multifaceted. These include: Immediate humanitarian aid: rapid deployment of food aid and nutritional support is crucial. This includes opening and maintaining secure humanitarian corridors for uninterrupted aid delivery. Immediate action is needed to prevent starvation and reduce malnutrition rates, particularly among children and other vulnerable groups.

Support for agricultural production: providing farm-

ers with seeds, tools and training can help increase local food production and farmers’ resilience. Initiatives to improve water management and irrigation infrastructure are also essential. Long-term investments in sustainable farming practices and infrastructure are necessary to rebuild and stabilise the agricultural sector.

Economic support: stabilising the economy through financial aid, reducing inflation and ensuring the availability of affordable basic goods can mitigate the crisis. Economic interventions should focus on supporting livelihoods and enhancing market access to make food more affordable and available. Conflict resolution and security: efforts to mediate the conflict and establish peace are fundamental to allow safe access for humanitarian efforts. This will also enable people to return to their livelihoods. Without a resolution to the conflict, sustainable food security cannot be achieved. Peace-building initiatives must be prioritised to create a stable environment for recovery.

International coordination: a coordinated international response is necessary to ensure efficient use of resources and to address the needs of displaced populations. Collaboration and resource-sharing among humanitarian actors can enhance the effectiveness of aid delivery and ensure that assistance reaches those most in need.

(Writer is a Research Fellow at International Food Policy Research Institute -IFPRI; <https://theconversation.com/>)

# G7 spending 62 times more on military than humanitarian aid

BRETT WILKINS

Despite historic levels of forced displacement due to armed conflict, Group of Seven member countries have increased their military expenditures to record highs while they slash spending on humanitarian aid for people affected by wars that these powerful nations often started or stoked, an analysis published Friday revealed.

According to Birmingham, England-based Islamic Relief Worldwide, military spending by G7 members Canada, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States—which wrapped up Friday in Puglia, Italy—rose to \$1.2 trillion last year, the overwhelming bulk of that amount attributable to the U.S.’ \$886.3 billion Pentagon budget. “Too many governments are putting far more resources towards acquiring weapons of war than helping those suffering the deadly impacts of conflict.” That’s a 7.3% increase over 2022 levels, and 62 times what those countries spent on all humanitarian aid in response to wars and disasters.

“From Gaza to Sudan,

Ukraine to Myanmar, we see millions of lives destroyed by war,” Islamic Relief head of global advocacy Shahin Ashraf said in a statement. “The humanitarian needs today are greater than ever before, so it’s scandalous that many wealthy G7 nations are cutting aid while spending more than ever before on weapons.”

It’s not just the G7. According to this year’s Stockholm International Peace Research Institute annual analysis, global military spending increased 6.8% to a record \$2.4 trillion in 2023. “Too many governments are putting far more resources towards acquiring weapons of war than helping those suffering the deadly impacts of conflict,” Ashraf asserted. “More must be invested in eradicating poverty and fostering peace and development, not fueling war and destruction.”

Islamic Relief Worldwide said: While some of the discussions at the G7 summit focus on restricting immigration into rich developed nations, most people displaced by conflict remain in war-torn countries and impoverished neighbouring countries. Af-



Eradicating world hunger in all its forms would require \$31.7 billion more from donors, and Oxfam estimates that the G7’s fair share of debt relief efforts for the world’s poorest countries is equivalent to \$4 billion, for a total of \$35.7 billion. Governments are finding their pockets run deep to fund war today, but when it comes to stopping starvation they are suddenly broke, says Oxfam International’s Head of Inequality Policy Max Lawson

ter more than a year of brutal war, Sudan is now the world’s biggest displacement crisis with over 10 million people—about a quarter of the population—now forced from their homes. The vast majority of people fleeing the violence in Sudan remain in the country, with many receiving aid from local communities, youth groups, and mosques.

“As rich nations increasingly shut their borders and cut aid, in places like Sudan it is heartening to see the generosity of some of the world’s poorest communities taking displaced people into

their homes and sharing their food and water with them,” said Ashraf. “But they need more international support, especially from the wealthiest countries.”

Another analysis published ahead of the G7 summit by Oxfam International revealed that just 3% of the seven countries’ 2023 military expenditures would be enough to “help end world hunger and solve the debt crisis in the Global South.”

With funds equivalent to just 2.9 percent (\$35.7 billion) of their combined annual military spending, Group of Sev-

en (G7) countries could help end world hunger and solve the debt crisis in the Global South, reveals new Oxfam analysis ahead of the G7 Summit in Borgo Egnazia, Italy.

Eradicating world hunger in all its forms would require \$31.7 billion more from donors, and Oxfam estimates that the G7’s fair share of debt relief efforts for the world’s poorest countries is equivalent to \$4 billion, for a total of \$35.7 billion.

“Governments are finding their pockets run deep to fund war today, but when it comes to stopping starvation they are

suddenly broke,” said Oxfam International’s Head of Inequality Policy Max Lawson.

“We’re talking about a small commitment with the potential for huge impact. Imagine a world where no one goes to bed hungry and where countries in the Global South can put money into public schools and hospitals instead of debt interest payments. The G7 not only has the means, but the moral and strategic imperative to make this happen,” said Lawson.

Hunger is rising rapidly in many places, including Somalia, Guatemala, Yemen and Kenya, with devastating consequences. Over 281 million people are now grappling with severe hunger and malnutrition. Gaza is facing one of the most severe hunger crises in the world, caused by Israel’s ongoing onslaught and siege of the enclave. People are already in extreme suffering and dying of starvation and treatable diseases. These deaths will increase at a faster rate unless a ceasefire is forged and full humanitarian access and safe distribution are allowed.

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



# Heatwave crisis

## To mitigate the health impacts of extreme heat, urgent Govt action is essential

This summer has been unlike any other. The relentless heat intensifies with each passing day, and there is no relief in sight. India is currently grappling with one of the most intense heat waves in recent history, with temperatures soaring above 45 degrees Celsius in many regions. This extreme heat is taking a significant toll on the health of the people, straining healthcare systems, and prompting urgent government action to mitigate the crisis. The immediate health impacts of the heatwave are severe and widespread. Hospitals across the country are reporting a surge in cases of heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke. Heat exhaustion, characterised by symptoms like heavy sweating, muscle cramps, and fatigue, can escalate into heatstroke. Heatstroke is a life-threatening condition that occurs when the body's temperature regulation fails, leading to confusion, unconsciousness, and potentially fatal organ damage. Chronic health conditions are also being exacerbated by the extreme heat.



Individuals with cardiovascular diseases are at increased risk of heart attacks and strokes as the body struggles to cool itself, leading to higher heart rates and blood pressure. Respiratory issues are worsening too, with higher levels of air pollutants combining with the heat to create a hazardous environment for those with asthma and other lung conditions. It is time the Indian Govt declared a health emergency and implemented measures aimed at protecting public health and alleviating the impact of the heatwave. The government must actively disseminate information through various media channels, advising people to stay indoors during peak heat hours and drink plenty

of water. The office timings must be changed. Some states like Rajasthan are doing good jo. External coolers have been installed on public buses to mitigate the soaring temperatures. In response to the extreme heat, the Jaipur administration has initiated the use of artificial rain. Large water tankers have been stationed along the roads to spray water on pedestrians, adopting this method to combat the sweltering conditions. The rest of the country could take a cue from Rajasthan. Indeed, healthcare systems are under significant pressure, with hospitals and clinics witnessing a sharp increase in heat-related medical emergencies. To cope with the surge, additional medical staff must be deployed, and temporary medical facilities must be set up in some areas to handle the overflow of patients. What we are witnessing can be attributed to climate change. Urban areas must have more green spaces which help lower temperatures. Climate experts warn that such events are likely to become more frequent and severe in the coming years due to climate change, necessitating comprehensive plans to protect public health. By investing in sustainable infrastructure, enhancing healthcare system capacities, and promoting public awareness, India can build resilience against future heatwaves and safeguard the health of its population in an increasingly warming world.



Ashy prinia bird feeds its babies, in Chikmagalur, Sunday

PTI

# Reimagining success in long-term relationships

## By fostering mutual support, effective communication, and shared goals, couples can build a resilient bond that withstands the test of time

Fairytales and romantic comedies have long shaped our dreams of love, painting idyllic pictures of happily ever after. However, reality tells a different story. Long-term relationships in the real world are far messier and more dynamic than their cinematic counterparts. It is essential to understand that the happily ever after narrative may not be practically achievable. Instead, we must delve into a more nuanced perspective on what constitutes success and fulfillment in lasting partnerships. As we reimagine and reinvent the path to success in long-term relationships, we must remember that unrealistic expectations and ideals can only lead to disillusionment. Facing real-life challenges, including conflict, growth, and change, is an inevitable part of any enduring partnership. In this rapidly changing world, it is prudent to navigate these complexities, offering a more realistic and ultimately more satisfying vision of long-term relationship success. Healthy relationships are dynamic ecosystems, not static stalemates. They thrive on creating an environment



where personal exploration and growth enhance the partnership's foundation. In such relationships, partners continuously evolve as individuals, with their passions, priorities, and goals shifting over time. Strong, lasting relationships develop on the foundation of good communication, creating a safe space for vulnerability where feelings, needs, and desires can be openly expressed. This openness enhances trust and emotional intimacy, leading to a deeper bond between partners. Acceptance is also crucial for lasting fulfillment. People, like relationships, are a beautiful mosaic of strengths and quirks. While individual growth is important, strong relationships benefit from a shared compass. Whether it's a passion for travel or a dream of building a family together, having common core values provides a sense of purpose

and unity. It is also vital to develop skills for healthy conflict resolution, as disagreements are inevitable in a long-term relationship. Maintaining the spark in a deeply satisfying relationship involves creating space for individual pursuits outside of the partnership. This fosters a sense of self and helps in developing a personal identity, which can reignite the spark and reduce co-dependency. For long-term fulfillment, intimacy must go beyond the intense passion of the initial stages. Prioritizing quality time, focusing on physical affection, and creating shared experiences play essential roles in nurturing intimacy. Social media can put intense pressure on couples to maintain a 'Perfect Couple' image, but real life cannot be perfect 365 days a year. The ability to weather storms together as a team is what demonstrates the strength of love. Prioritizing self-love is the foundation for a fulfilling relationship, as partners content with themselves can contribute positively to the partnership. If couples encounter endless challenges, seeking professional

support from a counselor can be invaluable. A successful long-term relationship is not about achieving an unattainable state of bliss but about embracing the journey with its inevitable twists and turns. By focusing on communication, shared goals, and individual interests, partners can build a connection that evolves and deepens over time. The happily ever after may not be a permanent destination, but the journey of building a satisfying partnership can definitely be a deeply enriching experience. The essence of a successful long-term relationship lies in embracing the journey with all its complexities and imperfections. By appreciating each other's unique qualities and navigating conflicts with grace, couples can build a resilient and dynamic partnership. Real love is all about supporting each other through life's challenges and celebrating the moments of joy.

(Author is Dubai-based award-winning Poet, Novelist, Writing Retreat Curator and Founder of TheWriteScene.com. Views expressed are personal)



DEEBA SALIM IRFAN

# Biblical rhetoric stirs controversy

## As Netanyahu faces mounting pressure, his future leadership hangs in the balance amidst growing calls for a more humane approach to the conflict

In politics, symbolism matters. In the biblical-civilisational land of Palestine or Ha'aretz Hamuvtakhat ('Promised Land') which birthed Abrahamic faiths, symbolism is even more significant. Therefore, Israel's most extreme-right Prime Minister ever i.e., Benjamin Netanyahu, upped the incendiary rhetoric by invoking the 'Amalek' narrative to appeal to the basest of instincts. Netanyahu provoked, "You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible" – referencing the Biblical Amalekites who were seen as the archetypal enemies of the Jews. It was suggestive of not sparing any of the so-called modern 'Amaleks' (read, Palestinians). Many were horrified at the attempt to seek justification in holy scriptures, to defend the indefensible. Similarly, many are deeply concerned at the import and usage of the Palestinian expression "From the river to the sea" as the same finds mention in the terror group Hamas's charter, which is construed as the complete extermination of the Israeli State and the Jews. The polemics are deeply symbolic. Israel is today conducting a brazen and no-holds barred retaliation (already accounted for over 35,000 Palestinian deaths) that remains unheeding and unconcerned to global calls for restraint. In some ways, the horrific 7th Oct attack by the terror group Hamas was serendipitously timed for the already unpopular, dictatorial, and tainted Benjamin Netanyahu. Expectedly, after the attack the opposition parties put their differences aside and joined the National Unity Government to stand together in the face of national crisis. It also distracted the attention from Netanyahu's misgovernance till then and offered a much-needed distraction. Netanyahu grabbed the opportunity of the wounded moment to launch an unprecedented revenge that has now got his initial allies like the USA to rethink. After many supportive vetoes in the Security Council, the US was forced to agree with motions that called out the disproportionality of Israeli revenge.



Netanyahu cared two-hoots and persisted with his onslaught, as he gambled that it allowed him time and space to do even more fear mongering, 'othering', and manufactured-outrage that could somehow justify his continuation.

Already, Israel (especially under Netanyahu) has regularly cocked a snook at the United Nations by becoming the most 'sanctioned' nation in the world. It also cares little about international condemnation. But perhaps it has overplayed its trademark belligerence for now, as the reactions from countries that were once clearly pro-Israel (e.g., the USA) or cautiously guarded (e.g. Western European nations) are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their stand, as the global outcry over Israeli excess becomes louder. While typically it wouldn't have mattered to Israel under Netanyahu – but perhaps now it does, given that it could backfire on the public mood in Israel which in any case is tiring of the bloodshed and even more wary of Netanyahu's ability to lead the nation, hereinafter.

Three Western countries i.e., Spain, Ireland and Norway have announced that they will now recognise a Palestinian State (with borders that existed prior to the 1967 war, with Jerusalem as the joint capital). It is a wholly symbolic move



ISRAEL IS TODAY CONDUCTING A BRAZEN AND NO-HOLDS BARRED RETALIATION THAT REMAINS UNHEEDING AND UNCONCERNED TO GLOBAL CALLS FOR RESTRAINT

that comes with the rider that they are willing to change the contours of the sovereign borders after the final negotiated settlement of the 'two-nation' formula, something Netanyahu has opposed tooth-and -nail. It is an attempt to defame Netanyahu's stand and propel the national mood towards ceasefire and rapprochement. Given that these three countries are 'Western' and have ostensibly no axe to grind with Israel (unlike any of the Arab Sheikdoms or Iran) and hence their action is only rooted in genuine concern and morality. A country like Norway, is in any case the beacon of ethics and humanity, in the global comity of nations – hence that bears its own significance with such an action. It could therefore impact and galvanise public opinion within Israel to put internal pressure on Netanyahu. Such a development, if it were to accrue, is possibly Netanyahu's worst nightmare come true. His survival and legitimacy are predicated on the still popular notions of extracting 'justifiable' revenge, and the sudden siding of Western powers (once pro-Israel) towards his nemesis i.e., Palestine, deligitimises those notions. Even its staunchest ally, the United States of America, is facing consequences of affording an initial 'blank cheque' onto Israel with rising protests across its campuses, some-

thing Joe Biden can ill-afford in the election year. Americans have now become mealy-mouthed and wishy-washy in their support towards Netanyahu and have started talking about ceasefire, reiterating the 'two-state' formula as the way forward and talking about direct dialogue with the Palestinians. Whereas the United Kingdom, Malta, Australia, and Slovenia have gone one step further and threatened to follow suit with Norway, Spain, and Ireland in recognising the Palestine State. While all of this is still in the realm of symbolism without any concrete interference in the expanding Israeli footprint and flattening of the Gaza Strip – it will be significant in checkmating Netanyahu's amoral politics and untenable approach in Gaza Strip. Even Netanyahu's instinctive reaction that such moves by one-time allies tantamount to 'rewarding' Hamas will not have too many takers as truly neutral countries like Norway are not known to take sides in conflict one way or the other, or even to 'derecognize' Israel, but only to drive peace with the insistence of the 'two-nation' formula of Oslo Agreement and peace, as the only way forward. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### DEMOCRATIC MATURITY

Madam — Apropos the news story "The robustness of India's political system," published on June 15, this is my response. Civil society thrives on a shared acceptance of rules and practices, whether documented or not. The UK's unwritten constitution exemplifies this, demonstrating that selfregulation and mutual respect can maintain order even amid disagreements. This contrasts with countries with written constitutions that struggle with orderly conduct, often resorting to courts for conflict resolution. Recent Indian parliamentary elections highlight the maturity and fairness of the electoral process. The electorate's peace-fulexercise of political choices reflects their thoughtful judgment. However, cabinet appointments based on the Prime Minister's prerogative, including non-elected members, have sparked debate. While some see this as a deviation from norms, it's crucial to recognise the inherent flexibility in political decision-making. The formation of a 70+ ministerial house underlines the complexity and balance required in such decisions, showcasing the artistry and maturity of the Indian political system. Despite negative press, these decisions should be accepted as part of the evolving political landscape.

Saanvi Jain | Jamshedpur

### COMBATING HEALTH MISINFORMATION

Madam — Apropos the news story "Addressing misinformation about health supplements," published on June 15, this is my response. In today's digital age, people often trust online resources more than fellow human beings. It's common during travel to follow Google Maps rather than ask a local for directions. Even when a local provide correct guidance, we view them with scepticism. For the present generation, Google and WhatsApp have become libraries and teachers. This trend extends to healthcare, where many rely on internet sources rather than visiting a physical doctor. While the internet offers easy access to information, it

## 'Ghar Wapsi' remains a distant dream



Apropos the news story "Kashmiri Pandits see return of spring," published on June 15, this is my response. Reading about the Mela Kheer Bhawani fills me with mixed emotions. The return of spring in Kashmir, symbolised by the

gathering of Kashmiri Pandits at the Ragnya Devi temple, is a poignant reminder of their longing for home. Ashok Kumar's words, "Spring has come back again," capture the bittersweet nature of their visit—celebrating their heritage while yearning for a permanent return. Despite the recent surge in violence, the steadfast faith of these devotees is admirable.

The image of local Muslim families setting up shops and offering support during the festival underscores a spirit of communal harmony that Kashmir desperately needs. However, the reality remains harsh. Successive Governments have failed to secure a lasting solution for the displaced Pandits. The construction of a Yatri Niwas for pilgrims is a small step, but it falls short of addressing the broader issue of resettlement. True 'ghar wapsi' remains a distant dream, overshadowed by security concerns and political inertia.

Aarush Kapoor | Vijayawada

also harbours a significant amount of misinformation, especially concerning health supplements. Misleading advertisements and exaggerated claims about vitamins and dietary supplements can lead to serious health risks. Profit-driven motives overshadow consumer safety, causing individuals to potentially forgo evidence-based treatments. To combat this, promoting scientific literacy and critical thinking among consumers is crucial. Social media platforms must enhance content moderation and regulatory bodies need to enforce strict penalties on manufacturers spreading misinformation. Education and stringent regulations are vital to ensure public health and consumer safety.

Vihaan Sharma | Udaipur

### GOD EMPOWERS GOODNESS

Madam — Apropos the news story "God's varied interest in humanity," published on June 15, this is my response. The BhagavadGeeta suggests that God is deeply invested in us, especially those who seek to live righteously. According to its teachings humans can be categorised

based on their relationship with God and their actions. Devotees, who worship with devotion, are closest to God and achieve liberation. They embody God's teachings and inspire others. Next are God's instruments, like Arjuna, who carry out divine instructions and are rewarded in heaven but must return to earth after their merits are exhausted. Social workers, like King Janaka, perform welfare acts, benefiting humanity and earning God's favour. Good people, characterised by their inherent goodness and philanthropists, who selflessly help others, are also recognised by God. Common people, primarily driven by passion and survival, form the society's backbone. The Geeta emphasises that God empowers those with virtuous intentions, guiding them and ensuring they receive His support, ultimately highlighting the importance of living a life aligned with divine principles

Meera Rao | Raipur

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FIRST COLUMN

IMPORTANCE OF BREAKS IN WORK LIFE

Enhancing productivity through strategic break management



SAKSHI SETHI

Are you someone who is making yourself available 24/7? Or the one who prefers clearing all work mails every now and then over a family get together? Well, if yes, then folks it may be the time to set healthy boundaries at work. Pausing amidst busy days allows the mind and body to recharge and refocus.

According to various studies and research, it has been found that the most productive employees have worked for 52 minutes followed by a 17-minute break. Furthermore the studies also suggest that the mind of an individual is not made for nonstop work. It becomes essential to take regular breaks for sustaining high performance and avoiding mental fatigue. Regardless of individual's job profile, taking regular breaks is a simple yet effective strategy to enhance the overall work performance and well-being. Continuous work without breaks can lead to burnout, which is characterized by exhaustion and decreased productivity. Breaks help to recharge mentally and physically. Regular breaks improve focus and concentration. Stepping away from tasks periodically helps individuals return with a clearer mind and renewed energy.

By integrating breaks into the work routine, an individual can maintain high productivity, reduce stress and improve their physical as well as mental health.

In short, prioritizing breaks is an investment in their long-term career success and personal happiness for it can foster creativity and innovation. It is often believed that when an individual takes a pause from work, the brains become free to wander and explore new ideas and can lead to unexpected solutions



The importance of taking breaks from work has become even more pronounced after the COVID-19 pandemic due to several factors that have altered the way people work and live. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for regular breaks from work to manage increased stress, digital fatigue and blurred work-life boundaries. These breaks are essential for maintaining productivity, creativity, physical health and overall well-being in a rapidly changing work environment.

Incorporating regular breaks such as a short family vacation or if not a vacation, just incorporating microbreaks into the workday or midday exercise breaks can lead to numerous compounding benefits, thereby making it a simple yet effective strategy for maintaining both productivity and well-being. When an individual will take all forms of breaks, they will seek positive emotions of excitement, joy, happiness, inspiration, pride and much more which will ultimately supercharge the cognitive restoration. There is no denying the fact that any individual can get too wrapped up in work stress when work is the only source of identity, validation and confidence they have but it becomes crucial at times for individuals to get in contact with activities that are completely unrelated to their professional life such as an unrelated hobby or a casual conversations about non work topics with friend groups that could often generate laughter, encouragement and much more. As is often said, contentment isn't the same as complacency. All of us should urge ourselves to be content, swim in gratitude and radical acceptance of now in a world that is never going to be happy.

Remember, whether you're a high-powered executive, a teacher, a creative artist, a healthcare worker, a customer service representative or any other employee working, the benefits of taking breaks are universal and can significantly enhance your productivity, mental health and the overall job satisfaction. So try to grant yourself full permission to punctuate work hours with rejuvenating pauses.

*(The writer is an educator; views are personal)*

# The healing symphony of yoga and music

Yoga and music intertwine to foster physical wellbeing and mental relaxation, offering a holistic approach to health and harmony



RAJDEEP PATHAK

June 21 holds a special place in the hearts of millions around the world. It is a day when the ancient science of yoga and the universal language of music unite, creating a symphony of wellness and harmony. "International Yoga Day (IYD)" and "World Music Day (WMD)", both celebrated on this date, offer a unique opportunity to explore the interconnections between physical, mental and emotional well-being. Yoga, with its deep roots in Indian culture and music — an intrinsic element of human expression — converge to create a holistic approach to health and happiness.

Originating in India over 5,000 years ago, Yoga integrates physical postures, breath control, meditation and ethical principles to achieve harmony between mind, body and spirit. The earliest references to yoga are found in the Rigveda and it was further elaborated in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita which defines Yoga as "The journey of the self, through the self, to the self". Further, Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutras', written around 400 CE, systematically outlined the eight limbs of yoga, providing a framework for physical, mental and spiritual practices. Over the centuries, yoga evolved with contributions from various yogis and saints, adapting to cultural changes and diversifying into numerous styles such as Hatha, Ashtanga, Kundalini and so on.

Yoga has transcended cultural and geographic boundaries in contemporary society, gaining global recognition for its myriad health benefits. Scientific research confirms its effectiveness in improving physical fitness, mental clarity and emotional resilience. For instance, studies published in reputable journals like the 'European Journal of Preventive Cardiology' highlights yoga's ability to enhance cardiovascular health by lowering blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body mass index. The 'Journal of Psychiatric Practice', which suggests 'yoga' can complement treatment for major depressive disorder by integrating physical postures and meditation techniques laying emphasis on mindfulness and breath control fosters inner calm and concentration, thus enhancing cognitive function. Also, the 'International Journal of Yoga' enhances emotional regulation and positive effect with practices like guided meditation and pranayama that are particularly effective in cultivating emotional stability and resilience.

Presently, millions of individuals worldwide adopt yoga not merely for physical fitness, but as a comprehensive approach to health and well-being. For instance, in the United States, yoga participation has increased dramatically over the past decade, with a significant percentage of the population practicing yoga regularly. Similarly, in Europe, yoga has been integrated into public health programs and educational curricula, emphasizing its role in promoting overall wellness.

Thus, International Yoga Day has become a global event following its proposal by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the United Nations General Assembly in 2014. The resolution, co-sponsored by 177 nations, emphasizes yoga's holistic benefits for health and well-being. This day aims to enhance global awareness of yoga and encourage its practice, promoting unity and peace. Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, International Yoga Day has gained unprecedented global recognition, empha-



JUNE 21 CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL YOGA DAY AND WORLD MUSIC DAY, UNITING THE ANCIENT PRACTICE OF YOGA AND THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF MUSIC TO PROMOTE HOLISTIC HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND GLOBAL HARMONY

sizing the timeless relevance of yoga in today's world. Simultaneously, World Music Day celebrates the joy of music in all its diverse forms, underscoring its power to heal and unite. Today, celebrations worldwide feature mass yoga sessions, workshops and educational events, highlighting yoga's universal appeal and its capacity to unite people across cultural and national boundaries.

Similarly, "World Music Day", also known as 'Fête de la Musique', is celebrated on June 21, coinciding with International Yoga Day. Originating in France in 1981-82, according to one theory, this day has grown into a global event dedicated to celebrating the universal language of music. It encourages musicians of all levels to perform in public spaces, promoting free and diverse musical expressions. Music's power to unite, heal and uplift resonates deeply, making this celebration an important cultural event.

Music has long been recognised for its therapeutic effects, aiding in emotional healing and mental wellness. Research indicates that music can reduce stress, alleviate pain and improve cognitive function. In the context of yoga, music enhances the practice by creating a serene atmosphere, aiding concentration and facilitating deeper relaxation. The synergy of yoga and music can profoundly influence one's well-being, offering a comprehensive approach to mental and emotional health.

Yogi and mystic, *Sadhguru* once said, "Yoga is not just about bend-

ing and twisting, it's a process of creating a situation where your body and mind are in tune with nature and music," which can be seen during the Shivaratri celebrations which Isha Foundation organizes every year, blending music, meditation and yogic practices. This connection between yoga and music does elevate the practice, enhancing the flow of positive energy and creating a meditative State conducive to inner peace.

As B.K.S. Iyengar, a pioneering yoga guru, had put it that "Yoga, an ancient but perfect science, deals with the evolution of humanity. This evolution includes all aspects of one's being, from bodily health to self-realization." The integration of music into yoga practices helps achieve this holistic development, fostering mental clarity and emotional stability. According to a June 21, 2022 report from TOI, Dr. Pratiksha Gadkari, a physiotherapist, emphasized the benefits of yoga in enhancing joint flexibility and range of motion. She highlighted its role in improving balance through posture and movement, while also noting the calming effects of music on the mind. Dr. Gadkari suggested that starting exercise routines with soothing music can boost energy and promote a fresh start to the day.

The report also quoted Amar Kulkarni, a renowned singer and music teacher who practices yoga regularly. He drew parallels between yoga and music and mentioned how both disciplines can generate internal energy and positive vibes. Kulkarni pointed out

yoga's emphasis on '*Omkar Sadhana*', which resonates with the foundation of Indian classical music in '*Omkar*'. He highlighted how these practices complement each other, enhancing respiratory strength through physical exercise and drawing inspiration from the energy of sound.

However, some 'Yog Acharyas' also believe that in certain styles of yoga, the incorporation of music varies and may not universally be deemed suitable. For instance, within the contexts of 'Vinyasa' and 'Anusara' methodologies, music has gained greater acceptance. Conversely, in Iyengar sessions, the auditory environment typically consists solely of the teacher's guidance. Here, the utilization of music, when employed, hinges upon the instructor's discretion, which may be argued.

In today's fast-paced world, where stress and mental health issues are prevalent and have hit the youth largely, the combination of yoga and music offers a sanctuary for healing and rejuvenation. This synergistic approach can alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety, providing a natural remedy to combat the pressures of modern life. Together, yoga and music intertwine to foster physical well-being and mental relaxation, offering a holistic approach to health and harmony. It's time we start to breathe in with rhythm and experience divinity in our inner peace.

*(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)*

# Mushroom farming empowers women in rural Bihar

Women in Bihar thrive through mushroom cultivation, achieving financial independence and contributing significantly to local economies

Mushrooms are rapidly gaining recognition and popularity in the culinary world for their unique taste and versatility. Dishes such as mushroom curries, pudding, pickles and snacks are becoming favourites on many people's palates. Along with this growing culinary trend, mushroom farming is expanding swiftly across various States in India, including Bihar. According to National Horticulture Board data, Bihar produced approximately 28,000 metric tonnes of mushrooms in 2021-22, accounting for 10.82 per cent of the total mushroom production in India. In the previous year, the State produced a total of 23,000 metric tonnes of mushrooms.



PRIYANKA SAHU

The Bihar Government is providing up to a 50 per cent subsidy to farmers engaged in mushroom cultivation, which is boosting production and increasing farmers' incomes. Under the Integrated Horticulture Mission scheme, these subsidies have also raised farmers' morale, leading to a surge of women farmers entering the field. In many districts of Bihar, women have established a

distinct identity in mushroom production, often surpassing their male counterparts. For the past ten years, Manorama Singh, a farmer, has been recognised for her mushroom production not only in the Vaishali district but across the State. She cultivates mushrooms herself and also trains nearby farmers in mushroom farming. Manorama prepares mushroom seeds and makes the necessary compost. Mushroom farming has emerged as a powerful catalyst for financial independence among many women. Neelam Devi, a 34-year-old farmer from Bandra block in Muzaffarpur district, was married off at a very young age due to her family's poor

financial condition. She always aspired to be self-reliant. One day, she learned about a mushroom farming training programme offered by an NGO called 'Atma'. She joined the programme, received training and began cultivating mushrooms in a room of her house. Despite facing disapproval and opposition from her in-laws, Neelam remained steadfast and determined to pursue her goal. Gradually, she began to achieve success and earn significant profits from mushroom production. Today, she has become so proficient in this field that she is teaching 200 women how to cultivate mushrooms, supporting them in their journey to become self-reliant.

For her commendable work, Neelam has been honoured as a successful farmer by Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa. Her reputation as a mushroom trainer and producer has spread far and wide. Those who once opposed her, including her in-laws, now take pride in her determination and passion. Like Neelam, dozens of women farmers in Muzaffarpur are creating a new identity through mushroom farming and earning substantial profits annually.

45-year-old farmer Lal Bahadur from Kothiya village in Kanti block, about 17 km from the Muzaffarpur district headquarters, believes that both women and men find mushroom cultivation bene-

ficial because it is easy to grow. It can be cultivated easily at home, with low costs and high profits. The mushroom crop is ready in just 25 days. He shared that initially, he too lacked knowledge about mushroom farming. Then, in 2012, he met Dr. Daya Ram, a professor at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa. After training with him in mushroom farming, Lal Bahadur began raising awareness about mushroom cultivation among farmers in the surrounding villages. He explained that initially, due to a lack of proper information, people did not support him. They believed that mushrooms were wild plants, known in the village as 'gobar chhata', some of which are

highly poisonous. After much explanation, people began to understand the difference between edible mushrooms and gobar chhata. Once this distinction was clear, the villagers started mushroom farming with him and women actively participated. Lakshmi Devi, another farmer from the same village, shared how Lal Bahadur's understanding of mushroom farming opened a new avenue for them in farming. "Before we knew about mushroom farming, we would go to the city for labour work, but even then, it was difficult to make ends meet. Since we started mushroom cultivation, our household situation has improved."

In recent years, the demand for mushrooms has increased

significantly across various districts in Bihar. From hotels and restaurants to wedding functions and feasts, mushroom dishes are becoming a status symbol. Beyond the capital city of Patna, mushrooms are now easily available in the vegetable markets along the roadsides in cities like Hajipur, Samastipur and Muzaffarpur. As the mushroom market continues to grow, so does its demand. This increasing demand has opened new doors for farmers, allowing them to benefit from this trend. Not only are they gaining financially, but these women farmers are also contributing to strengthening Bihar's economy.

*(The author is a rural writer from Muzaffarpur, Bihar. Charkha Features;)*



## Monsoon Delay

India is facing a potentially severe agricultural and humanitarian crisis due to the delayed arrival of the monsoon. This delay threatens to prolong an already oppressive heat wave in northern and central regions, impacting millions of lives and jeopardising critical crop cycles. As one of the world's largest producers of rice, wheat, and sugar, the stakes for India could not be higher. The monsoon, often described as the lifeblood of India's nearly \$3.5-trillion economy, is indispensable for agricultural productivity. Typically, the monsoon begins in early June in the southern regions and spreads nationwide by early July. This year, however, after a promising early arrival in the western state of Maharashtra, the monsoon's advance has stalled. This delay is not just a matter of inconvenience; it is a harbinger of potentially devastating consequences. In states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, and Haryana, the impact is immediate and severe. These areas, known for their extensive grain production, are experiencing temperatures between 42 and 46 degrees Celsius, significantly above normal. This heat wave, exacerbated by the delayed rains, threatens not only the health and well-being of residents but also the viability of upcoming harvests. Farmers in these regions rely heavily on timely monsoon rains for irrigation, as nearly half of India's farmland lacks sufficient irrigation infrastructure. The repercussions of this delay extend beyond agriculture. Prolonged heat waves can lead to acute water shortages, affecting both urban and rural populations. New Delhi, for instance, recently recorded its highest-ever temperature, a staggering 49.9 degrees Celsius, amid a severe water crisis. Such extreme conditions strain public health systems, increase energy demands for cooling, and exacerbate social inequalities as vulnerable populations bear the brunt of the heat. Moreover, this situation underscores a broader, more troubling trend: the increasing unpredictability and severity of weather patterns due to climate change. Scientists have long warned that human-driven climate change will lead to more frequent and intense heat waves, altered rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events. The current monsoon delay and associated heat wave are stark reminders of these warnings becoming reality.

India's predicament is a call to action on multiple fronts. First, there is an urgent need for investment in agricultural infrastructure, particularly in expanding irrigation facilities to reduce dependence on monsoon rains. Secondly, public health systems must be bolstered to better respond to heat-related illnesses and water scarcity. Thirdly, it is imperative that India, along with the global community, intensifies efforts to combat climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and implementing sustainable practices. In the short term, immediate measures are necessary to support affected farmers and communities. This includes financial assistance, access to water resources, and emergency health services. However, these are stopgap solutions. The long-term strategy must focus on building resilience against climate variability and safeguarding the livelihoods of millions who depend on predictable weather patterns. As we navigate these challenges, it is crucial to recognise that our actions today will shape the climate and living conditions of tomorrow.

## Challenges in SA

The recent political shift in South Africa is nothing short of historic. The African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) forming a government of national unity marks a profound change in the nation's political landscape. This collaboration between two former antagonists, one rooted in the struggle against apartheid and the other perceived as a pro-business advocate, signals a new chapter in South African democracy. The ANC's loss of parliamentary majority in the May 29 election and its subsequent alliance with the DA is a testament to the evolving political dynamics in South Africa. For decades, the ANC's dominance seemed unassailable, as a symbol of the post-apartheid era. However, unresolved problems such as poverty, inequality, corruption, and infrastructural decay have eroded its support base, prompting voters to seek alternatives. The DA's inclusion in the national government is noteworthy. Historically viewed by many as the party of the privileged white minority, the DA has struggled to shake off this perception despite its efforts to present a broader, more inclusive platform. Its emphasis on free-market policies and good governance is attractive to investors and those frustrated by the ANC's economic mismanagement. Yet, convincing a diverse electorate that it represents their aspirations remains a challenge. This coalition is a bold experiment in bridging South Africa's deep-seated racial and economic divides. DA leader John Steenhuisen's declaration that his party will co-govern in a spirit of unity and collaboration reflects a desire to move beyond historical antagonisms. The success of this government will hinge on its ability to foster genuine cooperation and deliver tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary South Africans. President Cyril Ramaphosa's expected re-election, supported by this new coalition, offers hope for stability and reform. Mr Ramaphosa, a seasoned politician with a pragmatic approach, has the potential to harness this unprecedented alliance to drive much-needed changes. His administration must now prioritise economic recovery, job creation, and infrastructure development while maintaining fiscal responsibility. The inclusion of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Patriotic Alliance adds another layer of complexity to this unity government. The IFP's Zulu base and the Patriotic Alliance's support from the coloured community provide a more representative coalition, potentially smoothing over some of the frictions between the ANC and DA bases. This inclusive approach could help mitigate fears and foster broader acceptance of the coalition's legitimacy.

However, challenges loom large. The coalition must navigate the treacherous waters of political compromise, ensuring that policy differences do not lead to paralysis. They must also address the grievances of the Economic Freedom Fighters and the uMkhonto we Sizwe, who feel sidelined and have accused the election process of fraud. Maintaining social cohesion and preventing further political fragmentation will be critical. This government of national unity offers a unique opportunity to reshape South Africa's future. It embodies a hopeful vision of a country where political adversaries can come together for the common good.

# Renewed Demands

Even if Special Category status is awarded to Andhra and Bihar now, it is unlikely to solve their problems. More than finances, the problem of the states is their capacity to utilise the funds. Even now, almost a quarter of their budgetary allocation remains unutilised and had to be surrendered. Lack of institutional capacity continues to plague them, like many other Indian states, and unless this aspect is addressed, additional funds would only lead to additional waste. Further, the flaws of the existing scheme need to be corrected



Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar are both indispensable to the NDA Government. They have now revived their old demands of special category status for their states with renewed vigour, which they had so passionately demanded in the past. Andhra Pradesh was promised this status on the floor of Parliament by no less than the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when Telangana was carved out of it to include two of its most prosperous districts ~ Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy. These districts earned the bulk of revenues for the undivided state. Nitish Kumar has raised this demand time and again and has even prepared a special paper on this, highlighting why Bihar absolutely needed this status to address its backwardness.

Eleven economically backward hill states of India, including eight North-eastern states and the three Himalayan states including J&K, now an UT, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, comprised the group of "Special Category States". These states, created at different points of time in the history of independent India, suffered from many drawbacks arising from their remoteness and geographical isolation, lack of resources, capital and infrastructure, economic backwardness being their only inheritance from the past. The Centre sought to address this asymmetry, partly through Constitutional provisions under Schedules V and VI, and partly through the mechanism of awarding them 'special category status' which was designed to solve the problems of their economic backwardness by giving them liberal access to Central funds. This was rather an unimaginative solution that relied solely upon the use of funds, ignoring the inherent structural weaknesses and capacity constraints of these states. Like many of our national policies regarding backward areas, this too was an ad-hoc solution, applied without insight into the nature of their problems.

States were accorded this status by the National Development Council based on Planning Commission recommendations on fulfilling an arbitrarily defined set of criteria that included: (1) hilly and difficult terrain, (2) low population density and/or sizeable share of tribal population, (3) strategic location along borders with neighbouring countries, (4) economic and infrastructural backwardness, and (5) non-viable nature of state finances. Once the status is awarded, the specific assistance pattern follows to the state in perpetuity. There is no stipulation as to what was intended to be achieved by such a sta-

tus, or the time period within which this is to be achieved. The status once bestowed upon a state carries only rewards but no obligation on the part of the state. The status is also neutral to the scale of backwardness and limited only to the funding pattern, without any consideration of the state's capacity to utilise these funds. The mechanism concerns only the transfer of funds without any accountability ~ certainly not an ideal mechanism for upliftment and empowerment.

It is not that the mechanism failed to deliver altogether. While some of the special category states gradually developed the necessary capacity over time and could use the Central resources to their advantage, others could not do so for various reasons, including protracted militant insurgency and political instability combined with misgovernance. The unabated flow of funds, unlinked to any performance expectations, produced an overwhelming dependence on the Centre and led to complacency, an attitude that culminated in just seeking more and more funds from the Centre as a magic solution to any problem faced by these states.

During the Planning era, the Central plan assistance was provided to the states under the Gadgil formula. Under this, 30 per cent of the total plan assistance was earmarked for the special category states which were then divided among them. This kitty of 30 per cent remained constant even though the number of such states went up from three in 1969 to 11 in 2001. Thirty per cent of the Centre's gross budgetary support for plan expenditure went to the special category states on the basis of 90 per cent grants and 10 per cent loans. The 12th Finance Commission recommendations made the Centre give only grants, and left it to the states to raise loans from the market as and when they needed. The 90 per cent grants plus 10 per cent loans formula for special-category states is now restricted only to centrally-sponsored schemes (CSS)

As further incentives to attract industries, excise duty concessions are provided to companies for setting up new industrial units within these states, besides income tax holidays for 10 years for setting up new industries, extendable further for five years upon expansion. They also get certain subsidies on capital investment, transport, interest,

insurance, etc. However, in the absence of market, infrastructure and local resources, these incentives have hardly led to industrialisation of these states. But because of these benefits, there have been persistent demands from Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh and even Goa for this status. Such claims had found favour in the era of coalition politics and wafer-thin majorities in Parliament. Initially around 70-80 per cent of the plan transfers were covered under the Gadgil formula. But with the gradual unchecked proliferation of CSS and appropriation of most plan resources by them through direct off-budget transfers, the Gadgil transfers progressively went on shrinking till they shrank to the point of insignificance, to only 9 per cent of the total plan transfers. It was a double whammy for the special category states, for while their number had proliferated from three in 1969 to 11 in 2001, their share of 30 per cent of the total plan assistance had not increased. It worsened their resource position substantially. Direct transfers were abolished in 2013-14. In 2013, CSS were also restructured into six "core of

the core" schemes and 22 "core" schemes, which have since been proliferating. In the budget for 2015-16, the NCA was abolished, and with effect from 2017-18, the distinction between plan and non-plan expenditure itself was removed, making the Gadgil formula a thing of the past. Questions have since been raised about its fallout on some of the earlier federal fiscal arrangements inherited from the planning days like plan transfers to states including the special category ones.

The Fourteenth Finance Commission report submitted in December 2014 did not make any specific recommendations for them. The report gives an impression that the special category status has de facto been abolished. "After the 14th Finance Commission recommendations, the era of special category status to states has ended," then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had said in 2015 in response to persistent demands of Nitish Kumar for Bihar's special category status, "I don't want to go into history. The 14th Finance Commission is a constitutional body. The state would get what has been recommended for it. And, we are also giving additional money to Bihar," giving an impression that

henceforth, no special benefits were available under the Special Category Status.

However, it must be remembered that finance commission grants till then were only non-plan grants, while the special category states benefited mostly from plan grants. The quantum of finance commission grants did not make much difference to their resources, while the devolution of taxes from the divisible pool was formula-based, in which factors like population, area, fiscal discipline or tax effort mostly went against them. These states benefited primarily from the plan grants, though they received some non-plan grants for bridging their revenue deficits, which still continues. But the non-plan grants have been rather insignificant compared to the plan grants. To evaluate whether the special category status is still active we have to consider two things - whether there has been a curtailment of resources of these states and whether they have managed to retain their relative advantages vis-à-vis other states. As I have shown elsewhere, the reality is that the benefits enjoyed by these states remain well protected.

Even if this status is awarded to Andhra and Bihar now, it is unlikely to solve their problems. More than finances, the problem of the states is their capacity to utilise the funds. Even now, almost a quarter of their budgetary allocations remain unutilised and had to be surrendered. Lack of institutional capacity continues to plague them, like many other Indian states, and unless this aspect is addressed, additional funds would only lead to additional waste. Further the flaws of the existing scheme need to be corrected, like the absence of any accountability and monitoring mechanism or any performance expectation from the states in a time bound manner. Further, given the emphasis that is increasingly being placed upon good governance, accountability and transparency, equity and efficiency, the purpose of development is likely to be served better if the status is reviewed periodically and a target-based, time-bound approach is adopted for assistance. Suitable incentives for better performance and disincentives for sub-optimal performance should also be built into the system for it to work efficiently. A target-oriented formula-based approach for assistance instils accountability, improves performance, removes complacency and helps a state move rapidly forward. It also makes the field more level for all players, with open entry and exit to the special status for all states in need of assistance.

## Prepare for earthquakes

A magnitude 4.8 earthquake struck near Buan, North Jeolla Province, early Wednesday, sending off alerts across the nation and causing minor property damage. Although no injuries were reported, the strong quake highlighted the need for tight, systematic preparations against tremor-related disasters. The temblor struck near the southwestern county at 8:26 a.m. at an estimated depth of 8 kilometers, according to the Korea Meteorological Administration. Firefighter and Interior Ministry officials said there were hundreds of reports stemming from the tremors.

The quake was the most powerful one reported in South Korea and its surrounding waters this year, the KMA said, adding that it marked the first earthquake over magnitude 4 to strike within an 80-km radius of where the quake hit. It is also notable that the quake occurred in the North Jeolla Province, a region where no major tremors have been reported in recent years. But experts have long warned that the Korean Peninsula is not completely safe from quakes, including such supposedly safe regions, and more safety measures are needed.

Quakes of 4.5 magnitude or greater have only rarely been reported in Korea. In May last year, a 4.5 magnitude quake struck in waters off Donghae, Gangwon Province. In February 2018, a quake of magnitude 4.6 struck in waters off Pohang, North Gyeongsang Province. In November 2017, a temblor of 5.4 struck near Pohang, mark-

### The Korea Herald

ing the second strongest earthquake in decades. President Yoon Suk Yeol, while on a state visit to Kazakhstan, asked the government to conduct a swift damage assessment and safety check for the earthquake near Buan, after being briefed about the incident, the presidential office said Wednesday.

Also on Wednesday, Prime Minister Han Duck-soon instructed the Interior Ministry to take thorough measures and manage the overall situation in the wake of the quake. Han called on public officials to provide safety guidelines to the public in high-risk areas regarding aftershocks, while asking related ministries to check power and communication networks.

Yoon and Han placed timely instructions to follow up on the rare quake, but some fundamental issues remain unresolved. Fast postquake measures led by the government are of course needed to minimize damage and help those injured. But Korea, hit by fewer and relatively weaker quakes compared with other neighboring countries, especially Japan, is known to be ill-prepared for massive earthquakes.

According to data from the People Power Party early last year, only 13.4 percent of buildings and houses across the nation have earthquake-resistant designs. Under the current law, buildings whose features meet certain standards must be built with mandatory seismic-resistant design, but the regulation has not been strictly enforced.

Alarmed by more quakes in neighboring countries, the Korean government belatedly recognized the potentially massive danger of powerful earthquakes.

In January this year, for instance, the government said it would boost the ratio of public facilities with earthquake-proof features to 87 percent from the current 76.5 percent and ultimately raise the ratio to 100 percent by 2035, a measure announced after a fatal temblor hit Japan on the first day of 2024. The Interior Ministry then said it would provide administrative incentives when owners of private buildings want to reinforce their property to better withstand earthquakes.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government also announced in January it would complete seismic reinforcement of all public buildings by 2030 in response to growing public concerns about the nation's poor earthquake preparedness.

## Patnaik's loss

SIR, This is with reference to the editorial "Political Shift" (13 June). If we are talking about the vote share, we can see the downfall of the vote percentage of BJD in Lok Sabha in respect of the Assembly election. An intriguing image is also painted by the vote percentages in connection to the number of seats obtained. Even though the BJD received 40.22 per cent of the vote in the Assembly compared to the BJP's 40.07 per cent, it nevertheless lost by 27 seats to the saffron party. With a vote share of 45.34 per cent, the BJP secured 20 seats in the Lok Sabha, while the BJD, with 37.53 per cent, was unable to get any seats. With a mere 12.52 per cent of the vote, the Congress was able to hold onto the Koraput seat that

it had gained in the previous election.

Despite Patnaik's widespread appeal and the effectiveness of his social programmes, the BJD's perceived successor, V.K. Pandian, an ex-IAS official from Tamil Nadu who left the service in November 2023, appeared to be the weakest link in the party's armour. In addition to causing a stir in the political community, Pandian's quick ascent through the ranks of the party seemed to unnerve people of the State. It was observed that an ailing Patnaik had progressively ceded territory, and subsequently control of the party, to Pandian, who was thought to be speaking for the Chief Minister.

By remaining silent about the increasing rumors that Pandian would succeed him, Patnaik

### MARKET REBOUND

SIR, Apropos today's report "Market surge led by heavy weights," in The Statesman, after riding a roller-coaster for a week, the Indian stock market seems to have found firm footing. When the BJP's campaign ended way below the much-touted '400 paar' target, forcing the party to quickly sew up a coalition government, the stock indices went on a downward spiral.

Stability, probably the most comforting factor for stock markets, spurred the indices to a new peak. Stock analysts are exuding confidence that ministers will hit the ground running without disturbing the status quo, and continue with their reform agenda without any tinkering. Many believe that the first few months of the Modi 3.0 government will be crucial for several sectors, as they are likely to see a reiteration of the existing policy framework as well as new proposals.

The market is now eagerly awaiting the 100-day action plan. The government has been drawing up an agenda in line with proposals announced ahead of the elections as well as Viksit Bharat. The market is waiting to analyse how the agenda would impact a number of sectors. Whatever be the change this time, a gradual reduction in retail inflation and faster growth will remain the two most important triggers for the markets in the longer run.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru, 13 June.

handed the BJP the justification it needed to dispel his seeming invincibility: "Odia asmita" (Odia pride). In addition to Pandian's ascent within the BJD, the party's

electoral collapse was exacerbated by the absence of a reliable second-rung leader. As all decisions were handled by Patnaik, the few leaders who were pro-

moted to prominent roles in recent years were not allowed to administer the party.

Yours, etc., Abhijit Chakraborty, Bally, 13 June.



# Children must be saved from online addictions

RISHABH MISHRA

In today's technological era, our system may boast about the ever-increasing number of mobile phone owners, and claim that in the 21st century we are providing everything at our fingertips. But perhaps by being engrossed in technology, we are forgetting that we are destroying our heritage.

At the same time, children and youth are being misled. This is because, at an age when they ought to be playing field games, listening to stories of brave men and reading books, our young children have fallen into the clutches of online games. In today's materialistic era, parents are short of time, due to which they give mobile phones to children at an age when they should have toys in their hands. This is really unfortunate.

In fact, the increasing inclination of youth and children towards online games is not just a problem for India. In the last few years, a different kind of craze for this has developed among children all over the world. This is now taking the form of addiction. Many studies show that this addiction is having a negative impact on the physical and mental health of children. Despite this, the situation in India is not hidden from us. In our country, even a two-year-old child is given a mobile phone. And he grows up watching the mobile with great interest.

It is noteworthy that in 2017, more than 130 children died in Russia due to online games. So far, about 100 children have embraced death in India. Children become so addicted to online games that they forget eating and drinking, and remain engaged in them day and night. Their sleep is affected and they become irritable.

According to another source, currently about thirty crore people play online games in India. And by 2028,



this number is likely to increase to 55 crore. From this it can be estimated that a large population of India is busy playing online games.

At present, some estimates suggest the online gaming market in the country is between Rs 7,000 to 10,000 crore, and is expected to reach Rs 29,000 crore soon. According to a FICCI report, an increase of 26 per cent has been recorded in "transaction-based" games. These figures point to the magnitude of the situation.

But our system does not seem to be unduly bothered, nor do families seem to care enough to see what children and young adults are doing on their mobile phones. A child can fall

easy prey to online game addiction; thus it is the responsibility of parents, guardians and society to ensure this does not happen.

It is noteworthy that the World Health Organization has identified addiction to playing online games (which has been named gaming disorder) as a mental illness. According to the WHO, online gaming can be as addictive as 'cocaine' and 'gambling'. This problem has become even more acute after the period of Covid-19.

During the Covid-19 period, children's participation in online gaming increased by 41 per cent. Also, the addiction to online games has been seen more among the children of nuclear families. It is also a bitter truth

that children are becoming aggressive and violent by getting involved in online games. Sometimes the game also pushes them towards depression. Many have turned obese. In the past years, many children lost their lives in India due to games like 'Blue Whale'. It is a worrying situation that online games are running rampant in our country without proper regulations.

When a child plays mobile and computer games continuously for hours, it has serious side effects on his eyes and other body parts. Curbing online games is the need of the hour and should be taken seriously. While the ubiquitous mobile has become a critical and sometimes indispensable part of our lives, it has also caused

great harm.

There are some children who get addicted to the phone from childhood. Many times parents also offer the lure of a mobile phone because they are busy, or sometimes only to feed a child. This soon becomes an addiction and adversely affects the child's development. Children who are exposed to mobile screens at an early age and who spend more time on mobile devices have a higher risk of developing behavioral problems like depression and anxiety. It is time to pause and reflect.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Mechanical Engineering Department, Kanpur Institute of Technology.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

## Earnest life, fervent dreams

Agatha Christie mentioned one of the unusual advantages of aging. She married an archeologist, Max Mallowan, and said that the older she got "the more interested" he grew in her. I do not have a statistician as my spouse, but the older I get the better gets to be the estimate of my remaining days.

The average Indian's longevity is 70 years and that of an American is 80 years. Since I have lived roughly half my life in India and half in the US, one may estimate my longevity to be 75. You can increase it a little, given my place in the income scale, and decrease it a little given the onslaught of the pandemic. As I have gone past that milestone, I feel like an illicit tenant who is staying on without paying the rent.

No doubt the end point is nearing. It is perhaps worth a thought or two about what I should do with the scant allowance left to me.

A friend suggested that I might compile the things I would like to do but hadn't done yet. It conjures the idea of making what has the uncouth name of a 'bucket list.' Derived probably from the ugly phrase "to kick the bucket" for dying, it is an inventory of things to do before one's end.

Frankly, I couldn't find in my mind anything I have long craved to do. If I were allowed 15 minutes before my execution, I would probably just ask to take a walk around the lake near my home. I think a look at



Illustration by: Debabrata Chakrabarty

its shiny ripples would, as Johnson said, 'concentrate my mind.' I do not have a longing to see the fjords of Norway or soar in the hot-air balloon festival fifty miles from my town. I am quite content to have seen the pyramids and the Libyan desert.

If I think of the last minutes, I imagine a scene – doubtless prompted by a myriad of sentimental Hollywood movies – of lying in bed surrounded by my daughters and their children, muttering some inane pro-

fundity as they listen, sad and solemn, to my whizzing. It is likelier that my daughters would be stuck in traffic coming from their downtown office and their children, quite appropriately, prefer to gambol in a park than near grandpa's dismal bed.

I would prefer my daughters and their daughters too to have fun rather than assemble for a gloomy event, just the kind of choice I have always made. If I were in bed, about to breathe my last, with or without the enlivening

company of my offspring, I would rather someone play Mozart's Symphony 40 in G minor, that thrilling and uplifting piece that I have always loved, rather than something solemn like Verdi's requiem.

When talking of a bucket list, I find people talk of places they have not visited. They speak of romantic places like Florence and Venice in Italy or adventurous places like Pamukkale and Capadoccia in Turkey. I might be a tad unromantic or deficient in a sense of adventure, but these prospects would leave me apathetic in my waning days. Perhaps I have traveled too much, seen too many things. In my last hours if I long to see anything it will be the familiar sights of the Lodi Gardens where I walked many a morning or the trails of Virginia where I loved running as the birds sang their evening Retreat. I will be serenely content to revisit familiar grounds, touch familiar trees and plants, perhaps see a few familiar faces.

Also in people's bucket list is a longing to gather experiences they have missed. Like a parachute jump from a plane or a bungee jump from a bridge. Going up a mountain, like the Annapurna circuit or hopping into a lake, like the Baikal in southern Siberia. I can't say I have swum the English Channel or taken the SpaceX rocket to spaces beyond our sight, but I don't feel any craving for out-of-the-world experiences. I encounter stunning experiences every other day in

the most mundane of places, in very prosaic circumstances. I see ordinary people doing extraordinary deeds, common men performing uncommon duties, simple women in their simple rounds performing heroic, staggering tasks. Their stories are what I want to hear, their history is what I want to know and talk about.

Why do I need a list of new places or new experiences? Every day is a day of excitement, every path is a path of adventure, every encounter is an encounter of endless drama and potential, every experience is an experience of myriad facets and million consequences. I can stand on a street corner and see a rainbow every day; I can sip coffee in a bistro and absorb the colorful cavalcade of the human race. I can be born every minute, live every second, soar beyond the limits of fantasy.

No, I don't need a bucket list. Like everybody else, I want to go in good shape and in good mind, in fair calm and high spirit, watching the day's light fade slowly, my strength ebb gently, my stray thoughts cease flapping its wings and land quietly, peacefully, contentedly on the winding of a life that cared for old friends, dared for new ideas, hoped for brighter days, shunned all unkind takes, loved all loving creatures, cherished men and women who crossed its byways and enhanced every one of its fervent dreams.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)



100 YEARS AGO

### OCCASIONAL NOTE

Old Calcutta ites are falling thick as autumnal leaves. One of the latest departures' to be chronicled is that of Mr. D. F. Mackenzie who twenty years ago was the resident head of the firm of McNeill and Company. Mr Mackenzie came out to Calcutta in the 'seventies of last century, and retired from India after putting in nearly thirty-five years' service. He was a brother of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who became Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, and their father was a Scottish dissenting minister in Birmingham. Both brothers were strikingly handsome men, and Donald, the younger, was possessed not only of the pawky humour which was his national birthright, but of a mimetic power seldom seen off the stage. When Sir Surendranath Banerjea and twenty seven other Indians resigned the Corporation as a protest against Sir A. Mackenzie's Municipal Bill, the Lieutenant-Governor's brother headed a small group of British merchants who joined the municipal body in order to keep it alive and did so.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### “PATRIOTIC” PSYCHOLOGY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE “STATESMAN.”

SIR,--Your comments on the patriotism of Gopinath Saha betray a lack of appreciation of the true psychology of the thing. Gopinath is a patriot be-cause (1) he killed an Englishman; (2) he intended to kill an official; (3) his attempt to escape arrest was prompted by the noble desire that he might live to kill again; (4) he shot in the pursuit with the idea of ridding the country of traitors and (5) his plea of insanity, though false, was prompted by the same noble desire of being of further service. His patriotism is hallowed by his subsequent conduct in court when he delivered his message from the dock. It must now be conceded that the killing of Englishmen generally and of officials in particular is the highest form of patriotism. Gopinath therefore was a great patriot-certainly greater than Mr. C. R. Das, who does not shoot with firearms and runs little risk. He shoots by persuasion and gentle force, and his victims have only themselves to thank if they find themselves in jail.

ORTHODOX, Hindu  
june 7

### THE SERAJGUNGE RESOLUTION

TO THE EDITOR OF THE “STATESMAN.”

SIR,—Allow me to appeal through the medium of your paper in the name of humanity, to the Bengalee assistants (Hindus and Mahomedans) of the British mercantile firms of Bengal who are neither Congressmen nor politicians, neither Extremists nor Moderates, to come forward and protest very strongly against the condemnable resolution passed by the Serajgunge conference in a manner supporting the murder of Mr. Ernest Day.

I believe we, as a community, have every right to express our attitude-and who would not support the European Association when it said that “the Swa-raj party and its responsible leaders have definitely issued an incitement to a campaign of murder and anarchical measures for the attainment of their political objects.” Is it not obvious that the attitude expressed by the Bengal Provincial Congress is purely hostile, inasmuch as it is prejudicial to the religious sentiments of the Bengalees?

Let the Bengal Congressmen worship the “heroes” of Sankaritollla and Day murder fame. WE will not, we cannot have any sympathy with a murderer and a coward, and in the name of humanity and religion, Gopinath cannot have any place in our peaceful and innocent community, although we pity his poor soul.

A leading extremist paper in its leader said “Hero-worship is ingrained in the Bengalee, who is, if anything, emotional.” Quite so, but the question is if any sane man may rightly call Gopinath a hero. Inferences have been drawn pointing to an admiration for Kanai Dutt the revolutionary, who murdered Noren Gosain the approver in cold blood. May I inquire if the admiration was for the murder of Noren Gosain or for something else? Will his so-called admirers give me a clear answer to my query?

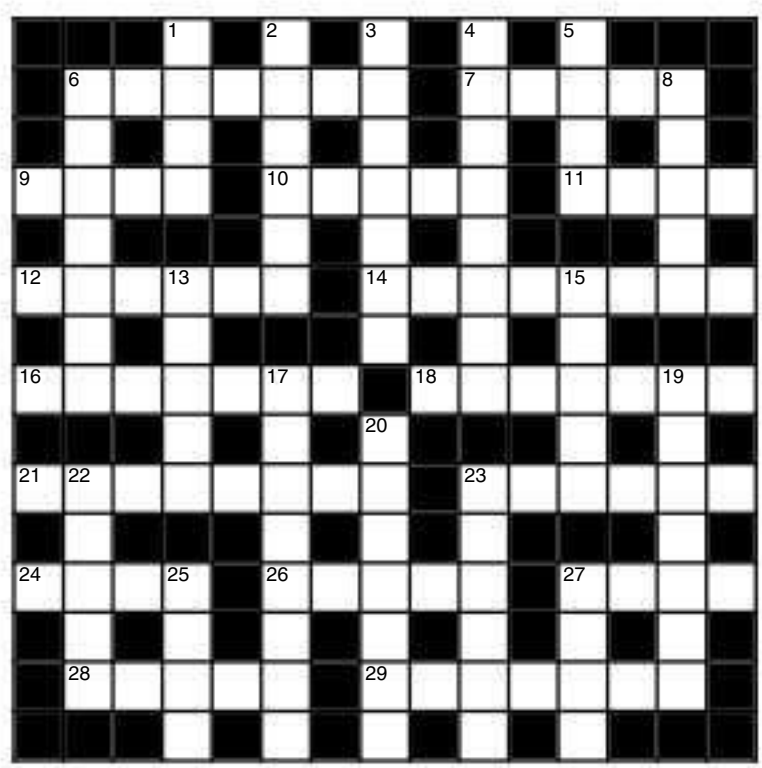
It is simply atrocious to keep ourselves aloof any longer, and we must come forward to show that we are a community, which when properly formed and I believe we have a right to ask the European Association to help us in this important matter) will represent an important class which cannot be ignored.

Let us make our employers, with whom we associate 365 days of the year, understand that we are heart and soul with them, and poor although we might be, we are rich enough in the possession of a grateful heart.

-Yours, etc.,

CROSSWORD

NO-292813



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

H O P S C O T C H P R O O F  
T H E R M A L L I G A T O R  
C O P D Y O A P C  
H O U S E G U E S T E P I E  
R N C E A C H E F  
R E S I D U E E A R A C H E  
E O I T A R E E  
H I R S U T E L I N S E E D  
E M R I K S  
A P E D C R O P C I R C L E  
R T R A S N E M  
S C H M A L T Z Y G U N G E  
E E C I N U D R  
D I E R R Y C I A C I O P H O N Y

#### ACROSS

- 6 Novelist introducing last letters from Fanny Brawne in Time Out (4-3)  
7 Mad? As mad as Fanny, perhaps (5)  
9 Clues note Psyche and suchlike, for starters (4)  
10 Bit of magic from outside right, said Mark Wright (5)  
11 Writers putting Nightingale in Berkeley Square originally (4)  
12 13 week period of not quite mutual admiration finally shattered (6)

#### DOWN

- 14 Surveillance job with second coffee option provides clue to theme (5-3)  
16 Free guitarist? Being given one for nothing gets rude rejection (4-3)  
18 Stick, ultimately one used in running slope (3,4)  
21 Deny struggling with Melancholy and Indolence initially, performing as a handsome youth (8)  
23 Chain or whip, when not extremely penal (6)  
24 Was happy with new pen? (4)

#### ACROSS

- 26 Near neighbour of Douglas's, about to get some 6A (5)  
27 Russian city cloaked in returning thick smog (4)  
28 John recited with some force, that's clear (5)  
29 Playwright unknown in China? (7)

#### DOWN

- 1 Fans missing "dark beer" drinks (4)  
2 Poet briefly working as comedian (6)  
3 Good person briefly supporting a Lake Poet's most lofty expression (7)

#### ACROSS

- 4 Linklater's content to respond cheekily (4,4)  
5 Win audience with small number that we hear might be Grecian (4)  
6 Spurs game I must lampoon, ironically at first (7)  
8 Setter blocked in by bus before lunchtime, cycling in Romanian city (5)  
13 Retract Nancy's article, for instance (5)  
15 Former postman, one now living abroad (5)

#### DOWN

- 17 Suddenly gets angry, obscure fish appearing in reverse (8)  
19 Male or female Lydians reimaged by poet (7)  
20 Making new sort of punk, met Shaggy! (7)  
22 Post from one we love (5)  
23 Heads are those of Cupid and Psyche, inscribed "To Apollo" (6)  
25 Part of 16 needing some bottle – and cheek! (4)  
27 Bits of old verse periodically appearing as part of today's theme (4)

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





## Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

## Terror casts shadow over polls

A spurt in terror attacks in Jammu & Kashmir — claiming ten lives within a week — has not only kept the security forces on their toes but also raised concerns in political circles over the deteriorating situation in the region. Terrorist handlers from across the border appear to have become emboldened with the way they have been able to execute the attacks at will. Terrorists have struck in Reasi, Kathua and Doda districts within a week, killing nine civilians and a CRPF jawan. In Jammu's Reasi, gunmen opened fire on a private bus carrying pilgrims who were on their way to the Mata Vaishno Devi shrine. This attack coincided with the swearing-in ceremony of the new government at the Centre. The worrisome security situation poses a big challenge to the NDA 3.0. It has prompted the Prime Minister to direct officials to deploy the 'full spectrum of counter-terror capabilities'. Home Minister Amit Shah too held a high-level meeting to review the security situation in Jammu & Kashmir and preparedness for the Amarnath Yatra. The encouraging turnout in Kashmir in the recent Lok Sabha elections has sent out a clear message that the people of the troubled Valley have faith in the democratic process. However, terrorists and their handlers are unleashing violence in a bid to undermine the turnaround. The back-to-back militant attacks have cast a shadow over the upcoming Assembly election in the region as well as the Amarnath Yatra.

The situation prompted the PM to direct officials to deploy the full spectrum of counter-terror capabilities

In 2023, a total of 59 people — 24 security personnel, seven civilians and 28 terrorists — were killed in Rajouri-Poonch. The attacks have continued across the belt this year. Since Jammu & Kashmir has not had a legislative Assembly for the past five years, the feedback loop of the political class to sensitise the security apparatus has been ominously missing. The Reasi attack reiterated the fact that addressing the security challenges in Jammu & Kashmir requires more than just a military approach; it must be embedded in local politics and a delicate societal equilibrium. The Supreme Court has directed the Centre to hold the Assembly polls in the region before September. The Amarnath Yatra, an annual pilgrimage to the cave shrine in Kashmir, is likely to begin on June 29 and conclude on August 19. Both events are challenging and call for heavy security deployment. Terror attacks at this time could divert security resources away from elections and the yatra. The Centre has reportedly deployed an additional 500 companies of the Central Armed Police Forces in the region as the Prime Minister plans to visit Srinagar on International Yoga Day, June 21. As J&K navigates these turbulent times, the government must enhance security measures and foster a sense of unity and resilience among the populace. Terrorism must not be allowed to derail the aspirations of the local people.

# 06

## VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Monday, June 17, 2024



SAURABH BHARADWAJ  
Delhi Health Minister

“I want to appeal to you all to do away with 'how does it bother us' mindset. Let's stand for our 24 lakh children (on NEET), otherwise this country's important hand (youth) will be destroyed



SANJAY RAUT  
Shiv Sena (UBT) leader

RSS has to play a role in safeguarding the Constitution and democracy. Whatever damage Modi and Shah caused to the country's security in the last ten years, the RSS too has a part in it



P NARAYANA  
AP Municipal Administration Minister

In the coming two-and-a-half years, we will complete the development works of State capital Amaravati. It will be developed as one of the top five capital cities in the world

## Learning from nature

Today's times of estrangement warrant us to reconnect with nature which offers holistic benefits



VIVECK VERMA

We talk of nature a lot today, albeit mechanically. Outside conversations on sustainability, there is little that we think of it, particularly in terms of its potential to inspire us. In fact, learning from nature on a deeper level often appears to be a less pragmatic proposition than talking about it and harnessing its resources.

However, this dominant line of thought demonstrates humankind's misplaced priorities. Instead of learning from nature in harmonious coexistence, we are geared towards merely using the things it has to offer. This viewpoint forgets that nature has been a constant source of inspiration for humanity since time immemorial. In fact, today's times of estrangement warrant us to reconnect with nature and there are holistic benefits to be availed through such an approach — scientific, therapeutic and intellectual.

To begin, we need to look at the various ways in which nature serves as inspiration, co-exists with us and leads to profound thought. These arenas can be distinguished in our exploration for coherence, notwithstanding the fact that these are only provisional categories and nature is beneficial to us in more ways and manifestations than we can count.

### Impact on Science

Let us start by looking at nature's impact on science, which is indubitably, the driver of our progress. From the aerodynamics of bird flight to the adhesive properties of gecko feet, the natural world offers a treasure trove of solutions to complex problems. However, amid technological advancements, we have often overlooked the wealth of knowledge that nature provides. However, this makes us non-cognizant of the phenomenon of biomimicry



whereby learning from nature has led to groundbreaking innovations. Biomimicry, derived from the Greek word bios, which means life, and mimesis, which literally translates to imitating, is the practice of emulating nature's designs and processes to solve human challenges. It involves observing, understanding and applying nature's principles to innovate and create sustainable and powerful solutions to human problems.

The examples of this approach are many. Inspired by the burdock burrs that stuck to his dog's fur during a walk, Swiss engineer George de Mestral invented Velcro in 1941. The hook-and-loop fastener mimics the tiny hooks found on the burrs, demonstrating nature's efficiency in adhesion. Similarly, the lotus leaf's ability to repel water and self-clean has inspired the development of hydrophobic coatings. By mimicking the micro-nano structures on the lotus leaf, scientists have created self-cleaning surfaces for buildings, reducing maintenance costs and water usage. Quite prominently, the design of the Shinkansen Bullet Train in Japan was influenced by the kingfisher bird's beak. Engineers sought to minimise the noise created by the train when exiting tunnels, leading to a streamlined nose design that reduced air pressure changes and sonic booms.

### Calming Influence

Beyond these incredible fashionings which have rejuvenated the world of science, it is necessary to look at the calming influence of nature in an in-

creasingly fast-paced and stressful world. From ancient traditions to modern psychological research, the therapeutic benefits of nature have been widely acknowledged. The serenity and beauty of natural landscapes, the soothing sounds of flowing water, and the gentle rustle of leaves in the wind have a calming effect on the mind and body, and several studies have shown that spending time in nature can reduce stress, anxiety and depression while promoting feelings of relaxation and well-being.

In fact, nature can provide an antidote against what lies behind many of our mental health issues: the fear of loss or the encountering of something unpleasant. It is important to note that in the hustle and bustle of modern life, it's easy to become disconnected from the natural world and its rhythms, and it might be difficult to look at it meaningfully. Yet, nature operates in cyclical patterns of growth, decay and renewal, mirroring the ebb and flow of human experiences. By reconnecting with nature's rhythms, we gain a deeper appreciation for the transient nature of our emotions and the inher-

By reconnecting with the natural world, we can forge a more harmonious relationship with the planet and each other, ensuring a brighter future for all

ent resilience of the human spirit. Through its therapeutic influence, connection to natural rhythms and lessons in adversity, nature offers a sanctuary for reflection, growth and renewal.

### Bound Together

On a related note, this tells us how nature can inspire complex, rigorous and intricate thought, which propels human endeavour across different cultures. Nature has long served as a muse for philosophers, evoking profound reflections on existence, morality and the human condition. From the stoic contemplations of ancient Greek thinkers to the transcendental musings of the Romantics, the natural world has inspired philosophical inquiry across cultures and epochs.

For example, one of the most prominent philosophical themes inspired by nature is the concept of interconnectedness. Observing the intricate web of relationships within ecosystems, philosophers have pondered the interconnected nature of all things. From the smallest microorganism to the grandest celestial body, everything in the universe is bound together in a vast network of interdependence. This interconnectedness challenges the notion of individuality and separateness, inviting contemplation on the unity of existence.

Ancient Eastern philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism emphasise the interconnectedness of all life forms, advocating for harmony and balance with nature. The philosophical inspiration to be gained from nature, therefore, is vast and multifaceted, offering insights into the interconnectedness of all things, the impermanence of existence, the awe-inspiring beauty of the natural world and the ethical implications of humanity's relationship to it. Whether through contemplation of the unity of existence or reverence for the transient beauty of a sunset, nature continues to inspire profound philosophical inquiry.

Looking to nature for inspiration and learning in today's advanced world is essential for sustainability, creativity, resilience, interconnectedness and the necessary sense of curiosity and wonder which engenders creativity and innovation. By reconnecting with the natural world and embracing its teachings, we can forge a more harmonious relationship with the planet and each other, ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

Nature remains and will remain an essential source of inspiration, wisdom, and innovation to human societies and we must make the most of its intellectual and experiential wealth beyond material gains to create refined human sensibilities that drive us to better destinations as a race.

(The author is Founder & CEO, Upsurge Global, Advisor & Adjunct Professor, EThames College, and Strategic Advisor & Venture Partner, SilverNeedle Ventures)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Good tidings

Going forward Narendra Modi will have to manage a coalition government with unpredictable and hard-bargaining partners — Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu, alongside many caste-based parties. Modi is no Vajpayee. Piti-fully Modi is not schooled in the political culture of consensual politics. The election results have been a big setback for Modi and the BJP, and have given a new lease of life to the opposition parties. The Congress has recovered from its terminal decline and has gained a lot of energy. This augurs well for Indian democracy, as the opposi-

tion voices will be louder in Parliament and the authoritarian tendency in the polity will see a downturn.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

#### Big loss

Ramoji Rao's death is a big loss to both cinema and publication industries. He was the pioneer in establishing the ETV Urdu channel quenching the thirst of Urdu lovers. Eenadu became a major force in Telugu media. His 'Newstime', the English daily, made waves for its interesting articles and sharp photos, specially under 'Lens Time' on its last page. His name will be written in golden letters in cinema, publication and entertainment industries.

MOHAMMED ABDUL WAHEED, Riyadh

Write to us at [letters@telanganatoday.com](mailto:letters@telanganatoday.com)

### Cartoon Today

#### JUSTICE NARASIMHA REDDY INQUIRY COMMISSION



### India in the hotspot

■ The Straits Times

#### India's opposition leveraged caste

A seminal moment in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unsuccessful campaign to retain his parliamentary majority occurred days before India's marathon election began in April

■ The Guardian

#### Arundhati Roy to be prosecuted

Indian authorities have granted permission for the prosecution of the Booker prize-winning Indian novelist Arundhati Roy over comments she made about Kashmir at an event in 2010

■ Gulf News

#### Global airlines bet on India travel boom

Global airlines are launching new flights and expanding schedules in India, betting the South Asian giant will become one of the hottest travel markets over the next decade, airline officials and analysts say



OUR VIEW



# Fix GST flaws to make it a ‘good and simple tax’

India’s goods and services tax needs a reboot on which the Centre and states must arrive at a consensus. We should simplify and broaden GST for this reform to serve the economy better

That cooperative federalism has been in need of rescue, given the shape of Indian politics, is all the more reason for India to put the economy first. Doing so can act as a political unifier, as seen in the run-up to GST adoption back in 2017. The Centre and states must use this Saturday’s GST Council meeting to tackle the task of fixing the flaws of this catch-all tax on goods and services. For this, the Council needs an ambitious win-win agenda. While GST was promoted on the slogan of “One nation, one tax,” with investment invited to a unified market forged by it for business taxpayers, the overall economic promise of this reform was far larger. To recap, it was expected to simplify indirect taxation, crush the scope for tax favours, end a tax-on-tax cascade by allowing input tax credits, nudge businesses to claim these by going formal, and enlarge the collection base. In its most subtle but enduring impact, by relieving value chains of a tax pile-up at every link, it was meant to usher in lower costs on the back of higher efficiency brought about by greater ‘gig’ specialization across the economy. All this, more than its uniformity, explains why GST was hailed as a bold move. It was pro-economy, at least on paper, and that’s what made its initial hiccups bearable.

Although India’s GST subsumed a bundle of local taxes, it was hobbled in its role as ‘the great simplifier’ by its multiplicity of rate brackets. Granted, the global ideal of a single rate is way too regressive for a country where levies must be borne mostly by the better-off, but still, we should have three slabs at most—with every taxable item slotted in a way that explains itself. The bulk of these items should

be in a standard bracket at a rate that assures the exchequer revenue sufficiency, with only one slab above it and another one below for exceptional items to be overtaxed or relieved as a policy call. The key is to institute a system whose rationale is so clear, it’s hard for hidden interests to distort. With our monthly GST collections within sniffing range of ₹2 trillion, although the interim budget for 2024-25 had a relatively modest projection, we have the fiscal space to rid this levy of its complexity and go for simplified stability.

While GST slabs need a reset, we must also widen its coverage to include fuel, liquor and other stuff left out for later consideration. Since states with heavy local levies on these items had feared it would hollow out their coffers, a consensus on this is a challenge. But a case for it can and should be made. Petroleum products remain particularly overtaxed, with a high domestic burden depriving users of a global moderation in oil prices caused by America’s rise as a producer over the past decade or so. For GST to play a more extensive role in reducing our cost base and making the economy more competitive, fuel should be treated like any other item, not as something easily squeezed for revenue because its demand is somewhat price inelastic. To allay the anxiety of states over lost inflows, they could possibly be offered a bigger share of the divisible pool of taxes. Or a GST split that’s more than half. A parallel plan to phase out cesses—which states cannot access—could sweeten such a bargain. Of course, a pitfall to avoid would be a pledge of compensation based on dicey assumptions of tax intake. All said, it’s time to act. GST hasn’t lived up to its potential so far and its guardians must join hands to give it another go.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

# The country requires 20 million new jobs to be created each year

This asking rate may sound daunting but it’s both necessary and possible to achieve with reforms



**NITIN PAI** is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy.

A number of analysts attribute the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) underperformance in the general election to voter unhappiness with the Narendra Modi government over unemployment, job reservations and farmer livelihoods. The Agnipath scheme of military recruitment came in for criticism during the election campaign and many political commentators expect that the new government will be compelled to make changes to it. We should view interpretations of election results with some scepticism, but it does appear that the issue of inadequate employment opportunities has bubbled up to the surface of our political ocean.

India’s growing economy is creating livelihoods and employment, but not fast enough. We need to create 20 million jobs every year (to cater to the 12 million young people entering the workforce and to transition around 8 million farmers languishing in rural areas). This is the required run rate. Even if our current run rate is 5 million a year, we are still falling short of the target. To put this in perspective, India must create more jobs per year than the entire population of the Netherlands, Sri Lanka or Taiwan. It’s a scary number. Yet, India cannot become Viksit Bharat without pulling off such an unprecedented feat.

Economic growth is the fundamental engine—the only engine—that can

power this quest. High growth is a necessary condition, but it needs to be supplemented with a concerted programme to boost employment generation. So what can be done?

Before we get there, it’s important to disabuse ourselves of the notion that government jobs and military recruitment should be employment generation schemes. Yes, there are a huge number of unfilled vacancies in the Union and various state governments, and these should be filled to capacity. Beyond that, they will constitute an unwarranted drain on the economy. Similarly, there is a case to reform the Agnipath scheme so that personnel can move laterally into security forces, but it is dangerous to view the exercise from the lens of an employment programme.

Here are some ideas on how we can achieve a quantum jump in employment across the country.

*First*, create new well-planned, sustainable cities. There are many good reasons why India needs new cities. Existing cities are highly congested and their growth comes at the cost of quality of life and the environment. New cities can be green cities, with everything from layout, building materials, natural resources and public services designed to emit lower carbon than if existing cities were to grow. I have previously argued that India can create new cities by building new state capitals, shifting military stations, founding new universities and innovation campuses. Construction and infrastructure industries can create millions of jobs—from unskilled to highly-skilled—at a scale few other sectors can.

*Second*, attract large-scale manufacturing. Yes, it’s still possible in the age of robotics and artificial intelligence. We have spent more than a century telling ourselves that India cannot do industries and big manufacturing. A look at India’s economic history shows how Mahadev Govind Ranade and B.R. Ambedkar debunked the naysayers and called for industrialization in the 1890s

and 1920s, respectively. Today, we must debunk the argument that Indians can directly jump from agriculture to services, skipping manufacturing. I’m sure there will be millions of people who will make such a jump, as can be seen from the number of people from villages and small towns who work in service industries. But if we have to provide for hundreds of millions of livelihoods, it cannot be done without large-scale manufacturing. A job-hungry India-sized player can transform global economics, just as China did over the past three decades or so. To believe otherwise is either escapism or defeatism.

*Third*, get more women into the workforce. Across income levels, every employed woman creates at least one other job. Female workforce participation has been declining and it is still unclear why this is so and how it can be addressed. Deeply entrenched social mores might have something to do with it, at least to some extent. These will be hard to change directly. But we do know what we can do to make it easier for women to work from home or at workplaces. Toilets, public transport, safety, street lights, home appliances, child care facilities and anti-harassment policies are low-hanging fruit that will show results at the margin. The government has instruments and the mandate to push each one of these levers.

*Fourth*, champion globalization. Free trade and movement of people is crucial for India’s development agenda. The West can perhaps afford to retreat behind tariff walls, but India cannot. Of course, reversing the de-globalization currently underway is a great task, but great nations undertake great tasks.

These are some examples of the kind of thinking we need to address the jobs challenge. So far, growth, migration and democracy have helped India avoid the kind of social unrest that accompanies widespread unemployment. There are limits to these buffers and it is best that we don’t take them for granted. The government has its job cut out.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of.

CONFUCIUS

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

# The quiet influencers: How the poor have shaped India

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, ‘Decoupled’

Was there ever a possibility that the first thing Narendra Modi would do after taking office again as Prime Minister was declare that his government would make air-conditioning a fundamental right? It may not have moved most Indians, even though it has been a scorching summer. Most of India is hot most of the year, yet most offices and modes of public transport are not air-conditioned. India is not protecting the environment; just that it perceives air-conditioning a luxury, and its unspoken policy is that Indians need not be treated with luxuries. That is how India has trained the poor to think, and this is how the poor have shaped India to treat them.

The first order Modi signed after taking over will give away cash—about ₹20,000 crore to about 100 million farmers. This was probably a way to convey to India’s poor that contrary to what they may have thought, they were his priority.

Indian elections are often the revenge of the poor.

In past years, whenever the educated middle-class grew cynical of democracy, India’s poor have shown their faith in it by turning up to vote. They have forced governments at all levels to be compassionate givers. And this year, the poor intervened again and diminished the might of the ruling party. But this is only the obvious way in which the poor have shaped India.

India’s public character comes from its poor. India is the way it is chiefly because of its poor. Almost every concrete and abstract thing in India is influenced by the poor. India’s elite in every field are deeply influenced, affected and shaped by the poor.

India’s poverty gives Indians a clear moral direction. Every affluent Indian may or may not have a moral compass, but certainly has one for India, and it directs the country to end poverty. How to go about it is at the heart of our economic, social and political debates. Many powerful emotional issues like religion are secondary to the wound of poverty. People who do not consider this the priority cannot hope for a career in public life. When India wants to invest in technology, it must first make it dreary by invoking the tech’s uses for the poor. This is what India did at the advent of space exploration, the internet and mobile phone—it was all

meant for the poor, especially poor farmers, as though India’s poor have no other profession. Satellites would save farmers from nature; the internet would tell farmers crop prices and mobile phones would save their children in emergencies. Eventually, digital connectivity spread across the country because of entertainment like music, films and porn, but the notion that even the poor want fun does not seem to strike us. We are shaped by the gravitas of poverty. Even when the poor try to tell us that not everything about them is grave all the time, we are unable to fully understand that dimension of life.

The Indian middle-class may not always realize it, but its sense of well-being emerges from the poor, from being privileged in a sea of poverty. Many of them may realize it when they go West and do not feel special anymore. When at home, Indians are so habituated to their privilege that they seem to start believing in the foolish notion that the poor are poor because they are lazy or not smart. Actually,

a typical middle-class person is a great beneficiary of poverty. India may appear to be a very competitive place because of the sheer number of people who turn up for a seat, but the fact is that most Indians do not have a chance at a fair shot. Their role is to make up the vast numbers and make the winners look distinguished.

But look at what happened to the profile of the Indian cricket team when more Indians found the nutrition, opportunity and equipment to train for this sport. The straight-bat middle-class city boys who could speak well at press conferences have vanished. In the same way, the make-up of prestigious colleges has changed. But there are reminders of many things that have not changed. The nation is still rigged in favour of people from affluent homes.

Also, it is very cheap to be middle-class in India because the poor subsidize us all. The poor serve us for almost nothing. They also force the government keep the prices of many basic necessities low.

The price we pay for it is that India treats everyone as though they are poor. India, in plain sight, looks poorer than it really is. If you do not count airports. Some of our airports are so swanky, I am tempted to follow foreign passengers who are visiting India for the first time—just to see the shock on their face when they hit the actual town they came to visit. India assumes that airports are for the rich and that they deserve spaces that are beautiful, while the rest of the nation need not pretend to be aesthetic.

There is not much street joy in our cities because the good life cannot just spill onto the streets. To eat a large meal in public is somehow vulgar. Any sign of affluence in plain sight is vulgar. That is why it is amusing when upper-middle-class people condemn billionaire weddings. Just about any middle-class wedding, or even a typical five-star buffet in India, is an insult of the poor.

India’s civic ugliness does have an unsung social benefit: it does not alienate the poor. Unlike in Europe where the poor live in great contrast to the spectacular urban beauty all around, India’s poor belong more easily in our public spaces. As a result, the affluent almost never interact with public spaces. They live in little islands of private spaces, like zoo animals that own their own zoos.

Almost every concrete and abstract thing in India is influenced by the country’s poverty



THEIR VIEW

# America's debt is sustainable but sustaining it will be a challenge

The IMF estimates that US government debt isn't excessive but also offers budget-deficit reduction advice that's unrealistic



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One of the more amusing exercises on the economic calendar is the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) annual review of the United States. Yet, while everyone knows that the US government pays absolutely no heed to what the IMF has to say about its affairs, the Fund's most recent Article IV review of the US economy is striking for one unexpected finding. Readers will be startled to learn that, in the IMF's estimation, US government debt is on a sustainable path.

This conclusion reflects consensus assumptions about the evolution of inflation, gross domestic product (GDP) growth, interest rates, and budget deficits. It is of course hazardous to attempt to forecast these variables for a period of ten years, much less for 30 years, the horizon over which the US Congressional Budget Office (CBO) undertakes an analogous exercise.

The assumptions adopted by the two institutions differ in their particulars, the CBO being slightly more optimistic about America's growth prospects, for example. But while both institutions foresee debt rising over the next ten years, neither sees it spiralling out of control.

To understand why, it is important to begin from the appropriate starting point. This is not total federal government debt, but rather debt in the hands of the public. A non-negligible share of total US federal debt is held by the government itself, notably in the Social Security Trust Fund. The Treasury's interest payments on this portion represent interest income for the Trust Fund. On this share of its debt, the government is simply making interest payments to itself.

Debt in the hands of the public is currently 100% of GDP. This is an elevated level by advanced-economy standards, but by no means catastrophic. CBO sees this rising, assuming no changes in the prevailing law, to 116% of GDP in 2034, 139% in 2044 and 166% in 2054.

These levels look alarming. But Japan has shown that an advanced economy that borrows in its own currency can manage debts of this magnitude. Factors limiting the risk of a debt crisis, as the IMF notes, include the depth of US financial markets, the breadth of the investor pool, the dollar's role in the international system, the Federal Reserve's ability to backstop the Treasury bond market, and the strength of American institutions.

What then could go wrong? Well, US institutions could turn out not to be so strong after all. Former US President Donald Trump has a personal history of defaulting on his debts. As William Silber has observed, Trump in the White House for a second presidential term could instruct his Treasury Secretary to suspend payments on the debt, and neither the US Con-



ISTOCKPHOTO

gress nor the courts might be willing to do anything about it. The gambit would be appealing to Trump insofar as a third of US government debt is held by foreigners.

The damage to the dollar's safe-asset status would be severe, even if Congress, the courts, or a subsequent president reversed Trump's suspension of debt payments. Investors in US Treasuries would demand a hefty risk premium, potentially causing the government's interest payments to explode.

Even absent this dire scenario, meeting additional interest obligations as the debt ratio rises could require the federal government to cut discretionary spending, with negative implications for economic growth. The subsidies offered by the CHIPS and Science Act are designed to stimulate growth by encouraging investment in high-tech capacity and know-how. Similarly, the Inflation Reduction Act's tax credit for investment in clean energy is intended to avert disruptive climate events that could impede economic growth rate and depress the level of GDP.

Higher spending on interest payments will mean either more debt, testing sustainability, or less investment in these other priorities, which could jeopardize growth.

The CBO expects discretionary spending by the federal government as a share of GDP to fall by about a fifth from current levels by 2034—without, however, inferring from this contraction much adverse impact on the overall rate of America's economic growth.

But if the cuts fall on public investment in semiconductors, quantum computing, clean energy and education, as seems likely, then the negative growth effects could be substantial. And sharply slower growth would throw debt sustainability into doubt.

The IMF offers a lengthy menu of possible measures for closing the budget deficit and stabilizing US debt. Revealingly, most of the options with quantitative oomph operate on the revenue side of the budget, reflecting the reality that tax revenues as a share of GDP are low by advanced-economy standards. These include eliminating tax deductions for state and local taxes, mortgage interest, sale of one's principal residence and employer-based health care, and raising corporate tax rates and adding a value-added tax and/or a carbon tax.

In your dreams, it is tempting to say. Still, the International Monetary Fund, unlike the rest of us, is entitled to dream.

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MINT CURATOR

## Hunter Biden's conviction has brought out the best in his dad

US President Joe Biden's response affirmed faith in his leadership



**NIA-MALIKA HENDERSON**

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Joe Biden's tragic family life is well known to his supporters

REUTERS

One of the worst days of his life, US President Joe Biden showed the best of who he is. He affirmed his faith in his son, Hunter Biden, who was convicted on three felony gun charges. And he affirmed his faith in the justice system that held his only living son to account. Not only that, but hours after his son was found guilty, the US president delivered a forceful speech on gun control that underscored his deep humanity, decency and determination to stay focused on the problems of average Americans rather than drown in bitterness, self-pity, revenge and victimization. He spoke of hope in the face of loss, comforting those who've lost loved ones with his own story of grief.

What Biden said was yet another stark and important contrast with former US President Donald Trump, who appears to believe that his self-created legal problems are matters of the state. Trump has vowed revenge if he returns to the White House, and Biden has said he respects the outcome of his son's trial.

The last two weeks have crystallized who these men are and who they would be in the next four years as president like no other stretch of the campaign so far.

It is the old and honourable man versus someone who comes across mostly as a con artist of sorts.

If elected, Trump will probably try to wipe away his own legal problems—including his recent conviction on 34 counts of felony. He will likely weaponize the Justice Department, and spend his first days in office as something of a dictator, pardoning many insurrectionists of 6 January 2021.

In contrast, when asked by ABC's David Muir if he would rule out pardoning his son, Biden said yes because he believes in the rule of law—unlike Trump.

Politically, Hunter Biden's conviction has complicated the grand old party's claims of a two-tiered justice system where his father is the puppet master. It has also created strange bedfellows.

Florida Representative Matt Gaetz, a well-known agent of chaos and conspiracy theories, posted on X (formerly Twitter) that the "Hunter Biden gun conviction is kinda dumb, tbh." The Trump campaign called the verdict a distraction from "the real crimes of the Biden Crime Family," a narrative with no evidence that Republicans have been trying to sell for the last few years. An earlier draft of the statement ended with a rare note of compassion: "As for Hunter, we wish him well in his recovery and legal affairs."

But the apparently vengeful Trump campaign has little room for compassion. The Hunter line was edited out of a revised statement that was sent later, according to CNN.

That Hunter Biden found himself standing in a courtroom hearing guilty verdicts was the result of his own behaviour, but it was also the result of a years-long effort by Republicans to taint President Biden.

Even if Trump's allies didn't recognize that Biden's strength as a politician came from his resilience as a dad in the face of his tragic family story, Trump seemed to understand it viscerally. So much so that it seems he tried to ensnare a foreign leader into smearing Biden and his son over foreign business deals.

That didn't pan out, but Trump's allies have spent the years since trying to make good on Trump's initial plot. It sounds a bit Shakespearean, but the plan was always about erasing Biden's reputation as the grieving and devout family man and replacing it with something seedier. Hence the Republican party's relentless focus on Hunter Biden, who has struggled with drug addiction.

This effort has proved successful in many ways. Yet, this difficult time for Biden's family is also proof of his core goodness, his unwavering sense of decency, his enduring faith in God and his relatability, the very traits the Republican would like to obscure.

Millions of Americans struggle with their own addictions and those of family members. Joe Biden's struggle is their struggle.

"I am the President, but I am also a Dad," Biden said in a statement. "Jill and I love our son, and we are so proud of the man he is today."

After giving a moving speech on gun control, telling the families of people lost to gun violence to never give up hope, Biden flew back to Delaware to be with his son and family.

On the tarmac, Biden embraced the son he almost lost five decades ago in a car crash that killed his first wife and baby daughter. His eyes closed as if in prayer, embodying the kind of unshakeable love, faith and hope that the United States of America desperately needs.

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MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

# The new government is flexing centralizing muscles

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If the poetic assertion of morning showing the day holds true, then first-day statements uttered by ministers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) should illuminate India's political path ahead. From all indications available, it is likely that the notion of cooperative federalism will be put to severe test. The government's governance structure, despite hopes springing from the return of coalition politics, could lapse into its default mode of overt centralization. Sample statements from two freshly-anointed senior ministers.

Diplomat-turned-politician Hardeep Singh Puri, appointed petroleum minister, said on his first day in office that petrol and diesel should be brought under the goods and services tax (GST) regime, something that states have been opposing. Currently, alcohol and petroleum products—such as, petrol, diesel, natural gas and aviation fuel—are subject to state-imposed and collected value-added and sales taxes, which differ from state to state. States are reluctant to

cede taxation control over petro-products and alcohol because these remain key revenue sources.

This assumes importance because many states, especially those with non-BJP governments, have been complaining of the Centre's discriminatory treatment. These states have been protesting that their share in the divisible central tax pool does not reach them on time, or their dues from central schemes (such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee) have been held back or sometimes even denied outright. Dissatisfaction has also been expressed over tighter limits on state borrowing or tardy central support during times of disaster. Any attempt to reduce a key source of state revenues under such circumstances is bound to face antagonism.

The second indication came from Arjun Ram Meghwal's federalism-busting statements on his maiden day in office as law minister. Meghwal, dashing hopes that coalition pressures would restrain the new government, emphasized that it would continue to pursue not only one-nation-one-election, but also a uniform civil code. Pushback from ally Janata Dal-United was instantaneous, with a spokesperson clarifying that such a decision could be implemented only

through discussion with all stakeholders and not pushed through unilaterally.

There could be many reasons for the government's apparently continuing insistence on adopting unilateralism and a centralizing tendency, but worse-than-expected election results for the BJP might be key here.

Whichever way you slice it, the BJP's final tally of 240 seats—after claiming it would get 370 seats, against 303 last time—is a clear message from the electorate that the ruling party has been put on watch. Yet, the BJP, on the surface, seems to be disregarding these signals and trying to portray its return to power with the support of allies as a sign of its invincibility and proof that it has been redeeming its pre-electoral promises. This message has been echoed multiple times by various party functionaries and supporters in the media and civil society, perhaps in the hope that repetitive iterations will convert it into an irrefutable truth.

Attempts to project a muscular image—by

adopting what seem to be decisive postures on unilateral issues—may be viewed as the party's bid to depict itself as having emerged unscathed from the polls and show that the results have not dented its core priorities of driving cultural, political and social homogeneity—or centralization in decision-making, resource pooling and power dispersal.

Another reason could be the party's seeming difficulty in shedding its feudal trappings, under which patron-client relationships form the bedrock of its political network.

If the government insists on pursuing centralization, the first casualty is likely to be federalism. Two challenges lie ahead.

The first test for federalism concerns new labour legislation under which a raft of old labour laws were consolidated under four regulatory codes on wages, industrial relations, social security and occupational safety, health and working conditions. Parliament passed these four bills in 2020. However, implementation is stuck at the level of states;

labour is part of the concurrent list in the Constitution, allowing both the Centre and states to enact laws. The government's ability to reach across political fences, remove some of the contentious rigidities (such as barring civil courts from hearing labour-related disputes) and accommodate state-level concerns will test its federalist chops.

The second concern relates to fraught revenue sharing between the Centre and states, in both the mandatory as well as discretionary verticals. In the first, tax devolution from the central pool to states has been falling, even though states are supposed to get 42% of the divisible pool; this is because cesses and surcharges now comprise a sizeable chunk of the pool but are kept out of states' reach. The other statutorily mandated transfers, grants-in-aid, have also been shrinking. This is in addition to states being asked to shoulder a larger share of expenditure on central schemes, over and above the Centre often delaying fund transfers for centrally-sponsored schemes.

If 'double engine' is to be the driving force behind federalism and economic growth, then implicit in it is the assumption that the Centre must maintain equitable and non-partisan relationships with all states, and not just with BJP-run or allied governments.



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### G7 summit

Commitment on corridor big takeaway for India

THE G7 summit in Italy has demonstrated that India continues to be a key player in this elite group's scheme of things. The summit witnessed the participation of the seven member countries — the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan and France — as well as the European Union, while India was present as an 'outreach country'. In his address at this major platform, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that the nations of the Global South were bearing the brunt of uncertainties and tensions. Reiterating the stand that marked India's G20 presidency last year, the PM said the country had assumed responsibility for highlighting the priorities and concerns of developing countries on the world stage.

Modi's words prompted German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to assert that the G7 was not an exclusive club. 'We want a partnership from which everyone benefits,' Scholz declared, though it's obvious that this is easier said than done. The ground reality was summed up by the Group of Seven's reluctance to adopt a combative approach on China. The summit statement said the G7 was not trying to harm China or thwart its economic development; instead, it sought 'constructive and stable' relations with China and recognised the 'importance of direct and candid engagement to express concerns and manage differences'. The G7's stress on cooperation rather than confrontation left no room for doubt about China's indispensability to the international community.

Beyond the optics of PM Modi's interaction with several world leaders days after he assumed office for a third term, a big takeaway for India was the commitment made by the G7 to promote infrastructure initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). This ambitious project, which envisages a vast road, railroad and shipping network connecting Asia with the West, is seen as a counter to China's multi-modal, multilateral Belt and Road Initiative. However, the IMEC's fate hangs in the balance amid the ongoing turbulence in West Asia.

### 4 years since Galwan

Widening trust deficit a stumbling block

FOUR years since the first face-to-face military confrontation between India and China in over five decades, the shadow of the Galwan valley clash of June 15, 2020, looms large, hugely impacting the strategic calculus of the two countries. India lost 20 Army personnel in the clash in eastern Ladakh. Beijing has acknowledged only four casualties, though western researchers put the figure at 40. A resolution of the border stalemate, especially the standoffs in critical areas, remains a contentious issue. A series of military and diplomatic engagements have yielded little. There's now a sense of permanence to the massive military build-up on both sides. Heavy weaponry has been inducted by India to counter the relentless offensive posturing by China; land and air connectivity is seeing an upgrade along the entire Line of Actual Control. The trust deficit has only widened. It is to no one's advantage.

To Beijing's call for normalisation of ties beyond the border dispute, New Delhi has steadfastly held on to its stance that the relationship cannot be normal without restoring the status quo ante along the border as of April 2020. Is there a way forward? Amid the entrenched positions, it is difficult to imagine any toning down of the belligerent posturing and rhetoric by Beijing. The prospects of a constructive dialogue on critical regional and global issues appear remote amid the border tensions. For India, the options are limited. It has to stay the course on bolstering its defences, reducing dependence on Chinese imports and protecting its digital sovereignty.

The appointment of the Chinese ambassador to New Delhi after 18 months may suggest a willingness to explore a fresh start to reduce the tensions. But as experience has shown, India cannot afford to lower its guard.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JUNE 17, 1924

### A welcome change

WE desire to accord a sincere and wholehearted welcome to the revised rules of the Swarjya party. 'Revised rules', indeed, is scarcely the name for the change which is now announced. It is a radical, at any rate a very far-reaching, change in the entire policy and programme of the party. From 'uniform, consistent and continuous obstruction', the aim of the party is now transformed into resorting, pending adequate response on the part of the Government, to the national demand as embodied in the famous resolution of the Legislative Assembly of February 18, 1924, to 'a policy of obstruction in such form and manner as it may determine from time to time with or without the consent and co-operation of other parties and members of the Assembly, as circumstances may require.' In pursuance of this policy, the party we are told, 'shall take necessary action so as to secure as far as possible: (a) the rejection of budgets and financial Bills; (b) the rejection of all new proposals or legislative measures calculated to increase, strengthen or consolidate the power of the bureaucracy; (c) the introduction and passing of Bills and measures for the removal from the Statute Book of all repressive or other laws curtailing the civic and political rights of the people of India.' Not only so, it shall be the duty of the party 'to promise the healthy growth of national life by introducing Bills and measures, calculated (a) to help the constructive programme of the Indian National Congress; (b) to advance national economy and the commercial interests of the country and to prevent the drain of the public wealth from India by checking all activities leading to exploitation.'

# Chance for Pakistan to raise its UN profile

Islamabad's election as non-permanent member of Security Council has implications for India



KP NAYAR  
STRATEGIC ANALYST

PAKISTAN's recent election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with the overwhelming support of the community of nations would have bewildered Indians had it been widely reported in this country.

With India caught up in the Lok Sabha election results and their far-reaching repercussions, the news of Pakistan's seat at the UN high table got little traction in the country. The election, in which 182 of the UN's 193 member countries voted in favour of Pakistan, offers a major foreign policy challenge for the Narendra Modi government during its third term.

With the election of Pakistan and Somalia, which will join the UNSC on January 1, 2025, for a two-year term, the UN's highest decision-making body will have five members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). That is half the number of elected members of the only UN arm whose decisions are legally binding on the entire world. It is another matter that such decisions are often pre-empted by a veto, exercised by one or more of the five permanent members of the Council, the P-5, also known as the Big Five. Some UN member countries defy the decisions of the UNSC. The Council can impose sanctions on errant states, and in extreme cases, authorise the use of force under the UN Charter.

None of the above means that India faces any imminent diplomatic threat merely because the UNSC doors are now open to Islamabad. Threat, no. Challenge, yes. Therefore, India cannot be complacent. To start with,



FACEOFF: Opportunities for covert & overt confrontation among rivals have increased at the UN in recent years. REUTERS

the post of India's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York is vacant. The Pakistani counterpart is the forbidding and redoubtable Ambassador Munir Akram, who has been holding the post for the past almost five years. He did the same job earlier for six years from 2002. It was Akram whose covert diplomacy nearly succeeded in getting Kashmir on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Commission in 1994. The following year, he was formally appointed Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and remained on this post for seven years. So, the new government must immediately appoint a successor to Permanent Representative Ruchira Kamboj, who retired in the midst of the Lok Sabha election campaign.

Next year, the counter-terrorism document will be back at the UN for its biennial review, the text of which will be of critical importance to India as a victim of cross-border terrorism. A universally acceptable definition of terrorism has eluded the UN in the General Assembly because of recalcitrant states like Pakistan, which has used terror for many decades as an instrument

Next year, the counter-terrorism document will be back at the UN for a biennial review, the text of which will be of critical importance to India.

of state policy. Together with the dubious presence of Somalia at the epochal horseshoe table, the influence of the duo could spill over to the General Assembly and corrupt the counter-terrorism document during its review. Another risk which India will have to guard against is the possibility — indeed, likelihood — that the five Security Council members belonging to the OIC will together work to list an Indian as a UN-designated terrorist. They will obviously look for a Hindu to be listed as a terrorist under the Security Council's famous Resolution 1267. Adopted in 1999, this resolution's most notorious designee hitherto was Osama bin

Laden. A Hindu nationalist government in New Delhi is potential fodder for the OIC in this objective. A lot will depend on how the new Modi government behaves at home during the remainder of 2024 and next year.

Ambassador Akram is widely known in Turtle Bay, the site of the UN headquarters, to be still nursing his hurt over India's successful drive — jointly with the US — in listing Abdul Rehman Makki as a 'global terrorist' via a Sanctions Committee set up through Resolution 1267. Pakistan's hurt was compounded by the designation's description that Makki was responsible for terror acts in Jammu and Kashmir. He is the brother-in-law of Lashkare-Taiiba founder Hafiz Saeed.

After India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution, Pakistan managed only to have 'consultations' in the Security Council. Such a procedure meant in-camera discussions among Council members, of which there is no record and nothing at all in the public domain. Once Pakistan enters the Security Council with the support of four other OIC members, it may attempt to move the needle on Kashmir in its favour. This is most

likely to be done via 'open consultations' in the Council. Unlike the earlier procedure, this would mean someone from the Council will brief the media and the public about the consultations and their outcome. On occasion, the UN Secretariat may also brief the world on those discussions. The danger, from India's point of view, is that the Kashmir issue will be squarely on focus at the UN while such manoeuvres are ongoing. A lot will depend, of course, on the P-5, who ultimately have the whip hand in the Council.

India and Pakistan have cohabited in the Council before without obstructing the work of the 15-member body. The last time they did it was in 2012. Two things have changed since then. Pakistan's Mission to the UN was then led by the erudite Husain Haroon, the scion of the Haroon family, which owns the Dawn Media Group, among other assets. He never frothed at the mouth against India, unlike many Pakistani career diplomats. The second change is that the world was very different and less complex in 2012.

Opportunities for covert and overt confrontation among rivals and enemies have unfortunately increased at the UN in recent years. Therefore, Pakistan has more opportunities to internationalise bilateral issues with India. For example, food security is at the front and centre of the UN agenda, especially after the war began in Ukraine. At the horseshoe table, Pakistan could well bring up its gripes about the Indus Water Treaty as an issue of its food security, notwithstanding this treaty's robust mechanisms to resolve disputes. They may not succeed in their mischief, but Islamabad is not beyond trying. After Europe lurched to the right in the European Parliament elections, Islamophobia will very much figure in UN deliberations. It is a godsend for OIC diplomats in the Security Council as their numbers swell. Pakistan will make the most of it to advance its UN profile.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The United Nations needs to be nimble, efficient and effective. — Antonio Guterres

## Pleasantly surprised by a police officer

KC VERMA

IN 1974, I was a young Assistant Superintendent of Police, posted in the remote Madhepura subdivision in Bihar. While reviewing cases of serious crimes under investigation, I came across an armed robbery that had taken place in the house of a retired railway doctor, who lived on the outskirts of the town. The case did not seem to have been properly investigated, and I wanted to question the inmates of the house.

It was getting dark when I reached the doctor's house. The place had a large compound, with a path from a latched gate leading to a pretty bungalow. No one came to open the gate when my driver blew the horn. So, he got down and opened the gate. Once we had driven in, I made him stop the vehicle and go back to close the gate.

The doctor was a frail old man, and his wife seemed equally delicate. Both were sitting in the verandah, where an equally old family retainer served them tea. They invited me to join them; I informed them about the purpose of my visit. I chatted with them for almost an hour, exchanging pleasantries, besides trying to elicit information that could help in further investigation. But there was really no new information and, when we drove away, I again got my driver to carefully close the gate after us.

A few months later, I visited the old couple again, but the probe made no progress and meandered to a dead end. I decided to recommend closing of the investigation as there was no hope of solving the case. I visited the couple one last time, more as a courtesy to acknowledge their old-world charm. I was apologetic that the police had neither been able to solve the case nor recover any of the stolen items. I assured them that we had tried our best and there had been no lack of sincerity on our part.

The doctor was all smiles and his wife blessed me affectionately. 'Don't worry, son,' he said, 'I know you must have tried hard.' He saw my somewhat puzzled expression and explained, 'I take your word because you are a gentleman. I knew it the very first time when you came and closed the gate after yourself. I was pleasantly surprised.'

I was glad that I had impressed the old man, though inadvertently, and that too by the ordinary act of closing a gate. But with this feeling of smugness came another thought. Was he as pleasantly surprised when other visitors to his house closed the gate behind themselves? Or was he pleasantly surprised because a policeman had shown the courtesy of closing a gate? I wanted to ask him, but did not. I suspected what his answer would be and did not want to be proven correct.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Ensure stability in J&K

The terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir are a stark reminder of the persistent threats to India's sovereignty. With nine civilians and a CRPF jawan killed, the violence in Reasi, Kathua and Doda is a deliberate attempt to destabilise the region. PM Narendra Modi's directive to officials to utilise the 'full spectrum of counter-terror capabilities' is a necessary and urgent response. The reinstatement of Ajit Doval as the National Security Adviser underscores India's commitment to a decisive stance against terror. Pakistan's continued support for militancy through local agents must be met with unwavering resolve. The promising turnout in the recent Lok Sabha elections reflects the people's faith in democracy, which terrorists seek to undermine. India's military and diplomatic response must be firm and forceful, ensuring that stability is restored in J&K.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

#### Biannual admissions welcome

Refer to 'Biannual admissions'; the UGC's decision to permit admissions to higher educational institutions twice a year is welcome. Students who appear for supplementary examinations but do not get admission because of a delayed announcement of their results will no longer have to waste a whole academic year. Besides, if biannual admissions are carried out smoothly, it will attract more international students to India. However, it is imperative for universities to improve the infrastructure and recruit more teaching staff to maintain the quality of education.

RAVINDER KWATRA, BY MAIL

#### Don't target communities

India is a diverse country. From Kashmir to Kanniyakumari, people — regardless of their caste, creed, colour and faith — live together. There is no doubt that CISF constable Kulwinder Kaur's assault on newly elected BJP MP Kangana Ranaut is highly condemnable. No security personnel or civilian has the right to take the law into his or her own hands. The CISF staffer must be dealt with strictly for overstepping her boundaries. However, at the same time, it was irresponsible of Kangana to make sweeping statements about the state of affairs in Punjab. She is no longer just an actor. She is an MP

now. An entire community cannot be tarred with the same brush for the actions of a few.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

#### Don't glorify violence

The incident at the Chandigarh airport was unfortunate. The case is reminiscent of the slaying of PM Indira Gandhi by her guards. Whether it is a bullet or a slap, a person in uniform must not take the law into his or her hands. It is condemnable that members of the farming community have hailed Kulwinder Kaur as a hero and tried to glorify what she did. Since the incident occurred merely a couple of days after the election of two radicals in Punjab, speculation is rife about the CISF staffer possibly capitalising on the controversy to make her way to the Assembly or Parliament. Utmost restraint from all quarters is the need of the hour.

KRISHAN BHATIA, HANSI

#### Delhi being run from jail

The Delhi Government is currently being run from jail. CM Arvind Kejriwal — an accused in a money laundering case related to an alleged excise scam — has been lodged in Tihar jail. The fact that he is still at the helm of affairs in the Capital makes a mockery of Indian democracy. Without a working CM, the Delhi Government is like a rudderless ship. Who will be taking important decisions on day-to-day affairs? Administrative powers must be accorded to the L-G so that the government can run smoothly. The acute water crisis is one of the many issues in the national capital that needs immediate resolution. Delhi residents must not be made to suffer at any cost.

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

#### Misuse of a draconian law

With reference to the news report 'Delhi L-G nod to prosecute Arundhati Roy under UAPA'; the grant of sanction by Delhi L-G VK Saxena to prosecute the author, a known critic of the ruling dispensation, is shocking to say the least. One does not need to admire her literary works or approve of her political opinions or outbursts to know that the prosecution of a writer under a draconian law over a speech delivered in 2010 is ludicrous. It seems that the BJP has not learnt any lesson from the decline in its tally in the recent Lok Sabha elections.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR



# ‘Neighbourhood first’ policy presents challenges



**JAYANT PRASAD**  
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO  
AFGHANISTAN AND NEPAL

IN his recent meetings with visiting leaders of the neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean Region — Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, Seychelles and Sri Lanka — on the sidelines of his swearing-in ceremony, Narendra Modi reaffirmed the ‘neighbourhood first’ policy he enunciated at the beginning of his first term as Prime Minister in 2014. According to a Ministry of External Affairs press release, Modi promised to work for regional peace, progress and prosperity in close partnership with neighbours. He called for deeper people-to-people ties and more connectivity.

Connectivity is indeed the key to regional cooperation and integration, as it promotes sustainable and better-distributed growth across a given region. It encompasses a range of public goods, including investment in inter- and intra-regional projects, across trade, transportation, information and communication technologies, energy and people. All these, under-

pinned by appropriate infrastructure, facilitate the free and unfettered flow of goods, services, investments, persons, ideas and technology.

India shares its land or maritime boundaries with China, the South Asian countries of the Indian subcontinent and Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. Its neighbourhood extends on its land frontiers from the Hindu Kush in the west to the Irrawaddy in the east. In the oceans, it stretches from Suez in the west to Shanghai in the east.

Beyond its immediate circle, India’s interaction extends to much of the Indian Ocean littoral, from Aden to Singapore, encompassing Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar; Iran, the Transoxiana Central Asian Republics and Gulf states; and members of the Association of South East Asian Nations. India’s periphery now includes the expanse of the Indo-Pacific, stretching from the countries of the East African seaboard right up to the Pacific coasts of North and South America.

Good relations with neighbours are a priority for India’s foreign policy. An unstable contiguity is distracting and bad for business, and it encourages meddling by outside powers. “It is our neighbourhood,” said Modi at the Combined Commanders’ Conference in December 2015, “that is most critical for our future and our place in the world.”

This was manifest in India’s



**IMPERATIVE:** The time has come to revive SAARC, which had its last summit in Kathmandu a decade ago. PH

active pursuit of ‘neighbourhood first’, Act East, Connect Central Asia, Link West policies; its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the I2U2 Group and in conceiving the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor; and its determination to commit to security and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean. Modi paid bilateral visits to Kathmandu and Colombo, not visited by previous Prime Ministers for 17 and 28 years, respectively. His first visit was to Bhutan, and by about mid-2015, he had completed visits to some Indian Ocean countries and to all Central Asian Republics.

However, during Modi’s tenure as PM, in contrast to India’s relations with the great powers and its leadership in the Global South, there has been an overall regression in India’s relations with its immediate

Greater sensitivity in handling India’s relations with neighbours will lead to a better entente with them.

neighbours, despite New Delhi continuing its development partnerships, accelerating project implementation, extending grants and loans and providing humanitarian and technical assistance.

The cultural closeness of South Asia — people speaking the same languages or belonging to the same ethnicity or religion on both sides of India’s boundaries — has counterintuitively reinforced a sense of distinctiveness of its neighbours from India. Psychological partitions of perception and identity have reinforced the physical fractures of South Asia.

On its margins, the subcontinent is bristling with terrorism and insurgencies. India’s neighbouring countries diverge in many ways: geographically, socially, economically, demographically, and most of all, politically. Many of them suffer from

endemic social strife and political instability. It does not help that they are significantly more unequal in growth, resources, population and size than neighbouring countries in any other part of the world.

While there is likely to be more continuity than change in the substance and style of Modi 3.0’s foreign and security policies, there is scope for improvement concerning South Asia. Greater sensitivity in handling India’s relations with neighbours will lead to a better entente with them.

Coalition politics might compel the BJP to temper Hindutva, which has caused misgivings in many parts of South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan and even Nepal, an erstwhile Hindu kingdom and now a secular republic. The stability of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) depends upon two staunchly secular leaders, Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar, who have a considerable Muslim support base. Although the primary players in the Indian Government remain the same and the BJP’s partners are not invested in foreign policy issues, the optics of the NDA coalition will improve India’s standing in the neighbourhood.

Without actively courting Pakistan, the NDA government might respond to friendly overtures and re-engage with the caveat that intractable bilateral issues can only be resolved as a

function of improved mutual perceptions and relations, not the other way around. Nawaz Sharif’s congratulatory message to Modi, appealing to “replace hate with hope”, is a positive portent.

Adversarial relations between India and China are likely to persist, as Beijing seems in no hurry to restore the status quo ante in eastern Ladakh. Yet, India will not view China as an enemy to be fought militarily. India, with its friends, will try to rein in China’s assertiveness and persuade it to follow international rules and rebalance relations peacefully.

The time has come to revive the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has had just 18 summits, the last one in Kathmandu a decade ago. That summit had given the go-ahead to national, regional and sub-regional measures and arrangements. Both the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Initiative and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation must be re-energised.

The objectives outlined in Modi’s ‘neighbourhood first’ policy are ambitious, and the impediments are many. Getting things right with neighbours is an arduous process, often with uncertain results. There is no alternative to trying, however. India cannot walk unfettered on the global stage without better relations in its contiguity.

# Go ahead with J&K Assembly polls despite terror attacks



**LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)**  
FORMER GOC, CHINAR CORPS

THE results of the Lok Sabha polls in Jammu and Kashmir have been interesting. One of the things everyone is looking for is a signal for the conduct of the Assembly polls, based upon a Supreme Court direction to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to hold the polls before September 30. There was a time when it was contemplated that the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls could be conducted simultaneously. That would have been an ambitious step. The ECI’s decision was sound — in that the Lok Sabha polls would restore confidence in the conduct of peaceful elections with an encouraging turnout. Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar recently said, “We will very soon start the poll process in J&K. We are very enthused by the voter turnout... J&K recorded the highest turnout in four decades at 58.58 per cent overall, and 51.05 per cent in the Valley”.

The poll results, however, have been followed by a

series of terror attacks. The June 9 Reasi attack on a bus carrying pilgrims was meant to send out a message that the Assembly polls would be targeted. While decrying this and urging the security forces to undertake a large-scale offensive to dominate Pir Panjal and neutralise the terrorists, there must be no climbdown on the Assembly polls, which are due in three months.

A few issues came to the fore with reference to the J&K polls. Each constituency in Kashmir has an interesting dynamic, and delimitation added to the suspense. The inclusion of Rajouri and parts of Poonch with Anantnag constituency gave a unique opportunity to the National Conference (NC) to exploit the Gujjar surge. Mian Altaf Ahmad of the NC, the virtual spiritual leader of the Gujjar community, was tailor-made for the fight there. He won comfortably against People’s Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Mehbooba Mufti, who also belongs to south Kashmir and is extremely influential in its prime locations at the Valley end, Bijbehara, Anantnag and Kulgam.

The Srinagar constituency includes Ganderbal in the north, Pulwama-Shopin in the south and Budgam to the west. The southern belt is where stone-throwing was most



**THREAT:** The June 9 Reasi terrorist attack on a bus carrying pilgrims was meant to send out a message that the Assembly polls would be targeted. FILE

intense in 2014-19, and the terror incidents were the most marked there. The radical footprint remains dormant, biding its time for another opportunity.

The Srinagar seat has been won by Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, a cleric from a prominent Shia family of Budgam. Mehdi is an old NC hand who has represented Budgam in the J&K Assembly. He identified ‘dignity’ and ‘identity’ as his core concerns. This sentiment was mostly about Article 370 being an article of faith, the Kashmiri not ever being anti-national and the

The absence of violence is not peace. But it would be unfair to bill Baramulla’s electoral verdict as one driven by separatist sentiments.

need for the restoration of statehood. Mehdi’s victory against Waheed Para — the young, intelligent and well-respected youth leader of the PDP — could be a surprise for some, as support for a Shia may have been unexpected. Waheed belongs to Pulwama and Mehdi to Budgam. So, both are not hardcore Srinagar representatives. The NC’s organising capability and ‘cadres in depth’, however, do usually spell advantage for its candidates. That capability will be an advantage in the Assembly polls too.

But the same ‘cadres in

depth’ and the party’s excellent organising skills have been unable to put former CM Omar Abdullah in the driver’s seat in Baramulla. If I know any part of Kashmir the best, it is Baramulla — both the city and the constituency — having commanded a brigade and a division in the area. I was a little surprised to see Omar enter the fray there. Of course, no party can claim ownership of Baramulla. It’s the gateway to the Valley from Muzaffarabad, and it has been so for centuries, while the main route lay through Uri along the Jhelum Road to Baramulla. The constituency is spread far and wide, including Gurez, Bandipora, Machil, Keran, Kupwara, Handwara, Tangdhar, Uri and Gulmarg. The outlying areas in the higher mountains along the LoC are populated by Pahadis, who have benefited from reservation, which was initially 4 per cent but subsequently raised to 10 per cent.

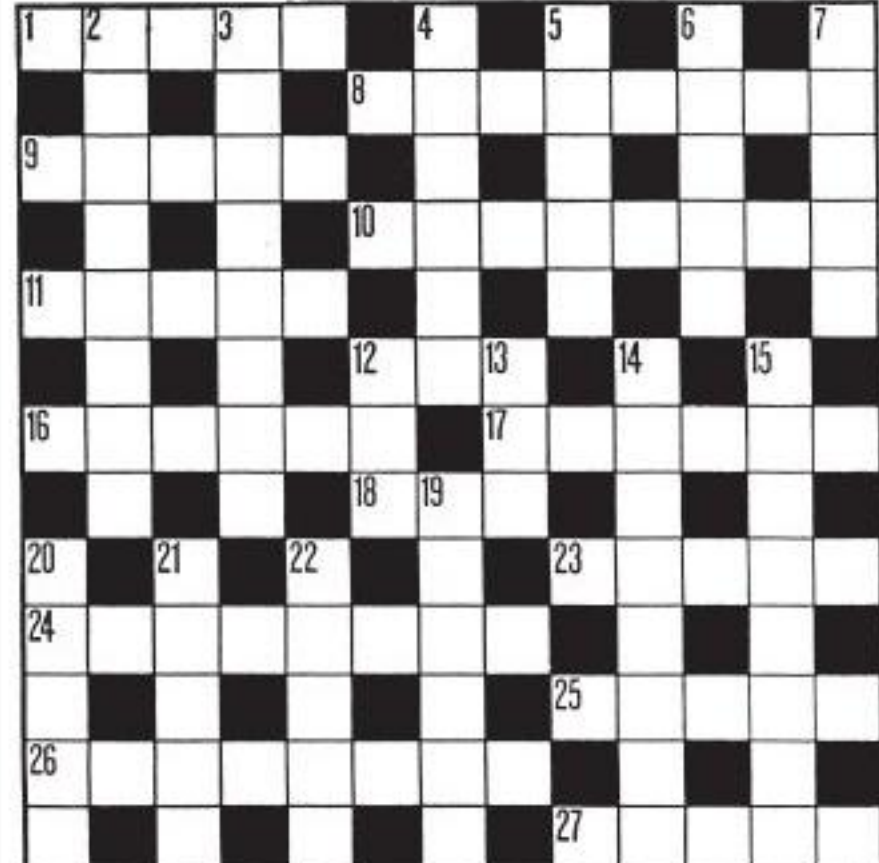
These areas are sparsely populated, although the communities there are all pro-India. There is no grey zone there. It’s the Valley floor with the townships of north Kashmir, where the separatist sentiment was high at one time. The decline in violence does not necessarily alter the sentiment. I have often remind-

ed observers that ‘absence of violence is not peace’ and it’s not a change of heart either. However, it would be unfair to bill Baramulla’s electoral verdict as one driven by separatist sentiments. The Assembly polls will tell us more.

Engineer Rashid, the man who defeated former CM Omar Abdullah by over 2 lakh votes, is known as a separatist. He fought the election while lodged in Delhi’s Tihar Jail through a two-week campaign managed on a shoestring budget by his sons. I have known Engineer Rashid for a long time. He once came calling on me in a rickety Maruti 800. I was aware of his popularity among the poorer segments of Langate in Rafiabad; that is what made him famous all over the Baramulla constituency.

It is believed by some that Rashid managed to get the support of non-voters (those who traditionally kept away from voting) in the hope of conveying that they backed his separatist stance. What is important for the establishment is that the Assembly polls are conducted, and in time. The people’s verdict aimed at development and welfare needs to be adequately reinforced against any persisting sentiments of separatism, which no doubt still thrive.

QUICK CROSSWORD



**ACROSS**

1 Composer of The Planets (5)  
8 Sound genuine (4,4)  
9 Open to bribery (5)  
10 An appraising glance (4-4)  
11 Drive forward (5)  
12 Greasy (3)  
16 To hurt (6)  
17 Fame (6)  
18 Ironically humorous (3)  
23 Reproach mockingly (5)  
24 Fulfil (4,2,2)  
25 An accepted principle (5)  
26 Properly (2,6)  
27 Drab (5)

**DOWN**

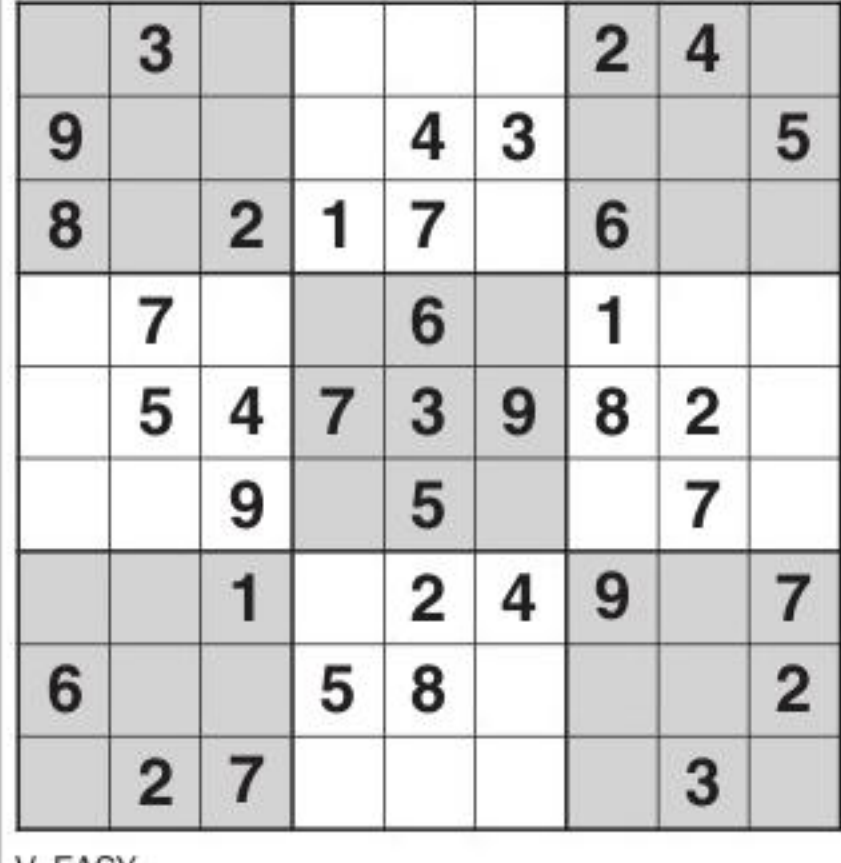
2 Freedom from prejudice (4,4)  
3 Divide and distribute (5,3)  
4 City of the waltz (6)  
5 A white heron (5)  
6 Weighty (5)  
7 Uncanny (5)  
12 Some but not many (3)  
13 Make demands on (3)  
14 Hunting in East Africa (2,6)  
15 Farewell appearance (8)  
19 Revolve (6)  
20 Suit in cards (5)  
21 Fend off (5)  
22 To estimate (5)

**Saturday's solution**

**Across:** 1 Fever pitch, 6 Itch, 10 Allow, 11 Cormorant, 12 Meantime, 13 Tilt, 15 Placate, 17 Elegant, 19 Overdue, 21 Soprano, 22 Gauge, 24 Sideways, 27 Associate, 28 Reach, 29 Site, 30 Persistent.

**Down:** 1 Flak, 2 Volte-face, 3 Rowan, 4 Incline, 5 Cortege, 7 Trail, 8 Hatchet job, 9 Bottle up, 14 Up for grabs, 16 Audience, 18 At any rate, 20 Enslave, 21 Sadness, 23 Upset, 25 Wares, 26 Shot.

SU DO KU




V. EASY

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SUNRISE:	MONDAY	TUESDAY	19:27 HRS	05:20 HRS
CITY		MAX	MIN		
Chandigarh		45	32		
New Delhi		46	35		
Amritsar		46	30		
Bathinda		45	33		
Jalandhar		46	30		
Ludhiana		42	27		
Bhiani		46	35		
Hisar		46	35		
Sirsa		45	34		
Dharamsala		37	25		
Manali		26	15		
Shimla		33	19		
Srinagar		32	17		
Jammu		46	28		
Kargil		21	11		
Leh		18	08		
Dehradun		43	28		
Mussoorie		33	20		

TEMPERATURE IN °C

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION



**CALENDAR**

JUNE 17, 2024, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Jyeshtha Shaka 27
- Aashadh Purnimite 4
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 11
- Pariha Yoga up to 9.34 pm
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 1.15 pm
- Moon in Libra sign





**The Free Press Journal**  
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

## Modi at G-7 raised India's profile

**T**rust Jairam Ramesh to utter cheap jibes, reflecting the mindset of the bosses whom he serves as the media in-charge of the Congress Party. Last week, when Prime Minister Modi left for the G-7 Summit in Italy the uncultivated mind claimed he was going to the Summit to 'salvage his diminished international image'. He went on to sing paeans to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who he claimed was the star attraction at an earlier G-7 meeting in Germany. The highly educated Ramesh clearly chose to ignore the irony of comparing an unelected prime minister with Modi. The latter might have returned to power with fewer seats than before, but still enjoyed the trust of the people whereas a meek bureaucrat was always nominated to whatever political post he might have held post-retirement.

Going by his logic there were a couple of leaders of the G-7 countries who seemed to be well on their way out and ought not to have attended the Summit. Again, calling Modi 'ek tihai prime minister' proves that the Congress has yet to recover from the blow it suffered from its rejection by the voters for the third successive time, failing to get into three figures. By Ramesh's logic Rahul would be 'ek chauthai Opposition leader'. Let us not dilate further on the frivolities of Jairam Ramesh.

The summit serves the wider national cause insofar as it allows the participating leaders to strike personal relationships, to move forward collectively on global issues and on the sidelines to try and resolve bilateral issues. Personal contacts help in removing misunderstandings, tamp down tensions and generally induce a cordial relationship. Whatever transpired at the brief and an unscheduled one-to-one powwow between Modi and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau certainly cannot be bad for lowering tensions between the two countries over the killing of a Khalistan suspect in that country. There were hot words exchanged between the two countries over the killing.

If the Modi-Trudeau meeting helps restore a semblance of normalcy in the bilateral relationship it would be for the mutual good of both countries. There were other such brief encounters between the Indian Prime Minister and the US President Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The meeting with the latter confirmed that the talks on the Indo-UK free trade pact were on course, likely to yield an agreement after the new government was in place in UK following the July 4 election.

The two leaders agreed to boost defence ties while the French President assured help in India undertaking a higher percentage of local manufacturing of military hardware. There were other spheres of mutual cooperation such as nuclear, communications, defence, nuclear power, et al. (Someone of Ramesh's mindset might argue that there was no point talking to Macron since he too was most likely to lose the snap presidential poll called for next month. But let us not take further notice of the childishness of the Congress media in-charge.)

The Summit held in the backdrop of the unending wars in Ukraine and Gaza dominated the official agenda. A warning was sounded on China for supporting Russia in manufacturing war material for use against Ukraine. China was also criticized for its unfair trade practices, subsidising its automobile exports to the EU countries with hidden and not-so-hidden subsidies to manufacturers. The US and EU found increasing unity on China's aggressive trade practices. On Ukraine the G-7 leaders reiterated the commitment to help it rebuff the Russian aggression which posed a serious threat to the security and peace of the wider region. Notably, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky met Modi, seeking the latter's help in stopping the Russian aggression.

It is significant that despite India refusing to join the western countries in condemning Russia, Zelensky and a few other western leaders have sought his good offices for ending the war

Pious words were said on the growing threat of an environmental apocalypse but there was no sign of the big spoilers putting money on the table for actions to mitigate the threat. In all these issues taken up at the Summit India had a deep interest and its participation at the highest level was absolutely necessary, frivolities of the Congress spokesperson notwithstanding.

*Personal contacts help in removing misunderstandings, tamp down tensions and generally induce a cordial relationship*



**W**e are a most unlikely democracy. Our vastness, extraordinary diversity, mass poverty, and lack of self-governing experience for centuries before Independence make our elections and adherence to democracy sources of wonder in the modern world.

Obviously, local political and economic factors play a significant role in the national election. Our Lok Sabha verdicts are in large part an aggregation of state verdicts. Small, but significant, proportion of population of about 5-10% votes in Lok Sabha polls on national issues relevant to Union's responsibilities. But most voters utilise every election — local, state or national — as an opportunity to deliver a verdict on the performance of the state government. In the minds of voters, state is the unit of governance and assembly constituency is the theatre of politics. In recent times a pan-Indian vote in the national election is growing. The share of people voting differently in state and national election is increasing slowly. Voters in states like Kerala and Delhi in particular seem to clearly distinguish the state from the Union.

Given this extraordinary complexity, it is hard to interpret the verdict in 2024 Lok Sabha election and draw lessons from it. However, four broad patterns and lessons can be gleaned from the

electoral verdict.

First, people are impatient and volatile. If a party offers several individual short-term welfare measures, the voters may embrace that party, but it does not last. They want more than welfare. Karnataka and AP are prime examples. Similarly if a party offers collective long-term good in the form of order, infrastructure, investment and growth, voters may embrace that too, but not for long. Uttar Pradesh is a case in point. There is no easy formula for electoral success. Most voters are still on the margins of poverty. Therefore short-term welfare measures are popular with the bulk of the voters. But very soon people realise that transfer of money and free goods and services are not enough to make life better or to fulfil their aspirations. Similarly people reward parties that offer public order and crime control, infrastructure, investments, fiscal prudence and growth. But growth is not enough too. Uttar Pradesh and Odisha are examples of people wanting more than growth.

In a poor country, there has to be a mix of sustainable welfare and accent on economic growth to end poverty and promote opportunity and prosperity. But in an unequal society, growth is substantially benefiting those who have real skills and productivity, and live in urban areas. Rising tide lifts all boats; similarly economic growth improves



lives of all families. But those without meaningful skills to participate in modern production process will not see significant increase in incomes. Poor healthcare delivery impoverishes people, dampens productivity and undermines earning capacity. Rural living limits opportunities in manufacturing and services. But migration to distant, inhospitable, large cities with low skills makes lives only marginally better. Gruelling urban poverty,

lack of housing and social support system and insecurity make the lives of migrants miserable, and cities congested and crime-ridden. The second lesson from the election verdict is that people are crying out in despair. Thanks to TV and social media, they see the opportunities and lifestyles others enjoy, but are distant dreams for them. People want better lives for themselves. Inclusive growth involving quality school education focused on outcomes and skills; robust, effective, universal healthcare; and in situ urbanisation and small town development to absorb a large number of semi-skilled workers in a hospitable milieu closer to their rural habitats are critical for inclusive growth and harmonious society. This is the central message of the verdict.

The third message is, polarisation on grounds of caste, religion, region or language has limited electoral returns. Indian people, like all people, are prone to bigotry and prejudice to an extent. We do tend to deviate from socially productive behaviour and civilised norms; but there is a strict limit. Centuries of coexistence and compulsions of survival developed a sense of tolerance and acceptance of diversity even as we harbour some prejudices about 'the other'. The moment prejudice crosses an unseen live, our society's inner compass is alerted, and we go back to the median. There is a clear "this-far-and-no-further" approach

in our diversity. That is why our plurality, secularism, and embrace of new ideas are intrinsic to our culture and tradition, not the gifts of the state. People have at large shown our parties in this election that polarisation of society will not be rewarded beyond a point. This strengthens our democracy and society. "Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahudha Vadanti" (Truth is one, wise perceive it differently) has always been our society's guiding principle.

Finally the exaggerated fears of dictatorship, rigging, manipulating EVMs, Election Commission being subverted etc have been firmly put to rest. Our democracy is a work in progress, and there are many flaws. But they are outside the polling booths, not in the conduct of elections. While we need to work hard to improve our democracy, we should also trust our political process, conduct of elections and institutions of state. "I will accept the verdict if I win, I will reject it if I lose" approach is a recipe for disaster.

Elections are not about the parties and candidates; they are not about who wins and who loses. Elections are about the people, the voters, the tax payers, and about what happens after the elections, and how the future is shaped.

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**O**f the many ongoing conflicts around the world, Russia's war on Ukraine and the relentless conflict between Israel and Hamas — that have killed thousands of people, displaced millions, destroyed billions of dollars worth of infrastructure, and devastated forests and water bodies — are now under scrutiny for the release of an unprecedented amount of carbon emissions into the atmosphere.

A recent study, titled 'A Multitemporal Snapshot of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from the Israel-Gaza Conflict', estimates that the emissions from the first 120 days of the conflict alone were greater than the annual emissions of 26 individual countries, and territories.

Billions of litres of fuel to keep the war machinery going, billions of tonnes of cement and steel to build defences, burning of fields, forests, and built infrastructure and then rebuilding it all. The upper estimate of emissions from pre-war, war-time, and post-war activities is comparable to the burning of 31,000

kilotonnes of coal, enough to power about 15.8 coal-fired power plants for a year.

The total emissions from the Hamas tunnel network and Israel's protective "Iron Wall," surpass those of over 36 individual countries and the report estimates that emissions associated with rebuilding Gaza will be higher than the annual emissions of over 135 countries, equating them to those of Sweden and Portugal.

Another study by the Initiative on Greenhouse Gas Accounting of War (IGGAW), estimates that the first 12 months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to the emission of 120 million tons of carbon dioxide. However, in the 24 months since the invasion, emissions have significantly increased to 175 million tons of carbon dioxide. This exceeds the annual emissions of a highly industrialised country like the Netherlands, putting 90 million new petrol cars on the road, or building 260 coal-fired power units of 200 MW each.

According to a paper published in Nature, the heaviest impacts are

on scientists and research institutions in Ukraine and Russia, where their institutions have been bombed, research stalled, and facing boycotts and sanctions in response to their country's actions.

The war-induced migration of people has generated almost 3.3m tCO<sub>2</sub>e, according to the IGGAW analysis. This includes the transport-related emissions of more than 5 million Ukrainians seeking refuge in Europe as well as millions of internally displaced people and Russians fleeing Russia. As of September 2023, the UNHCR estimates 114 million people are displaced due to conflict and persecution globally, the highest number on record.

Meanwhile, the annual military emissions of the United States of America are the largest of any country worldwide, rivalling the entire annual carbon output of some smaller nations, like Norway or Sweden. The US military is also responsible for 1.2 billion metric tonnes of greenhouse emissions in the last 20 years. They have a wide range of origins, including both

military operations and the maintenance of more than 700 U.S. military bases worldwide.

Not surprisingly, under pressure from USA, it is not mandatory for countries participating in the Paris climate agreement to report the carbon emissions of the wars they wage with their weapons of mass destruction, armies, navies and aircraft.

According to a report by Conflict and Environment Observatory, "Estimating the Military's Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions," militaries account for almost 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions annually — more than the aviation and shipping industries combined, larger than that of all countries except the US, China and India.

With wars becoming a permanent feature of the modern age, with nearly 150 ongoing conflicts at any given time in recent years according to Global Conflict Tracker, there are increasing calls for military emissions be counted toward each country's climate targets, to better understand and mitigate the climate impact of conflicts.

At present, given the slow prog-

ress at the UN led global climate negotiations, it may sound next to impossible to bring war-related emissions to the negotiating tables, but the two studies underscore the importance of doing exactly that. It is time governments acknowledge the role their militaries play in global emissions and the costs it entails in current spendings and the future loss and damage at home and in enemy territories. Climate change, after all know no borders.

Even the thousands of climate activists — who believe that "there can be no climate justice without human rights" — calling for an immediate ceasefire, cannot shy away from subject of military emissions any more.

No one imagines that the need for climate action will stop wars, but knowing the exact quantum of emissions from global conflict will certainly help those struggling with the question on whether to upgrade to an electric vehicle or not.

Shailendra Yashwant is an independent environmental photojournalist and climate communications consultant. He tweets at @shaibaba

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Ticketless bonanza

Last week, ticketless passengers crowded reserved coaches on the Vande Bharat train from Lucknow to Dehradun, with most of them packed tightly in the aisles. There is one more opportunity

**Dear reader,** We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using snail mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, 215 Free Press Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.

become a reality in India soon.

Ticketless passengers, however, are advised not to act in haste but wait till the bonhomie dies down, as happened in the case of Vande Bharat.

PG Menon, Chennai

#### MIKA'S MATRIX



#### Heat on 40/60

Delhi, already reeling under abnormal heat, is being singed even more by gusts from Nagpur. Climate change is here and now on every phenomenon could well be guided by the new constant — 240/400. Tired agencies could expect a 40% off on working hours. Legal nerds of prosecution can shed their singular attachment to the Money Laundering Act, to be conversant with other chapters on law and in particular on bail. There could be 40% drop in cases, and 60% more bail conceded. Farming in UP could get a fillip, with 40% less load on JCBs. As much as 60% of diesel quota may be diverted to ploughs and tractors. TV anchors can spare their larynx with 60% off on decibel levels. Non-BJP spokespersons may get 40% more attention. Anon, while the North could become 40% cooler, Maharashtra is bound to be 60% hotter. The nation could expect advertising space for the government's brownie points to be 40% less and that of fresh job openings, 60% more.

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

#### Hold the result

The Parliamentary elections this year were by and large without any controversy except for the

incident in Goregaon where Wai-kar won against Kirtikar with a slender margin of 48 votes after the latter was declared winner and the decision overturned after recount. The matter is now under investigation, and the investigating agencies should examine CCTV footage and other tools to detect foul play if any. The result of the seat should be put on hold until its authenticity is established.

SN Kabra, Mumbai

#### Rethink school bags

Books, lunch boxes, stationery... children are back with their customary routine after schools reopened. Heavy school bags are going to cause many children neck and back problems. This deepens our understanding of the relationship between heavy bags, body posture and the pain the children are forced to endure. Unfortunately, not much attention has been paid, both by parents and the schools, to the link between weight of the school bag and the child's growing muscles and backbone. Students in developed nations carry their text and notebooks on a 10-gram USB stick. Sadly, in our country, the age-old practice of carrying super-heavy bags is still in vogue.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai





## Criminalising words

Speeches that do not instigate violence should not be deemed unlawful activity

The grant of sanction to prosecute writer-activist Arundhati Roy and academician Sheikh Showkat Hussain for alleged “unlawful activity” in a case dating back to 2010 is unwarranted. Delhi Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena, who had accorded sanction in October 2023 to prosecute the Booker Prize-winning writer and the former Kashmir University professor, respectively, for allegedly divisive speeches and imputations against national unity, has now given his nod for invoking Section 13 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for the same set of speeches. The earlier sanction order was in his capacity as the appropriate authority on behalf of the Delhi government under Section 196 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The recent one is, presumably, on behalf of the Central government, the appropriate authority to sanction prosecution for offences under Chapter III of the UAPA, under which Section 13 falls. The resurrection of this old case is an unfortunate instance of ill-motivated prosecution. The only possible explanation for the revival of this case, registered on a magistrate court’s order in 2010, is that the present regime has found it expedient only now to do so, as part of its continuing crackdown on dissenters and outspoken critics. The eight-month gap between the two sanction orders is inexplicable, as the same material would have been placed before the sanctioning authority.

The regime at the Centre then did not deem it appropriate to prosecute the speakers at the conference held in Delhi in October 2010. Even though the Bharatiya Janata Party, then in the opposition, pressed for it, the Delhi police did not consider the speeches seditious. Its reluctance was possibly because the Centre did not want to jeopardise efforts to find a solution to the Kashmir problem through designated interlocutors. When a complaint was filed before a Magistrate, the court asked for a police report, but the Delhi police did not think the speeches warranted prosecution for sedition. However, on November 27, 2010, the Metropolitan Magistrate rejected the police stand and directed registration of a First Information Report. The FIR included Section 13 of UAPA, which seeks to punish “unlawful activities”. Speeches made at the conference may have contained imputations about the status of Kashmir, but it is doubtful if a mere speech, in the absence of a call to arms or instigation of violence, would amount to “unlawful activity” under UAPA. In any case, much has changed in the ground situation, especially in the aftermath of the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status in 2019 and its division into two Union Territories. The new coalition regime should move away from the earlier era’s obsession with stamping out dissenting views and put an end to its propensity to criminalise speeches.

## Two steps back

India needs to close the gender gap in education and politics

Gender parity may be climbing upwards worldwide with the global gender gap standing at 68.5% closed in 2024 – but the glacial pace of change – it was 68.4% in 2023 – is a grim statistic. At this rate, it will take 134 years to reach full parity, the Global Gender Gap report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) last week pointed out, “roughly five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target”. Iceland maintains its number 1 rank (93.5%), and is also the only economy to have closed over 90% of its gender gap. India has slipped two places to 129 out of 146 countries. Last year, it was ranked 127, after having jumped eight places from 135 in 2022. India has closed 64.1% of its gender gap in 2024, the report noted, leaving policy-makers with a huge window of opportunity to do better. The “slight regression,” according to the report, is mainly due to “small declines” in the spheres of education and political empowerment. With a population of over 140 crore, even two steps back mean staggering numbers. Though India, it pointed out, had shown a slight improvement in economic participation and opportunity for the last few years, it would need 6.2 percentage points more to match its 2012 score of 46%.

One way of achieving the objective will be through bridging gender gaps in, say, the labour force participation rate (45.9%). To do that, a slew of measures must be in place, from ensuring that girls do not drop out of higher education, providing them job skills, ensuring safety at the workplace, and helping them keep a job after marriage by sharing responsibility for chores at home. In education, the gap between men and women’s literacy rate is 17.2 percentage points wide, leaving India ranked 124th on this indicator. India has fared better in the political empowerment index, but women’s representation in Parliament continues to be low. For confirmation, look no further than the newly elected Lok Sabha. Close to 800 women contestants were in the fray, but the number of women Members of Parliament has dipped to 74 from 78 (2019) of 543 members, which is 13.6% of the total. These numbers are not a good sign in the backdrop of the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2023, yet to come into effect, which aims to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State legislative Assemblies for women. All under-performing countries, including India, must heed WEF Managing Director Saadia Zahidi’s words, calling for “Governments to strengthen the framework conditions needed for business and civil society to work together to make gender parity an economic imperative”.

Many iterations of the verdict in the just concluded 2024 general election exist. One thing is, however, obvious – viz., that there were no clear winners. The election threw up a split verdict – the National Democratic Alliance, or NDA, 294, and the INDIA bloc crossing the 230 mark, reversing a trend seen during the 2014 and 2019 general elections, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as a clear winner and Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the messiah.

### Has democracy won?

A lot has again been written again about the nature of the verdict: primarily, that democracy had won and right-wing forces (more specifically the BJP) had been defeated. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Indian voter, essentially the rural voter, did prove discerning, no doubt, and gave a reasonable opportunity to the Opposition to alter the trajectory of the past decade, by forming a ‘coalition of the willing’. This could then have been viewed as a clear message against ‘authoritarianism’. Instead, a disunited Opposition failed to take advantage of the situation. The INDIA bloc which had failed to firm up a coalition prior to the election, failed once again to unite when the time came for ministry formation post the election. In that sense, the Opposition failed the Indian voter.

The BJP-led alliance managed a slim victory, though the BJP’s tally, of 240, fell well short of a simple majority. The party lost 63 seats as compared to its 2019 tally (303 seats), and was compelled to depend on the Telugu Desam Party, or TDP (16 seats), the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U) (12 seats), the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) with five seats and a motley set of other allies to cross the magic figure of 272. The Congress, with 99 seats, and the Samajwadi Party, with 37 seats, reflect, in turn, the nature of the churn that has taken place this time. Nevertheless, it is a mistake, as many analysts have been wont to do, to say that extreme right tendencies have been curbed. For democracy to succeed in such a situation, there was every need for deft handling, and a clear understanding of what requires to be done. What the INDIA bloc gained at the hustings, was lost when the combination failed to ‘seize the moment’, and allowed the BJP to inveigle the TDP and the JD(U) to share the spoils of office. The winner has been the Prime Minister. Narendra Modi, through stratagems, rather than an electoral verdict, achieved his ambition of becoming India’s Prime Minister for the third time.

All that can be said for now, is that the election outcome could possibly lower the risk of the country sliding towards autocracy. How long such a situation will prevail is, however, uncertain. In



M.K. Narayanan

is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

The election outcome could possibly lower the risk of India sliding towards autocracy

# The general election of 2024, its true verdict

Prime Minister Modi’s thought processes, the verdict is not a repudiation of his doctrine of how to wield power, though an overwhelming mandate could have helped set the seal on his majoritarian outlook. This can well be discerned from a careful reading of the Prime Minister’s post-election statements. In his third term, the Prime Minister appears set to prove yet again, that he is no consensus builder or that he would give up his polarising views.

### Reading the signs

Already, the signs are there for all to see. The new Cabinet and Council of Ministers remain essentially the same. This is as good a sign as any that the Prime Minister does not think it necessary to effect a change or even consult anyone in any such exercise. Again, everything points to the Prime Minister dealing with his new Cabinet and his new Council of Ministers in the same fashion as previously. It appears extremely unlikely that any major shifts from past practices, or in terms of future legislation, will occur. The past practice of asserting arbitrary authority to achieve ends that the Prime Minister considers desirable, is hence, likely to continue. This will remain the Prime Minister’s leitmotif this time around as well.

More to the point, there seems to be little hope that the Prime Minister, while pushing for multi-polarity on the global stage and seeking a greater say for the Global South internationally, would apply the same logic to the situation in India. The Prime Minister does not see the election results as a verdict for a change in direction. Rather, he possibly believes that more of the same might have produced better results. Hence, there is little hope that the Prime Minister would moderate the use of central investigative agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate against all and sundry. Again, Mr. Modi will be fixated on urban India, which in this election gave him maximum support. He is unlikely to make concessions to working-class voter families, and informal workers, especially those in the rural areas. The announcement of ‘Kisan Nidhi’ should not, hence, be viewed as a nod in favour of rural farm workers.

A hurt, but not wounded, Narendra Modi is likely to be a far greater threat to democracy and democratic traditions, than was the Mr. Modi at the end of March. Nothing could have been more galling for him – that of his own majority in Varanasi shrank from the more than four lakh votes he got in 2019 to 1.5 lakh votes this time. Equally disappointing would have been the fact that in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP suffered a shock defeat at the hands of the Samajwadi Party (SP). Also after having spent so much time and effort

on the Ram Temple issue, the BJP lost the Faizabad seat (where Ayodhya is located), to a relatively unknown opponent from the SP. Even lesser mortals would have reason to feel chagrined that fate had dealt such a cruel blow. Being Modi, he would seek avenues to overcome this insult. Hence, the worst is yet to come.

The Prime Minister was at the G-7 in Italy as an invitee. While accepting the invitation he, no doubt, believed that as India’s third-time Prime Minister, he would have another opportunity to strut on the international stage, as had been the case when the G-20 was held in Delhi in 2023. But knowing the Prime Minister, he will try to convert what in effect was a defeat into victory.

### The road ahead

India must be prepared, as there is not much hope, given the disjointed nature of the Opposition. Whether the Opposition and the country can withstand the battering that the Prime Minister is likely to unleash is yet to be seen. Together with announcing a whole new package of programmes aimed at enhancing his stature, the Prime Minister can be expected to be even more intolerant of the Opposition. He is unlikely to tolerate any attempt to moderate some of the actions that he had taken during his previous tenures. The misuse of investigative and other agencies can be expected to continue.

For Mr. Modi, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections were his project, and his project alone. He had invoked god himself to achieve his objective. He is, hence, unlikely to allow mere mortals to checkmate and prevent him from achieving his desired objective. The rural poor may cavil at several of Mr. Modi’s policies, but India Inc. is bound to act as cheerleaders. The United States and the West, in the meantime, can be expected to continue to provide the Prime Minister the kind of international acclaim that he craves.

India’s hopes lie less with a pusillanimous Opposition, than of a division in the NDA, and more so in the BJP itself. In regard to the BJP, the Prime Minister’s refusal to consult with the ‘high priests’ of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has reportedly angered them. This has been the case for some time. If divisions get exacerbated, this could have a material impact on the BJP and its future, but it is uncertain as of now whether, or how, this could happen. Again, with the denting of the Prime Minister’s image as a winner having taken a beating, there is reason to believe that voices are beginning to be raised within the BJP against the Prime Minister’s autocratic attitude and behaviour. The big question mark, nevertheless, is how and whether the Prime Minister can adjust to the reality that he is no god, given that the mandate proved he is not invincible.

# High Court’s take on Marriage Act, an erosion of rights

A problematic order from the Madhya Pradesh High Court has given rise to the likelihood of a misinterpretation of the law around inter-faith marriages and a calling into question the scope of the Special Marriage Act, 1954. If unresolved, this could potentially lead to consequences contrary to the objectives of the Act, which sought to provide a viable legal avenue for inter-religious marriages.

The issue has arisen out of a petition that sought protection for an inter-faith marriage, jointly filed by an unmarried Hindu-Muslim couple before the Madhya Pradesh High Court. While hearing the arguments, the High Court went into the question of whether such a marriage of “a Muslim boy with a Hindu girl” under the Act would constitute a “valid marriage or not”. The High Court then proceeded to not grant police protection to the unmarried couple on the grounds that theirs would amount to an invalid marriage. By doing so, the High Court has reversed the gains in the jurisprudence on the right to choice of partner and has rewritten the well-settled objectives of the Special Marriage Act.

### Erroneous considerations

It is common practice that when a petition seeking police protection is filed under Article 226 of the Constitution of India, the High Court looks into the violation of rights of the petitioners and the extent of threat faced by them. Such petitions are usually filed by couples in inter-faith and inter-caste marriages. However, it is now seen that even in cases of unmarried persons, High Courts have extended them protection after considering the various threats emanating from society. In similar circumstances, Justice N. Anand Venkatesh of the High Court of Madras recognised the precarious situation encountered by same-sex couples and granted police protection to a lesbian couple.

Similarly, the Punjab and Haryana High Court



Manuraj Shummuga-sundaram

is a media spokesperson for the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and advocate practising before the High Court of Madras. He appeared for the petitioners in the case where the Madras High Court granted protection to a same-sex couple



Haripriya Venkatakrishnan

is an advocate practising before the High Court of Madras

The M.P. High Court order goes against the very basis of the Special Marriage Act

granted police protection to a live-in couple holding that “the key issue at hand is not the legality of the petitioners’ relationship, qua which they may be liable for civil as well as criminal consequences in accordance with law, but whether they are entitled to protection of their fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution”.

In contrast, the Madhya Pradesh High Court, without weighing in on the real and apparent dangers faced by an inter-faith couple and adjudicating on the prayer for protection based on a threat assessment, has gone into the merits of an impending marriage itself. Even if the couple does not get their marriage registered, their claim for protection ought to have been decided in accordance with Article 21 of the Constitution, which provides for the protection of the right to life and liberty of an individual.

### Dilution of the Special Marriage Act

Another serious concern is the order passed by the Madhya Pradesh High Court goes against the very basis and objects of the Special Marriage Act. The order refers to a precedent from the Supreme Court of India in *Mohammed Salim vs Shamsudeen* (2019), a case which dealt with the issue of property succession arising out of a marriage between a Muslim man and Hindu woman under the Mohammedan Laws. This judgment should never have been considered as a precedent in either deciding the validity of an inter-faith marriage or for police protection.

The order also goes into Section 4 of the Special Marriage Act which excludes marriages between persons within the “prohibited degrees of relationship”. The reliance of the Madhya Pradesh High Court on this prohibition is entirely untenable and factually flawed as this provision only bars marriages between those who are

related. By doing so, the High Court failed to recognise that the objective of the Act is to facilitate marriage between any two Indian nationals “irrespective of the faith with either party to the marriage may profess”.

### The India of today and special marriages

The Madhya Pradesh High Court order assumes importance in the current social and political climate, where there is a real threat of vigilantism against inter-faith and inter-caste marriages, which do not have the sanction of the parents. The love jihad conspiracy, right-wing propaganda and consequent vigilantism have directly challenged our constitutional morality. While these are yet to be resolved, there is also a batch of petitions challenging unconstitutional provisions within the Special Marriage Act, such as prior notice which are pending before the Supreme Court. Tying these together is a common thread of individual autonomy, liberty, and equality. The Supreme Court in *Shafin Jahan vs Asokan K.M.* (2018), held that “intimacies of marriage lie within a core zone of privacy, which is inviolable”. Dealing with a case of inter-faith marriage, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, as he was then, wrote that “social approval for intimate personal decisions is not the basis for recognising them” and further, that “the Constitution protects personal liberty from disapproving audiences”.

The *ratio decidendi* of the Shafin Jahan case has the effect of prioritising the absolute right of an individual to choose a life partner over any consideration of faith or caste-based diktats. With the spirit of this judgment having been lost sight of in recent years, it is wholly necessary for constitutional courts across the country to keep in mind that the arc of jurisprudence bends towards autonomy, privacy and liberty.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### No to ‘love thy neighbour’

The report, “Residents oppose allotment of flat under CM scheme to a Muslim woman in Gujarat” (Inside pages, June 15), was shocking. There appears to be a weakening of secularism in present-day Indian society. Such a scenario threatens the amicable co-existence of many.

**Chetan Datta Poduri,**  
Hyderabad

It was painful to read that several residents were

against the allotment of the flat to the woman. Is Indian society getting balkanised on the basis of caste and religion? Where are we headed? One hopes that the Vadodara Municipal Corporation and saner representatives will prevail upon the residents and convince them that we are all Indians and need to co-exist peacefully.

**C.S. Ravikumar,**  
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

**State of welfare schemes**  
A prominent leader of the

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, while campaigning in Attur, Salem, recently, said that “Telangana and Karnataka have adopted the Chief Minister’s free breakfast scheme for students”. The leader added, “Besides other States, Canada President Justin Trudeau had hailed it as the best scheme and declared its implementation in their country.” One wonders whether the leader knew that the meal scheme was introduced by the leaders,

K. Kamaraj and M.G. Ramachandran, who expanded it. The report, “Everyone loves a hot, cheap meal” (Tamil Nadu, June 16), on the state of the Amma Canteens under the DMK regime, was an eye-opener. It is clear that the poor have been affected. If this is the state of the Amma canteens — a scheme by the DMK’s political rival — one wonders what state the DMK’s schemes are in.

**N. Mahadevan,**  
Chennai

### Travel notes

The same and embarrassing situation arose when I travelled with my son on a direct flight from Mumbai to San Francisco to meet my granddaughter. It was a short trip. Being a senior citizen, my seat had been booked in premium economy class, while my son was in economy. Two young lady students, who were pursuing an educational course in the United States, were seated next to me. One of the girls asked me

whether I could sit in the middle section so that they could sit together. Given my age — I am 87 years old — and being a very long flight, I politely said, “Very sorry, a window seat will be very comfortable for me.” After reaching San Francisco, I was surprised to know that the two girls were close friends of my granddaughter! An “unexpected connection amid the clouds” (“Open page – Magazine”, June 16).

**D. Sethuraman,**  
Chennai



*More than that meets the eye*



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The amount pumped into Indian equities by FPIs in the past week

**11,730** in ₹ crore. Foreign investors made a strong comeback in the week ending on July 14, driven by positive signals from domestic and global markets. The net inflow was in stark contrast to the net outflow of ₹14,794 crore witnessed in the preceding week from June 3-7, according to depositories data. PTI

Nations seeking Kyiv's territorial integrity as basis for peace

**80** countries. The joint communique capped a two-day conference in Switzerland marked by the absence of Russia, which was not invited, but that many attendees hoped could join in on a roadmap to peace. About 100 delegations, mostly Western countries but also some key developing nations, were on hand for the conference. AP

Number of child labourers rescued from MP distillery

**58** The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights in collaboration with the Association of Voluntary Action rescued 39 boys and 19 girls from Som Distillery in M.P.'s Raisen district. The children were transported in a school bus and worked 12-14 hours in the distillery daily. They bore burn wounds from exposure to harsh chemicals and alcohol. PTI

Rise in India's coal imports in April: mjunction

**13.2** in percentage. India's coal import rose to 26.10 million tonne (MT) in April 2024 as buyers took fresh positions amid early onset of summer. The country had imported 23.05 MT of coal in the year-ago period, according to data compiled by B2B e-commerce company mjunction services ltd. India's coal import rose by 7.7% to 268.24 MT in FY24. PTI

Number of accounts added to MF industry in April-May FY25

**81** lakh. The mutual fund industry has added above 80 lakh investors' accounts in the first two months of the current fiscal (Financial Year Y25), mainly due to consistent marketing efforts, celebrity endorsements and dedicated work of the distribution network. Experts say the industry will continue to see decent growth. PTI

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## On the size of council of ministers

What has been the composition of the Council of Ministers at the Centre and in States since India became a democracy? What were the instances when the council became too large and unwieldy? How were the laws brought in to rein in this trend?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R

The story so far:

**T**he Union Council of Ministers (COM) headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was sworn in on June 9, 2024. The present COM consists of the Prime Minister, 30 Cabinet Ministers, 5 Ministers of State (MoS) with independent charge and 36 MoS.

Who constitutes the Council of Ministers?

India is a parliamentary democracy with the President as its nominal head. Article 74 of the Constitution provides that there shall be a COM headed by the Prime Minister (PM) to aid and advise the President. The real executive powers lie with the COM. A Minister should be a member of either the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha and if not, should become one within six months of his/her appointment. A similar setup prevails in States with a COM headed by the Chief Minister (CM).

The COM consists of a Cabinet minister, MoS with independent charge, MoS and a Deputy Minister. The Constitution does not classify the members of the COM into different ranks. All this has been done informally, following the British practice. Cabinet Ministers are higher in rank and handle large portfolios while MoS assist the Cabinet Ministers and work under them. MoS with independent charge directly reports to the Prime Minister for their respective ministries.

What is the constitutional limit?

The first COM at the time of independence had only 15 Ministers headed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal



**Number game:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, with his Council of Ministers at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on June 9, 2024.

Nehru. After the first general elections in 1952, Nehru inducted around 30 Ministers into his COM. Over the years, the size of the COM had gradually increased to around 50-60. Interestingly, it is the United Front governments led by Deve Gowda (June 1996) and I.K. Gujral (April 1997) that were sworn in with just 21 and 34 Ministers respectively. In 1999, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee became Prime Minister, his COM had 74 Ministers. However, the size of COM was becoming unwieldy in some of the larger States. For instance, in 2002 when Mayawati was the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, she had 79 Ministers.

The National Commission to review the working of the Constitution under the Chairmanship of Justice Venkatchaliah set up in February 2000, had suggested a ceiling of 10% of the total strength of Lok

Sabha/Legislative Assembly for the number of Ministers at the Centre/State level. Finally, through the 91st Constitutional Amendment in 2003, the total number of Ministers including PM/CM in the COM was limited to 15% of the total strength of the Lok Sabha/State Legislative Assembly. There is no minimum requirement at the Central level whereas even the smaller States should have a minimum of 12 Ministers. For Union Territories of NCT of Delhi and Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), the maximum limit is 10% of the total strength of its Assembly.

What are the issues?

A thorny issue even after the limit on the number of Ministers is the appointment of Parliamentary Secretaries in various States. The office of Parliamentary

Secretary (PS) also has its origin in the British system. In India, the post of PS was first created in 1951. They have not been a regular feature in the Central governments thereafter and the last PS at the Centre was appointed in 1990. However, various States have continued with their appointment to circumvent the limit on COM placed by the 91st Amendment. High Courts of Punjab & Haryana, Rajasthan, Bombay, Calcutta, Telangana, Karnataka etc. have quashed or questioned the appointment of PS in the States under their jurisdiction for indirectly violating the maximum limit on COM. The Supreme Court in July 2017 had also declared a law passed by Assam in 2004 for the appointment of PS as unconstitutional. The most recent instance is the order of the Himachal Pradesh High Court in January 2024 that restrained six PS appointed in the State from functioning as Ministers or availing facilities provided to Ministers. Appointing MLAs to the position of Ministers under the guise of PS to circumvent constitutional limits should be strictly prohibited and discontinued.

It is also pertinent to note that States like Sikkim, Goa and smaller States in the northeastern region with a current estimated population ranging from seven to forty lakhs have a minimum of twelve Ministers. However, Union Territories of Delhi and J&K with estimated population of over 2 crore and 1.5 crore, can have only a maximum of seven and nine Ministers respectively. The administration of public order, police and land in Delhi is not with the Delhi government. Similarly, public order and the police of Jammu and Kashmir will not be with its government. Nevertheless, considering the population of these Union Territories, the 10% limit for their COM may be reconsidered.

*Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer. He currently trains civil-service aspirants. Views expressed are personal.*

THE GIST

▼ The present Council of Ministers consists of the Prime Minister, 30 Cabinet Ministers, 5 Ministers of State (MoS) with independent charge and 36 MoS

▼ The first COM at the time of independence had only 15 Ministers headed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. When the council started expanding, through the 91st Constitutional amendment in 2003, the total number of Ministers including PM/CM in the COM was limited to 15% of the total strength of Lok Sabha/State Legislative Assembly.

▼ A thorny issue even after the limit on number of ministers is the appointment of Parliamentary Secretaries in various States. Courts have stepped in multiple times to restrain States from appointing PS to circumvent the constitutional limit set for the number of Ministers

## What is SWM cess and why is it levied on waste generators?

How has the SWM cess fared so far and why has it hit the headlines suddenly? How has Bengaluru been handling its solid waste management and what is about to change going forward?

Pushkara S.V.

The story so far:

**T**he Bruhat Bengaluru Mahangara Palike (BBMP) has proposed a Solid Waste Management (SWM) Cess of ₹100 per month for each household. While the proposal has sparked debate and criticism among residents and stakeholders, it is important to understand the rationale behind SWM cess, its intended use, and the broader context of solid waste management challenges faced by Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in India.

Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) levy user fees or SWM cess as per the provisions of Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. According to these guidelines, ULBs must collect user fees/cess for SWM services provided. ULBs typically charge about ₹30-50 per month as SWM cess, which is collected along with property tax. ULBs are now considering revising these rates and imposing higher

charges on bulk waste generators to meet a portion of the costs incurred in providing SWM services.

What are the costs?

Offering SWM services is complex and resource-intensive. ULBs typically deploy about 80% of their manpower and up to 50% of their annual budgets to provide SWM services to city residents.

In a city like Bangalore, an urban resident generates about 0.6 kg of waste per day, totalling 0.2 tonnes per person per year. Overall, Bangalore generates about 5,000 tonnes of solid waste per day. Managing this volume of waste requires around 5,000 door-to-door waste collection vehicles, 600 compactors, and about 20,000 Paurakarmikas.

SWM services comprise four components: collection, transportation, processing and disposal. ULBs package collection and transportation together, and processing and disposal together. Collection and transportation are

resource and labour-intensive and come up to 85-90% of the SWM budget, whereas only about 10-15% is spent on processing and disposal of waste.

What are the challenges?

Solid waste generated in Indian cities consists of about 55-60% wet biodegradable material and 40-45% non-biodegradable material. The portion of recyclable material in the dry waste is minimal, only about 1-2%, with the rest being mostly non-recyclable and non-biodegradable waste. Although 55% of the wet waste can be converted into organic compost or biogas, the yield is as low as 10-12%, making both composting and biogas generation from solid waste financially unviable. Typically, operational revenue from waste processing facilities covers only about 35-40% of operational expenses, with the rest subsidised by the ULB.

Apart from financial challenges, ULBs face other challenges associated with SWM services, such as extra work of

clearing open points and drains, preventing open littering, seasonal changes in waste generation, and sweeping operations. Additionally, the disposal of non-compostable and non-recyclable dry waste, such as single-use plastic, textile waste and inert materials, is expensive since the material needs to be shipped to cement factories or waste-to-energy projects located about 400-500 km from cities.

Large cities like Bangalore spend about 15% of their budget—about ₹1,643 crore out of ₹11,163 crore—whereas the revenue from SWM services is almost negligible at ₹20 lakh per year. Smaller cities tend to spend up to 50% of their budget but also end up with almost negligible revenue. Hence, ULBs charge SWM cess to cover a portion of the costs.

What is the solution?

Although collection and transportation of waste generate no revenue, several strategies can reduce overall expenditure on SWM and lower user charges. These are segregation of waste at source, reducing single-use plastic, decentralised composting initiatives, Information, Education and Awareness (IEC) to prevent open littering, and asking bulk waste generators to process their own waste.

A balanced approach, combining marginal user charges with efficient operations, could help make our cities cleaner.

*Pushkara S.V. works with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru.*

THE GIST

▼ The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahangara Palike's decision to levy a Solid Waste Management cess of ₹100 per household has sparked debate and criticism among residents and stakeholders.

▼ Offering SWM services is complex and resource intensive. The yield from waste conversion is low and typically, operational revenue from waste processing facilities covers only about 35-40% of operational expenses, with the rest subsidised by the Urban Local Bodies.

▼ Large cities like Bangalore spend about 15% of their budget whereas the revenue from SWM services, is almost negligible at ₹20 lakh per year. Smaller cities tend to spend up to 50% of their budget but also end up with almost negligible revenue. Hence, ULBs charge SWM cess to cover a portion of the costs



CACHE

Is Pakistan using a firewall to censor social media platforms?

Pakistani media outlets reported that the country is deploying a Chinese-style firewall to block access to social media platforms; even those using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to access the Internet are likely to be hit by this firewall; however, Pakistan Information Minister denies reports



According to estimates from the digital privacy research group Top10VPN, Pakistan has shut down the Internet for 1,752 hours so far in 2024. AFP

Sahana Venugopal

Pakistani media outlets reported in the past week that the country plans to implement a Chinese-style firewall to block users from accessing social media platforms.

Newspapers *Pakistan Observer* and *Daily Ausaf* claim the government is ready to set up a ‘National Firewall’ to stop people from accessing X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube. These outlets also noted that there are plans for filtering keywords to enforce the policy and block unwanted content. Other media reports claim even those using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access the Internet would be hit by this digital firewall.

However, media outlet Samaa on June 10 quoted Pakistan’s Information Minister Atta Tarar as saying that no ‘Chinese-style firewall’ was being set up, though he did speak about the need to crack down on hate speech and misinformation.

Such conflicting reports reveal the lack of clarity regarding the current status of Pakistan’s potential firewall and its implementation. But, it must be noted that Pakistan does have a history of curtailing people’s access to the Internet, either through website or social media blocks. Some examples include a Twitter block in 2017 that was flagged by the company itself, and Internet disruptions earlier this year around the time of the country’s elections.

How does a digital firewall work?

Simply put, firewalls are security tools that stop online traffic from reaching certain sites. They can prevent malicious actors from targeting individual users’

computer systems or home networks, and even thwart cyber threats on specific websites.

Though in recent times they are associated with censorship by oppressive governments, firewalls were meant to be a security tool. In fact, if you look at the settings of your personal computer, you will likely see options to set up firewalls of your own with varying restriction levels. A firewall can be a physical device, or a software-based tool. It depends on a specific user’s needs.

At the other end of the spectrum, large firewalls like the Great Firewall of China, for example, are highly complex cybersecurity tools maintained at scale to prevent people from accessing large sections of the Internet. That means nation states can entirely stop citizens from accessing the most commonly used websites on the Internet – say social media sites or information gathering platforms.

While VPNs or privacy browsers can help disguise a user’s location, the amount of friction in the process of trying to bypass a firewall puts off most people and repels those who lack technical skills and knowledge.

How are people’s lives affected?

When used by nation-states, a firewall impedes activists, journalists, dissidents, and regime critics from obtaining information critical of the government. Internet shutdowns and social media blocks also prevent governments or military authorities from being held accountable during periods of civil unrest and violence.

Whenever an Internet shutdown or block is suddenly implemented, the country’s citizens suffer a huge setback,

education is disrupted, and healthcare institutions struggle to provide quality care.

According to estimates from the digital privacy research group Top10VPN, Pakistan has shut down the Internet for 1,752 hours so far in 2024.

“Pakistan’s restrictions have been by far the costliest election-related shutdown, costing \$351 million,” noted the group in its report, adding that the economic cost of Internet shutdowns worldwide last year was \$9.13 billion.

A firewall might look like a viable alternative to authoritarian nation states who wish to replace a larger, free Internet with a controlled intra-net. However, setting up and maintaining a firewall is no easy task. Even for a small company, firewall implementation and maintenance are expensive. The firewalls require constant monitoring to thwart bad actors and patch security vulnerabilities as soon as they are detected. At a national level, this expenditure is much higher as a far greater number of people are looking to bypass the restrictions.

Firewalls also bring up antitrust concerns because they hurt competition. Well-performing companies and businesses that would normally gain more users may be blocked and replaced by government-approved alternatives with lower privacy and service standards, degrading the Internet user’s experience even further.

Adding to this, apps and services may be combined for the authorities’ convenience instead of encouraging users to try out new and independent alternatives. The Great Firewall of China is a major example of this phenomenon.

Both India and Pakistan have a record of censoring the Internet or shutting it

down. India blocked access to the Internet 116 times in 2023, per a report released by the Keep It On coalition.

Has Pakistan blocked the Internet or social media before?

Pakistan has frequently obstructed people from accessing the Internet or specific social media platforms over the course of more than a decade. Talks of a Chinese-style national firewall in Pakistan have been making rounds since around 2012, though not much verified data is available regarding the status of this project.

In 2012, the country’s government blocked around 20,000 websites, including YouTube, as per a Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) official. In 2017, Jack Dorsey-led Twitter posted on its Global Government Affairs account that it was aware of reports that the “Pakistani government has taken action to block Twitter service, as well as other social media services.”

In the first two months of 2024 as Pakistan prepared for its elections, the government throttled access to Elon Musk-owned X for days on end. Internet service was also largely affected during this time period. Activists protested the move, but government authorities attributed it to system upgrades.

“Pakistani authorities have already imposed multiple shutdowns that disrupted opposition activities during this election cycle. At least 11 Internet shutdowns were imposed during the last election year of 2018, and the authoritarian use of shutdowns has only emboldened through 2022, 2023, and now 2024,” said digital rights advocacy group Access Now, in a statement in February.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Iceland

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION #1

June 17 marks the end of Iceland’s centuries old ties with which country?

QUESTION #2

What is the Capital of Iceland and what distinction does it hold as regards its location?

QUESTION #3

Name the Icelandic parliament which is one of oldest surviving parliaments in the world, having been founded in 930 at Pingvellir (‘assembly fields’) and situated approximately 45 km close to its modern capital.

QUESTION #4

Name the Icelandic saga that is considered one of the greatest prose works of medieval literature?

QUESTION #5

The ‘Hakarl’, an Icelandic national dish, is made using the rotten meat of which marine animal that has been cured with a fermentation process and hung to dry in an open air shed.

QUESTION #6

Which late American sporting legend, who won the World championship in his sport at Reykjavik in 1972 but became a recluse, was granted an Icelandic citizenship in 2005?



Visual question: If the colours white and blue in the Icelandic flag represent the snow and ocean, what does red represent?

Answers to the previous day’s quiz:

- White colour said to be achromatic because it has no \_\_\_\_ **Ans:-Hue**
- When red, green, and blue are mixed on electronic screens, you get white. This process is called \_\_\_\_ **Ans:- Additive mixing**
- Name the carbonate mineral (or rock) with the use of which paintings from the Palaeolithic ear were able to obtain white colour **Ans:- Calcite or chalk.**
- Ancient Rome had two words to describe the colour white: \_\_\_\_ and candidus. **Ans:- Albus**
- Jainism has two branches. The names of the two branches are \_\_\_\_ and Digamber, which in Sanskrit mean “white clad” and “sky clad”, respectively. **Ans:- Shwetamber**
- Visual question: This man created Russia’s flag by reordering the colours of the Dutch flag, which was the first national flag to feature white **Ans:- Peter the Great**

Early Birds

Rajmohan V – C Saravanan – Jyot Prakash Gulati – Bharath Viswanathan – Abhinav Raj Satwat



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

‘Is prepone the opposite of postpone?’

“I’ve seen that unhappy look before. Did you have another silly argument with Sujatha?”

“Is it that obvious? I tell you, that woman just drives me crazy.”

“What did the two of you argue about this time? Was it about the recent elections or was it...”

“It had nothing to do with politics. It was about the word ‘prepone’. I argued that the opposite of ‘postpone’ is ‘prepone’. She said that native speakers of English do not use ‘prepone’. Tell me, is she right or am I right?”

“Well, for a change, both of you are right! You see, we Indians coined the word ‘prepone’. We use it quite a bit in our country. It’s quite common to hear a sentence like, the meeting was postponed by a couple of hours.”

“We need to postpone the launch date of our new product. It needs to be launched at least a week before our rival’s.”

“That’s a good example! But the word is mostly used by us. Native speakers...”

“Why don’t native speakers use it? After all, ‘prepone’ has been listed in most standard dictionaries.”

“That’s true. But the dictionaries make it very clear that it’s an example of Indian English!”

“You are right! Many dictionaries have ‘Indian’ or ‘Indian English’ within brackets next to the word. So, what word do native speakers of English use instead of ‘prepone’?”

“They use quite a few actually. One is ‘advance’. The meeting was advanced to Monday.”

“Would it be possible to advance my appointment to Friday?”

“That’s a good example. Native speakers also use the expression ‘move forward’. Tomorrow’s meeting has been moved forward. We’ll be meeting at 10:00 a.m. instead of 3:00 p.m.”

“I think Sneha is planning to move her wedding date forward.”

“Good for her. Who is this Sneha that you’re talking about? Do I know her?”

“She was my classmate. I don’t know if you ever met her. She was tall...”

“I don’t think I’ve met her. But for some reason, her name rings a bell.”

“Rings a bell? What does the expression mean?”

“When somebody says something, and you respond by saying that it rings a bell, what you are suggesting is that it sounds familiar. What the person has said...”

“What the person has said reminds you of something. It jogs your memory.”

S. Upendran  
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Word of the day

Repartee:

quick and usually funny answers and remarks in conversation

Synonyms: humour, wittiness

Usage: Oscar Wilde’s plays are full of witty repartee.

Pronunciation: https://bit.ly/reparteeepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˌrep.ɑːˈtiː/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject ‘Text & Context’



Fed’s flip-flops

Fed’s indecision poses challenges for central banks

After adopting a distinctly dovish tone in its last two monetary policy meetings and raising market hopes for an early start to the easing cycle, the US Federal Open Markets Committee (FOMC) pulled back in its latest meeting on June 12. The policy statement showed that the FOMC is back to its indecisive avatar while keeping policy rates on hold. The statement noted the ‘solid’ pace of expansion in the economy despite US GDP growth coming in at a two-year low of 1.6 per cent for the first quarter of 2024.



It noted ‘modest progress’ towards the 2 per cent inflation target despite signs of cooling inflation. It mentioned strong job gains and ‘low’ unemployment. Latest US payrolls data showed high job additions of 2,72,000 jobs in May, but a spike in the unemployment rate to the critical 4 per cent mark, a two-year high. Signs of a slowing economy and a below-forecast CPI print of 3.3 per cent, had led markets to budget for the Fed to cut rates as early as July and pencil in two-three rate cuts for the rest of 2024. However, the much-awaited dot-plot, where FOMC members share their rate projections, has now forecast only one rate cut for 2024. The statement this time also saw no mention of the Fed’s plan to slow its pace of quantitative tightening, clearly outlined in the previous meeting, leaving markets confused.

US commentators have been increasingly arguing that early rate cuts may be necessary for the country to achieve a soft landing. The prop to consumer spending from excess savings amassed during Covid are already waning. US housing starts have seen sharp declines from February as mortgage rates upwards of 7 per cent have deterred buyers. A letter to the Fed by US lawmakers, urging rate cuts in this meeting, pointed out that high interest rates were feeding into shelter costs and ironically propping up the very CPI that the Fed was trying to quell. Shelter costs in the US make up about a third of the CPI. These indicators also suggest that the US Fed, by delaying its rate cuts too much, could put the US economy at risk of a sharp slowdown, undermining global growth prospects.

The Fed’s flip-flops also make it not just expedient, but necessary for other central banks to decouple their rate actions from the US. The European Central Bank, Bank of Canada, People’s Bank of China et al have already gone ahead with rate easing policies. After the recent monetary policy meeting, the Reserve Bank of India Governor explicitly stated that he was not in the game of ‘Follow the Fed’ and would calibrate India’s monetary policy to local conditions. However, the RBI is sure to be aware that it would involve trade-offs on capital flows and the exchange rate, given that US remains the largest contributor of foreign portfolio flows to emerging markets such as India. The unexpected election verdict and higher foreign investor participation in Indian bonds starting this month, will make this balancing act harder.

OTHER VOICES.

The Japan Times

The center holds as Europe’s far right surges  
The far right appears to be the winner of the just held European parliamentary elections. While the conservative center continues to control European Union institutions, a surge in support among more extreme elements of the right has alarm bells ringing. Populism is on the rise in Europe — as it is elsewhere in the world — and leaders are struggling with ways to mute its impact. For much of the world, the results will have limited effect. There appears to be growing fatigue with the war in Ukraine, but there is no indication of a readiness to abandon that fight. Nor is there evidence of a willingness to accommodate China as it seeks to expand its influence. Europe will continue to resist Beijing’s pressure and predation. Japan should welcome both outcomes. TOKYO, JUNE 16

The Guardian

Keir Starmer’s plans could face a long haul  
At the Conservative manifesto launch on Tuesday, Rishi Sunak offered a selection of gimmicks not a strategy, and a compendium of uncosted promises instead of a plan. The result was a slapdash manifesto, with large areas of government responsibility almost wholly ignored. It offered the same old prejudices and the same old policy reflexes to the same old audience. Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour manifesto launch in Manchester on Thursday could hardly have been more different. A party that looked into the electoral abyss in 2019 now stands on the threshold of government – and it showed. Labour has raised its game, and the manifesto rollout was optimistic and professional. Sir Keir’s speech was almost painfully aware of how much is at stake. Everything was part of a plan for renewal. No area of policy was left out. There were no surprises. It was all very thorough, conscientious and, in its way, impressive. The contrast between Mr Sunak’s desperate insouciance and Sir Keir’s unmistakable gravity suggests that each is well aware where they will be a month from now. LONDON, JUNE 15

The paradoxes of polarisation

In the Left-Right, Liberal-illiberal divide there is no room either for reasoning or facts or contexts

LINE& LENGTH.  
TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

In the last decade a word, never before used with reference to Indian politics, has become its staple description: polarisation. It was introduced by the Congress party along with another term, ‘echo chamber’. The BJP countered this with ‘ecosystem’, meaning the Congress sympathisers. Mind bogglingly stupid polarisation is the result. The Cambridge dictionary defines polarisation as “the act of dividing” something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups”. So Indian politics today is divided between those who are right wingers even if they aren’t. Those who oppose the right are left wingers even if they aren’t. This is because Left and Right aren’t defined. But in India these terms have become an approximate code for pro- or anti-Muslim. Indeed, many don’t even know the difference between a religion and its practitioners. Within that Left-Right division is a subdivision: liberal and illiberal. A right winger is illiberal and a left winger is liberal even though the evidence doesn’t support this categorisation. And this is where we run into what I call the ‘paradoxes of polarisation’. It affects the intellectual class most, on both sides. The biggest paradox is that liberals on both sides have become completely illiberal, closing their minds totally to any view other than theirs. Facts, or other peoples’ informed opinions, don’t matter to them. The driving force is pure prejudice uninformed by even the slightest modicum of fairness. It’s like the Black Panthers formula: “if you believe in the solution join us; if you’re the problem ‘we will take care of you’.” All these people are otherwise highly intelligent and well educated. But they believe that a view is correct merely because it’s the one who hold it. The Latin expression for this is *ipse dixit* which means “because I say so”. This has left no room either for reasoning or facts or contexts. It has therefore led to everything being judged and condemned on the basis of who is doing or saying it, not what is being done



When in power, the Left and Right parties behave in a similar manner ANI

or said. It has also led to another new term: whataboutery. Everyone counters everything by saying “but what about that?” I must admit I too am guilty of this because it’s an easy and lazy way of

Polarisation of intellect has resulted in the Left and the Right converging in their follies. What worse fate can befall a society?

weakening an argument. It’s very effective because it takes the moral sheen of polarised criticism. What’s more X, formerly Twitter, has allowed everyone to contest everything without reference to context. The opposite of this is ignoring context altogether. Everyone is guilty of this. The IT cells of political parties are revelling in it.

THE PARADOXES  
This sort of implacable opposition to each other has resulted in many

State governments maintain capex pace in FY24

The States’ revenue deficit was curtailed despite moderate revenue receipts. But the higher fiscal deficit was capex-driven

Aditi Nayar

A few themes stand out while parsing through the provisional data on FY2024 fiscal indicators of the State governments and their use of RBI’s liquidity facilities. One, lower grants dampened the growth of aggregate revenue receipts of the State governments, but a disciplined rise in the revenue expenditure allowed the momentum of growth of capital spending to be maintained. However, some States tapped into RBI’s liquidity facilities more frequently in FY2024 than in FY2023, hinting at a tight cash-flow position. The combined revenue receipts of the 23 States governments (excluding Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Manipur, Mizoram and Sikkim) rose by 7.4 per cent as per the provisional actuals (PA) for FY2024 published by the Comptroller General of India. This was the slowest pace of YoY revenue growth recorded by the States since the Covid-induced contraction in FY2021. A key culprit was the sharp 22 per cent YoY decline in grants from the Centre in FY2024, as both GST compensation grants and Finance Commission (FC) grants were lower from the year-ago level. However, States received a pleasant windfall in the form of the release of an

additional ₹250 billion as tax devolution in March 2024. This was in excess of ₹11 trillion included by the Centre in the revised estimates of FY2024.

REVENUE SPENDING SLOWS  
States’ overall moderate growth in the revenue receipts in FY2024 was mirrored in their revenue spending, which saw a limited YoY rise of 7 per cent. With this, the State governments’ revenue deficit was pared to ₹887 billion in FY2024 PA from ₹938 billion in FY2023. However, the rise in the capital spending led to the widening of the fiscal deficit of the 23 States to ₹8.4 trillion in FY2024 PA from ₹7.2 trillion in FY2023. On the capital spending side, the 23 States were able to maintain the pace of 20-24 per cent YoY expansion in FY2024, in line with the trend in recent years. While several States saw a healthy rise in their capital spending, Punjab’s capital spending declined sharply by 36 per cent in FY2024 PA. Possibly, the cessation of the GST compensation grants has dented the Punjab’s revenue receipts more deeply than the other States. Punjab suffered a permanent loss of revenues on certain items, on which it used to levy agricultural cesses/fees prior to the GST regime, which is no longer permitted. Encouragingly, the pattern of States’ quarterly capital spending became less back-ended in FY2024. Nearly 39 per cent of the total capital spending in



HEALTHY SIGN. Robust capex REUTERS

FY2024, was incurred in H1 FY2024 compared to 26-35 per cent in the recent years. The upfronting of capital spending appears to have benefited from the early disbursements of funds by the Centre to the States under the interest-free capex loan scheme. The Centre had modified the guidelines for availing the funds under the capex loan for FY2024, to encourage less back-ended utilisation. Notably, Andhra Pradesh (AP), Kerala and Punjab had not availed the capex loan until January 2024 as they had not fulfilled the required conditions. Interestingly, some States tapped the Ways and Means Advances (WMA) and RBI’s overdraft (OD) facility more frequently in FY2024 compared to FY2023. Kerala used the WMA for 126 days more in FY2024 over FY2023 while

increasing its OD utilisation by 66 days. The reported cut in the net borrowing ceiling of Kerala in FY2024 and drop in 15th FC recommended revenue deficit grant to Kerala in that fiscal may have tightened the liquidity position. Punjab, which did not utilise the WMA and OD window during FY2022-23, accessed it for 105 days and 16 days, respectively, in FY2024. This could have been a fall out of lower grants (revenue deficit and GST compensation grants). AP, Telangana and Jammu and Kashmir accessed funds under the WMA window and OD for extended periods of time in FY2024. Going forward, a higher tax devolution in the final FY2025 Union Budget relative to the ₹12.2 trillion included in the Interim Budget could boost the resource availability of the state governments for capital spending. The Centre has already stepped-up the tax devolution in June 2024 to ₹1.4 trillion from ₹699 billion each in April-May 2024. Additionally, the Centre may enhance the allocation of the capex loan scheme in the FY2025 final Budget. Nevertheless, a larger number of States would need to fulfil the conditions necessary for availing the funds under the latter in FY2025, to reduce their reliance on the WMA and/or OD facilities.

The writer is Chief Economist, Head- Research & Outreach, ICRA

BELOW THE LINE



MoS’s ‘transfer’ worries  
The Finance Ministry, under NDA 3.0 has just one Minister of State. Given the task on hand one would think his hands will be full. And his hands were full on Day One itself, but not with regular files or official work. It was related with transfers and postings. Earlier, there used to be

two MoS – one for revenue, expenditure etc. and second for financial services, disinvestment etc. Now, all the six departments (Revenue, Expenditure, Economic Affairs, Financial Services, Investment & Public Asset Management and Public Enterprises) will be taken care by one MoS, Pankaj Chaudhary. Even before taking charge, Chaudhary got number of calls for transfer and posting for bank staff. He later admitted the calls are set to rise. However, he must be relieved that there were not many transfer requests from tax personnel. Speaker Showdown  
In the high-stakes arena of the Lok Sabha, the Speaker’s post has

become the epicentre of political manoeuvring. With BJP having to rely on allies TDP and JD(U), the Speaker’s role is crucial. TDP, eyeing the post, sees it as a safeguard against potential BJP-engineered defections. The Speaker’s power to decide on disqualification issues makes this election a battleground. BJP is pushing for its candidate, while TDP demands the role as their price for support. The outcome will shape the balance of power and the future of the coalition. EVMs at G7  
Despite the conclusion of elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi still seems to be on campaign mode. At the G7 outreach summit in Italy,

Modi’s surprising plug for India’s electronic voting machines (EVMs) — hailing them for their “impartiality and transparency” — turned heads. This praise comes amidst ongoing Opposition allegations of election rigging through EVMs. Political observers wonder whether Modi’s victory speech was a celebration of democracy or a rebuttal to his critics? All in the family?  
Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections were much in news for the political shift it saw. Though elections usually have one winner, this time there seems to be two families winning — the NTR family and YS Rajasekhara Reddy family. These two families have a foot in all

parties — TDP, YSRCP, BJP and Congress. So irrespective of who is in power the family ties hopefully will remain strong! MTNL: Future uncertain  
Public sector companies have hogged the limelight after the Modi-led NDA won a third term. However, the one which is standing out is Mahanagar Telephone Nigam. The once sought-after telco has registered a net loss of ₹3,302 crore on a topline of ₹728 crore in FY23 and its net loss was ₹818 crore on revenue of ₹193 crore in the March quarter. Interestingly, the PSU’s stock is traded at ₹42 a piece. Only investors buying the stock seem to know about the company’s future. Our Bureaus



# Healing careers

How ‘Deshbhakti’ drives these women

## BOOK EXTRACT.

Excerpts from the book *Conversations with the Career Doctor*, by Saundarya Rajesh, Founder – President, Avtar Group.

We are on the fifth and topmost floor of the Ramada Raj Park, a humble hotel on TTK Road, one of the oldest localities in Chennai. ... It’s a large vacant hall and we have separated it into two parts: a row of interview booths and an area cordoned off for group discussions. ... The process is to start at 9.30 a.m. The year is 2006 and it is the humid month of July. ‘We’ are Team Avtar and something historic was about to happen.

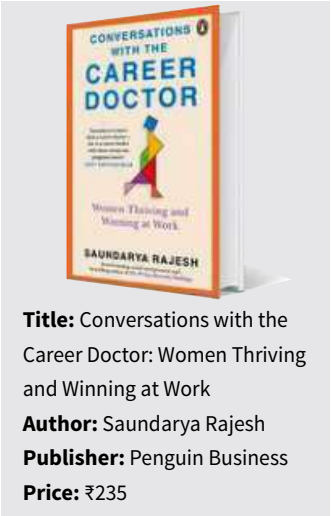
Avtar was started in December 2000 as a talent strategy consulting firm with the primary goal of providing India Inc. with exceptional female talent. After five years of intense effort, we had managed a breakthrough. A large multinational bank was ready to experiment with hiring second-career women for the very first time. ...

It is 9.30 a.m. and we don’t have a single candidate as yet. ... We are getting desperate. ... At that moment, the intercom buzzes. I pick it up, my hands clammy. It is from the front desk. ‘Madam, how can we send all these women up in one lift?’ she demands. All of us run to the window. ...

A glorious sight awaited us. The road was filled with women — at least 500 of them, standing in a serpentine queue, quietly and intently, but impatient to board the elevator to a second career! ... The team from the bank met over 200 women for the final and ended up hiring over 148 of them. ... And that was the official launch of India’s first-ever career re-entry programme!

But this chapter is not about that. It is about an amazing conversation that I had with Hema, an MCom graduate and mother of two who taught neighbourhood children how to play the veena. ... After brilliant results in her school final, Hema wanted to become a banker. ... But her parents had other plans. They found a suitable match for her and convinced her to get married. Life took over. The next two decades sped by. ...

When I asked her why she had applied, she replied (in Tamil): ‘Desabhakti, ma’am, patriotism! My family has a sufficient income, so it is not money that makes me want to work. I want to contribute to my nation’s development. I want to build my country!’ ... I was thrilled. This was such an incredible reason why Indian women must pursue careers. ...



**Title:** Conversations with the Career Doctor: Women Thriving and Winning at Work  
**Author:** Saundarya Rajesh  
**Publisher:** Penguin Business  
**Price:** ₹235

More women in the workforce pushes the entire country towards social and economic empowerment. ... So, the next time you doubt your decision to pursue a career, remind yourself that you are not being selfish — you are being patriotic!

But if women’s participation in the workforce is a win-win for everyone, why is India still grappling with abysmal women’s workforce participation numbers? ... We, as a society, still believe that childcare is the primary responsibility of mothers. ... Women are reinforcers of these gender norms too. ... And what becomes of these women who pause their careers in their prime years? Childcare and housework consume them. ... After an extended break, when they long to get back to work, they find themselves grappling with skill gaps and feelings of isolation and self-doubt. ...

But trust me, a starkly different path is possible for second-career women and Avtar’s work in the field of women’s workforce participation clearly proves this point. Avtar has worked with over 500 organizations to help them achieve gender diversity and assist them in fostering a supportive environment for women. ... Through myavtar.com, India’s first diversity portal, Avtar has enabled over 1,00,000 women to pursue fulfilling careers. ...

While we are incredibly happy with what we have achieved to date, we know that we are still far from our goal. ... Until every woman out there is able to dream without bounds and pursue those professional dreams fearlessly and unapologetically, Avtar’s work will continue. And when a woman asks me how she can keep the passion for her career and profession alive, I simply reply, ‘Desabhakti!’

Excerpted with permission from Penguin Random House India’

# A case for trade liberalisation

A collection of articles that traces India’s bumpy journey on the global trade highway, amidst changing trade patterns

## BOOK REVIEW.

B Baskar

In a world that is ‘de-globalising’, where trade blocs are rapidly gaining ground and trade wars are imminent, it takes a brave economist to advocate free trade and tariff cuts. Arvind Panagariya, Professor at Columbia University, the first NITI Aayog Chairman and now the Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, does that in his book ‘India’s Trade Policy: 1990s and Beyond’.

This book is a collection of articles that Panagariya wrote in Indian newspapers and magazines over the last three decades. Though there is an attempt to organize them thematically, it suffers from repetition, something common to collection of articles.

The articles are bunched in 10 parts ranging from trade policy, trade relations with US and China and the WTO and the various rounds of negotiations held under it – Seattle, Doha, Cancun, FTAs and the future of global trade.

In the first four parts, issues relating to India’ trade policy over the years is discussed. Panagariya fervently advocates tariff cuts and free trade and firmly believes in the benefits of a rapidly globalising world economy. Many of these articles were written in 1990s and early noughties and the issues and policy prescriptions reflect the flavour of those times.

He is a passionate opponent of that favourite instrument of policymakers – anti-dumping duty. In a couple of articles written in 2018, he frowns on the government’s decision to raise tariffs and the return to protection. Panagariya is clearly not a fan of the

government’s decision to support MSMEs and curb imports. Instead of appointing a panel to curb imports, Panagariya feels it would be a better idea to have a panel to boost exports.

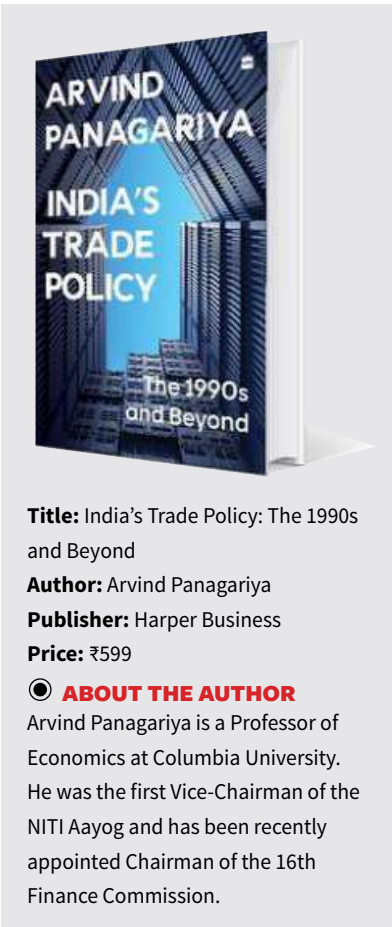
In an article written in 2017, Panagariya criticizes the ‘Make in India’ policy arguing that along with reducing imports, this policy will also reduce exports and hurt the competitiveness of Indian industry. It would be interesting to see what Panagariya would have to say on the government’s flagship industrial policy – the PLI scheme. But sadly there is no article in this collection on this crucial policy issue on which a lot of funds and policy focus have been accorded.

Interestingly, in an article written way back in 1989, Panagariya calls for trade liberalization but seems cautious on easing rules on foreign investments. In a series of articles on India-US trade relations, Panagariya calls out some of the US’s unfair moves on Super 301 and H-1B visa, which the Indian IT sector feels targets them unfairly. Donald Trump’s tariff hikes in 2019 and India’s measured response to it finds mention in one of the articles.

If Trump returns to the Oval office, the world will have to brace itself of more such tariff hikes.

On India’s testy trade relationship with China, we can discern a clear shift in Panagariya’s stance. The articles written 10-15 years ago call for deeper trade engagement with China despite the growing imbalance. But post-Galwan, the author is wary of China and advocates a strategy of “decoupling”. He favours signing free trade pacts, especially with the US, EU and other like-minded countries to counter China’s economic heft.

**WTO AND ITS DISCONTENTS**  
There are 15 articles in the section ‘India



**Title:** India’s Trade Policy: The 1990s and Beyond  
**Author:** Arvind Panagariya  
**Publisher:** Harper Business  
**Price:** ₹599  
● **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
Arvind Panagariya is a Professor of Economics at Columbia University. He was the first Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog and has been recently appointed Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission.

and multilateral trade negotiations’, which is perhaps the meatiest part of the book. A couple of these articles are co-authored with Jagdish Bhagwati. Unfortunately given that the WTO is a shambles now many of the issues dealt in this section may seem dated now.

Panagariya comments on India’s stance on the various rounds of WTO that took place in Singapore, Seattle, Doha, Cancun, and Hong Kong. The

West’s attempts at including non-trade or “Singapore issues” like labour, trade facilitation and environment and India’s valiant and pragmatic attempts to keep these issues out and focus only on the trade issues are brought out by Panagariya in these articles.

Of course India had to cop a lot of criticism in the Western press for its “obstructionist” attitude, but on the whole Panagariya gives credit to the Indian negotiators of that era for keeping the focus on India’s core interests, though he does on occasion wishes there was greater flexibility by India.

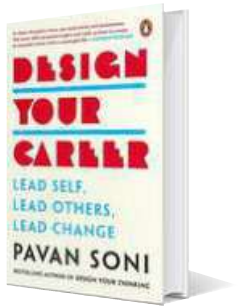
Agriculture subsidies is another bugbear that Panagariya talks about and here the US (which has a comparative advantage) and the EU (which is lacking in comparative advantage) were often adversaries. Interestingly there seems to be a healthy bi-partisanship in India’s stance where the Vajpayee’s NDA government and Manmohan Singh’s UPA government converged on trade issues. Though Panagariya does not specifically mention this, it comes through clearly in the articles.

The hollowness of the West’s pious incantations on labour issue is called out by Panagariya. He argues that far from caring for the rights of developing countries’ workers, the West fears more the competition from the developing world.

In a world that has clearly lost its appetite for a rules-based global trading system, there is a question mark hanging over the future of the WTO. Though Panagariya calls on the developing world to resurrect the WTO’s fortunes, in a world fast moving towards bilateral trade pacts and plurilateral trade blocs, the WTO’s future looks bleak.

This book will be of interest to those looking for a quick read on India’s trade journey over the last three decades.

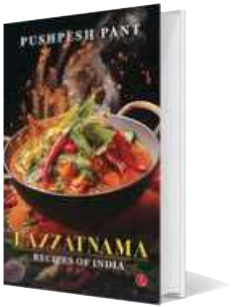
## NEW READS.



**Title:** Design Your Career: Lead Self, Lead Others, Lead Change  
**Author:** Pavan Soni

**Publisher:** Penguin Business

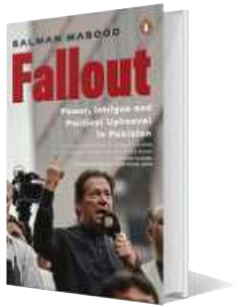
**The book is** the distillation of the author’s 550 workshops at over 175 organisations across five countries



**Title:** Lazzatnama: Recipes of India  
**Author:** Pushpesh Pant

**Publisher:** Rupa Publication

**With recipes spanning** the length and breadth of India, the book captures the diverse culinary landscape of a country rich in exemplary cuisines



**Fallout:** Power, Intrigue and Political Upheaval in Pakistan  
**Author:** Salman Masood

**Publisher:** Penguin

**The book delves** into the tumultuous journey of Imran Khan’s transition from a tenacious opposition leader to the prime minister of Pakistan

## TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 17, 2004

### TCS proceeds to fund mainly telecom: Irani

Tata Sons will plough back a majority of the proceeds from initial shares sale of Tata Consultancy Services to its telecom company Tata Telecom, the Tata Sons Director, Mr J.J. Irani, has said. Telecom, along with software, steel and automobiles, which have been identified as future growth triggers for the Tatas, will draw a majority of future investments, he added.

### Filip likely for Mumbai, Delhi airport revamp

The Government move to reconstitute the empowered Group of Ministers (e-GoM) in the next couple of days is likely to see the proposed modernisation and restructuring of Delhi and Mumbai airports getting a filip. Sources indicated that the e-GoM will have to take a view on a number of important issues including the decision of the Ministry of Civil Aviation to cap the foreign direct investment (FDI) ceiling of parties bidding for the modernisation of the two metro airports at 49 per cent.

### Montek is Plan panel Deputy chairman

The Prime Minister has reconstituted the Planning Commission with Mr Montek Singh Ahluwalia as Deputy Chairman.

### Short take

# Potential of Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission

Abhinav Lal

Since its launch by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) in 2016, UPI has been focused on improving accessibility and simplifying the process of transferring funds.

Taking a cue from UPI, India’s healthcare is on its way to replicate a similar revolution in the country through the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM). ABDM aims to interconnect different stakeholders in healthcare like patients, doctors, hospitals, policy makers and so on to facilitate the best quality of care for patients.

Much like UPI, the aim here is to improve affordability and accessibility of healthcare by making it truly inclusive and easy to use.

But can ABDM be UPI’s equivalent in healthcare?

The potential for ABDM, as of today, is in its capacity to address three critical principles just like UPI did when it was launched—Identity, Interoperability, and Data.

**Identity:** ABDM has introduced unique identifiers, such as ABHA (Ayushman Bharat Health Account) ID for consumers, HPR (Healthcare Professionals Registry) ID, and HFR (Health Facility Registry) ID for providers. These unique identifiers create a robust identity layer, allowing

the tracking and identification of every transaction within the healthcare system.

**Interoperability:** The Unified Health Interface (UHI) under ABDM plays a pivotal role in solving the problem of interoperability. It enables patients to use various apps to access healthcare professionals and institutions listed on different platforms. This means a patient using one healthcare app can access a doctor registered on another app, enhancing ease and efficiency.

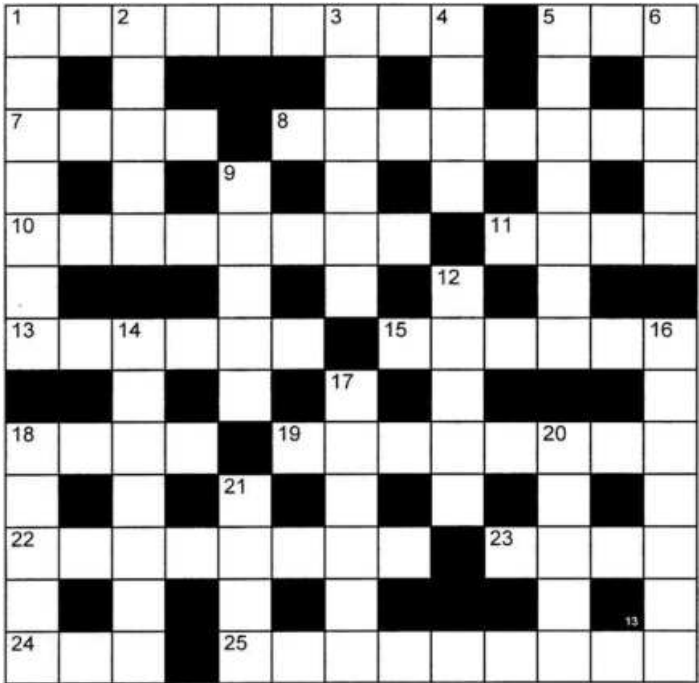
**Data:** Just as UPI reduced cash transactions and enabled end-to-end tracking of financial transactions, ABDM is leading the way in digitising healthcare data. With government incentivisation, the healthcare sector is

transitioning to a digital era where all healthcare data will be digitised, paving the way for innovative use cases, such as quick insurance issuance and payout.

Much like UPI, ABDM is also working on leveraging digital technology to streamline processes, enhance accessibility, and improve efficiency in one of our most critical sectors. It empowers patients with improved access to quality care, particularly in marginalised areas. ABDM will be a game-changer for digital healthcare. It has the potential to address the challenges of identity, interoperability, reduce data fragmentation and ensure seamless health care delivery.

The writer is Co-founder, Practo

## ● BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2462 EASY



### ACROSS

- Old firearm (9)
- Coal-carrier (3)
- Takes part (4)
- Young wild cats (4,4)
- Flee (4,4)
- Remain (4)
- Take away (6)
- Haphazard (6)
- Skin of tree (4)
- Perpendicular (8)
- Blameworthy (8)
- Steering-gear (4)
- Dip one’s head (3)
- Lady related (9)

### DOWN

- Treat with insincere praise (7)
- Bury (5)
- Source (6)
- Monarch (4)
- Visited as ghost (7)
- With a film of dirt (5)
- Cooking, heating apparatus (5)
- Social function (5)
- Irregularly mottled and streaked (7)
- Dairy roundsman (7)
- Four-wheeled carriage, hooded seat behind (6)
- Cured pig flesh (5)
- The elite (5)
- Promenade (4)

## SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2461

**ACROSS** 1. Surely 4. Tropic 9. Pancake 10. Gusto 11. Rows 12. Four 13. She 15. Yoke 16. Gulp 19. Tap 21. Pelt 22. Soda 24. Olive 25. Furnish 26. Stress 27. Endear **DOWN** 1. Superstitious 2. Runaway 3. Lean 5. Rigorous 6. Poses 7. Choreographer 8. Lemon 14. Skippers 17. Provide 18. Cliff 20. Prior 23. Bran



## Apulian interlude

Mr Modi hit the right notes

Four days after being sworn in as Prime Minister for a third time, Narendra Modi travelled to Italy to attend the 50th G7 summit. India was one of 12 countries and five organisations invited to the G7's outreach programme in Fasano, in the Apulia region, situated on the heel of Italy. In terms of tonality, Mr Modi appeared to have hit the right notes. His visit took place a week after the European Union's own massive elections, the largest exercise after India's, and ahead of consequential elections for several G7 leaders — the United States, France, and the UK. Indeed, the longest section of Mr Modi's speech dwelt on the impressive logistics involved in conducting the Indian elections, which he described as “the biggest festival of democracy in the world”. Technology accounted for the second-largest portion of his speech, focusing on the importance of technology access to make the world a more equitable, democratic place and underlining the need to make technology “creative and not destructive”.

His call to end tech monopolies as a founding member and lead chair of the Global Partnership for Artificial Intelligence (AI) sits well with the current mood of governments across the world — especially in Europe — as they challenge the power of Big Tech. His appeal for heralding a “Green Era” is also apt, indirectly highlighting for the world's richest and most powerful nations the need for higher levels of funding of mitigation and adaptation by the world's poorest countries that face the brunt of climate change. He did not fail to mention that India was among the first countries to fulfil its commitments under COP (Conference of Parties) ahead of time. Perhaps his most direct message to the G7 was on the Global South, the leadership of which India has sought to assume, especially by making Africa a permanent member of the G20 during the New Delhi summit last year. As he rightly pointed out, it is the Global South that is “bearing the brunt of global uncertainties and tensions”, an oblique reference to the continuing war in Gaza.

In terms of diplomacy, the gains were mixed. With Indo-US tensions having cooled since the G20 summit, there was a brief handshake with President Joe Biden but no formal meeting, which was explained by officials as an inability to coordinate calendars. A handshake with Justin Trudeau, with whom tensions have been running high over the murder of Khalistani terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil, also suggested that the dialogue between the two countries was alive. Later the Canadian Prime Minister talked about a commitment to collaborate on addressing some “very important issues”. A meeting with Ukraine's embattled President Volodymyr Zelenskyy just before the Swiss Peace Conference got underway near Lake Lucerne enabled Mr Modi to underline India's preferred position of finding a resolution to the war with Russia through “dialogue and diplomacy”. India sent a high-level delegation from the Ministry of External Affairs. The most concrete gain for India was perhaps a commitment by the G7 to promote India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), which was announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit last year, though that remains contingent on a solution to the Israel-Hamas war. As a starting point to Mr Modi's third term, the G7 meeting proved a fortuitous global stage.

## Increasing adoption

Electronic devices will be increasingly driven by AI

Chief Executive Officer Tim Cook's statement that Apple is going to embed OpenAI's ChatGPT into future iterations of iOS has sparked off a new “tech war”. It has focused the spotlight on an ongoing competition to present artificial intelligence (AI) for mass consumption. Elon Musk, who has launched a rival generative AI chatbot, Grok, for public consumption through his new company, xAI, has threatened to ban the use of any Apple products on the premises of his multiple businesses (Tesla, X, Boring Co, xAI, and SpaceX among others) for fear of “security violations”. Meanwhile, a major Apple rival, consumer electronics giant Samsung, has already boasted the launch of AI-embedded functions in its new series of handsets. Indeed, there are rumours that Mr Musk and Samsung may be in talks on collaboration on the AI front to make a new phone. Mr Musk has said that he's worried OpenAI can suction off the data and breach privacy on Apple devices, but sceptics would suspect his outburst against the Apple-OpenAI collaboration is partly driven by rivalry, and partly by the fact that he has a complicated on-again, off-again dispute with OpenAI (where he was a co-founder).

Be that as it may, AI chatbots and large language models (LLMs), and features and apps built upon such platforms are witnessing increasing adoption. Every tech major is looking for ways to integrate AI into their respective offers. This trend promises to change many aspects of digital markets. Operating systems that incorporate AI and search engines, which use AI in some fashion, are just two of the many sectors where LLMs are going to be commonplace soon. Google has incorporated its AI, Gemini, into its search engine, although users have had mixed responses to the changes in the current experience. Bing from Microsoft has also embedded AI. Niche service providers like Perplexity have successfully built “wrappers” that take search engine results, curate them for accuracy, and build in AI prompts using ChatGPT, or other LLMs, to offer natural language results. Alexa is currently working on embedding AI as well.

Apple and Samsung together hold over a 50 per cent market share in mobile devices and tablets. Google has over a 90 per cent market share in global search while Bing has 4 per cent, and Windows has a 69 per cent market share in personal computer (PC) operating systems. The next generation of mobiles, PCs, home security systems, smart fridges, home theatres, and other devices are all likely to have AI embedded, along with Internet of Things (IoT) devices, to improve operating efficiency, and offer a smooth interface to the user. It is likely that voice-activated devices driven by AI will soon become the norm across the consumer electronics industry. Such devices would also be largely capable of self-diagnosis, apart from customising user experience. This would indeed mean paradigm shifts in security, and the need to set new standards in data privacy. For one thing, voice-activated systems can be broken by AI, which can mimic voices flawlessly. Also AI-driven devices with IoT would be streaming data out to many different service providers continuously. Creating and enforcing new laws to keep such data private would present new challenges. However, the world inevitably is headed to some version of this AI-driven future and it will present the potential of increased productivity and convenience. It is to be hoped that the pros outweigh the cons.

## Return of ‘coalition dharma’

Allies are newly empowered, but need not stand in the way of reform

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



The biggest takeaway from the last month appears to be that Indian policy making is back in the age of coalitions. So far, the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA's) pivotal constituents — the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of N Chandrababu Naidu and the Janata Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar — have largely laid low and made few demands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Prime Minister has chosen to emphasise continuity in governance by reappointing much of his Cabinet. But it is far from certain how long this honeymoon will continue.

The ministries allocated to the coalition partners may be of interest. The TDP has been assigned that old mainstay for “allies”, the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Interestingly, the Ministry of Railways — usually much in demand — remains with the former civil servant Ashwini Vaishnaw. Other ministries granted to the constituent parties include the Ministry for Panchayati Raj, for fisheries and animal husbandry, for steel and heavy industry, for food processing, for small and medium enterprises, for skill development, and for traditional healthcare systems.

On the one hand, none of these might immediately strike one as major policymaking ministries. Those have been retained with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Some of them have a major rural or “rurban” focus, such as food processing, making them useful vehicles for patronage. Others have a closer relationship with big business — civil aviation and steel, for example.

At least one of them — skill development and entrepreneurship — should certainly be a major location for policy making in the coming term. That has been given to the Rashtriya Lok Dal's head, the

Jat leader Jayant Chaudhary. Mr Chaudhary's party as recently as two and a half years ago had no elected representatives at all, whether at the Union or the state level. Partly thanks to his ability to curb dissatisfaction among young people in the areas around the national capital, he has now risen to considerable responsibility. It is uncertain whether him being assigned this ministry is a sign that the BJP's leadership trusts his efficiency more than it does those of its other allies, or that unfortunately skill development remains a low priority for this government.

But the fear nevertheless will be that coalition allies, protecting their turf, will play blocker for broader government-wide policy. Suppose, for example, the Ministries of Finance and Environment together can come to some agreement on what domestic carbon pricing would look like. Will the minister of steel and heavy industry, H D Kumaraswamy of the Janata Dal

(Secular), play along? Or will he seek to block any changes that his bureaucrats tell him might reduce the profits and revenue of the big steel companies, both public and private? Mr Kumaraswamy has already made headlines for questioning the scale of the subsidy that the government has set aside for semiconductor fabrication. His criticism — that every job created in Gujarat under the semiconductor scheme would cost ₹3.2 crore — is not mistaken. As a job creation scheme, many of the production-linked incentives to sunrise or strategic sectors are hopelessly inefficient. Yet, as Mr Kumaraswamy was himself forced to acknowledge subsequently, the idea behind the scheme is not job creation per se, but a very expensive attempt to move some production of a critical



## POLICY RULES

MIHIR S SHARMA

## Back to ‘political’ economy

Exactly 30 years ago, writing in this space, I argued there were two companies in Reliance Industries. One set up manufacturing plants and sold products while the other was focused on raising capital and managing it well through its treasury. They were in a symbiotic relationship. Similarly, there are two Narendra Modis: One administers the country from a vastly expanded Prime Minister's Office while the other is on a perpetual political campaign to win votes by maintaining a larger-than-life image in numerous ways. For 10 years this strategy worked well. Modi the politician won most of the elections using a recipe of Hindutva, nationalism, and welfarism, supported by well-oiled party machinery.

On the other hand, under Prime Minister Modi, interest rates were moderate, the fiscal deficit was within control, indirect taxes and levies were raised sharply, and higher revenues were deployed to roll out massive infrastructure projects. The stock markets cheered and part of the urban elite were in raptures, buying into every idea and utterance of Mr Modi, no matter how many times he shifted the goalpost or replaced old slogans with new ones. They were confident that he was on his way to a historic landslide in the general elections of 2024.

To the shock and surprise of most people, though, the election results proved that the last 10 years were an exception. The norm of the previous 25 years — coalition politics — has reassessed itself. Before the elections, politics didn't matter. It was a given that Mr Modi's popularity ended any question about “who would rule India”. Now politics has entered the political economy again, as was the norm during Narasimha Rao's regime to later experiments with the Janata Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalitions, to the two Congress-led ones right up to 2014. Is coalition

politics detrimental to the economy? Can Mr Modi, allegedly an autocratic leader, run a coalition government? There are strong arguments for and against both these questions. We don't know the answer. What is more important is the answer that we know. The electorate has sent a clear message that Hindutva, nationalism, and welfarism are not enough of a draw anymore. The first two don't put food on their plate. The third delivers a bare minimum. But which voter, exposed to an aspirational lifestyle streaming from

Instagram, Facebook, and entertainment serials is interested in the bare minimum? It now appears that an embarrassing torrent of memes, catchphrases, alliterative coinages, clever abbreviations, schemes, yojanas and slogans such as Achhe Din, Amrit Kaal, and Viksit Bharat, all had a “sell-by” date. People are not buying them anymore. Yeh Dil Maange More. The farmers want higher prices for their produce, the youth want employment, mothers desire education for their children, and wage-earners expect higher wages. Can any political formation deliver these?

When Mr Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, he made many promises. One of them was that farmers would get more than half the cost of production as profit. In 2016, he announced something even more lucrative: Farmers' income would double in six years. Not only did these prove to be empty promises but in a bizarre move to reform agriculture, he tried to railroad three farm Bills through Parliament in a high-handed manner. The farmers went on the warpath and the government responded in an even more autocratic manner, digging up roads, placing spikes, and putting up barricades. Inflation in health care and education, which impacts every citizen, is in double digits while the official inflation rate is ridiculously under 5 per



## IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

## Fauci on Trump: It's complicated



## BOOK REVIEW

SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

Three months into the coronavirus pandemic, Anthony S Fauci was at home in northwest Washington when he answered his cell phone to President Donald J Trump screaming at him in an expletive-laden rant. He had incurred the president's wrath by remarking that the vaccines under development might not provide long-lasting immunity.

That was the day, June 3, 2020, “that I first experienced the brunt of the president's rage,” Dr Fauci writes in his forthcoming autobiography.

Dr Fauci has long been circumspect in describing his feelings toward Mr Trump. But *On Call: A Doctor's Journey in Public Service*, he writes with candour

about their relationship, which he describes as “complicated.”

In a chapter entitled “He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not,” Dr Fauci described how Mr Trump repeatedly told him he “loved” him while at the same time excoriating him with tirades flecked with four-letter words.

“The president was irate, saying that I could not keep doing this to him,” Dr Fauci wrote. “He said he loved me, but the country was in trouble, and I was making it worse. He added that the stock market went up only 600 points in response to the positive Phase 1 vaccine news, and it should have gone up 1,000 points, and so I cost the country ‘one trillion dollars.’”

The book, which will be released on June 18, traces the arc of Dr Fauci's life, from his boyhood in Brooklyn as a son of first-generation Italian Americans (his father was a pharmacist, and the family lived above the “Fauci Pharmacy”)

through his 54-year career at the National Institutes of Health, 38 of them as the director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

It is 450 pages long, and Dr Fauci devotes about 70 of them to the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, when Mr Trump was in office. His criticisms of Mr Trump and his White House are at times blunt and at other times oblique, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.

Dr Fauci served under seven presidents, shepherding the nation through infectious disease threats including AIDS, swine flu, anthrax and Ebola. But the coronavirus pandemic turned him into a polarising public figure and a target of Republicans, particularly Mr Trump's most ardent supporters. During a tense hearing this month before the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, Dr Fauci forcefully denied Republican allegations that he had helped fund research that started the pandemic or had covered up the possibility that it originated in a laboratory. He called the accusations “absolutely false and simply preposterous.”

In Dr Fauci's telling, the Trump White House was different than any

other he had experienced, not least because of its passing relationship with the truth.

Those differences extended to the relationship between Mr Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, the chairman of the White House coronavirus response task force.

“Vice presidents,” Dr Fauci wrote, “are almost always publicly loyal to the president. That is part of the job. But in my opinion, Vice President Pence sometimes overdid it. During task force meetings, he often said some version of, ‘There are a lot of smart people around here, but we all know that the smartest person is upstairs.’”

Dr Fauci also makes clear he had little use for some of Mr Trump's advisers: His chief of staff, Mark Meadows; his chief economic adviser, Peter Navarro; and his medical adviser, Scott Atlas. He said Mr Trump's aides were feeding negative stories about him to journalists in 2020.

“The growing White House hostility toward me over the spring and summer

seemed to trigger at least in part the overt attacks on me by right-wing media and trolls using social media platforms,” Dr Fauci wrote.

Dr Fauci's first encounter with Mr Trump was before the coronavirus pandemic, at a White House ceremony where the president signed an executive order that called for improvements in the manufacturing and distribution of

flu vaccines. After the event, Mr Trump remarked to Dr Fauci that he had never had a flu shot. “When I asked him why, he answered, ‘Well, I’ve never gotten the flu. Why did I

need a flu shot?’ I did not respond,” Dr Fauci wrote. The doctor was flabbergasted to discover that Mr Trump knew so little about the purpose of vaccines.

On January 29, 2020, Dr Fauci wrote, the conservative political commentator Lou Dobbs, whom the doctor had known for years, called to say Mr Trump wanted to meet him. Several hours later, Dr Fauci found himself in the White

House Situation Room, briefing the president and his top advisers on a new virus that was circulating in China. It was instantly clear to Dr Fauci, the scientist from Brooklyn, that he and Mr Trump, the president from Queens, could relate to each other in the way that only New Yorkers can.

“He had a New York swagger that I instantly recognised — a self-confident, backslapping charisma that reminded me of my days in New York,” Dr Fauci wrote.

But that is where the kinship ended. Dr Fauci wrote that when Mr Trump embraced hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug, as a Covid treatment on the basis of anecdotal evidence, he realised that “sooner or later I would have to refute him publicly.”

He painted the president as consumed with television ratings; after one coronavirus briefing in March 2020, Mr Trump summoned Dr Fauci into the Oval Office and called the Fox News personality Sean Hannity. Dr Fauci recalled the moment: “Hey, Sean,” he said on speakerphone. “You should see the ratings we have!”

The reviewer covers health policy and politics ©2024 The New York Times News Service





OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Food costs still a drag on inflation

Economic prospects are tied to monsoons; a good agriculture season will help raise spirits

Inflation numbers for May were on expected lines. The headline print for both the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) can be termed benign. To be sure, at 4.7% the former is still above the 4% target of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The latter has seen a big increase compared to last month from 1.3% to 2.6%, but that is mainly on account of base effects. For both CPI and WPI — they are very different in composition — food continues to be the primary driver of inflation.

What is the larger import of these numbers? With the general elections behind us and the next election cycle a few months away, the political salience of the inflation numbers is expected to come down a bit. But they will matter a lot in the next few months because inflation is a critical factor that influences RBI’s decision on whether to bring down interest rates. They have been held at 6.5% since February 2023 and there is a growing opinion, even within the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of RBI, that this could be taking a toll on economic growth. The impressive headline GDP growth numbers aside, there is good reason to be concerned about both private consumption and investment right now.

Will RBI pivot soon? The answer depends on what happens to food inflation in the next two months. This, in turn, will depend on the performance of the southwest monsoon, which started on a good note but has weakened in the second week of June. Adequate rainfall is essential for a good *kharif* crop and adequate water in reservoirs and moisture in the soil are needed to ensure a good *rabi* crop. Overall rainfall just staying in the ballpark of the long period average is no guarantee of agricultural production doing well anymore. Rains are increasingly becoming temporally and geographically skewed, inflicting a lot of damage on the prospects of a good agricultural season. Monetary policy can do little to address this matter except to keep track of the numbers. Hopefully, things will be clearer when the MPC meets next in August. The larger picture, however, is increasingly clear: The climate crisis and its supply-side shocks to food markets are capable of impacting overall growth prospects.

Dealing with summer of climate discontent

Deadly forest fires, illness-inducing temperatures even after sundown, a loss of earnings for businesses as well as daily wage earners, and water shortages — the blistering summer this year has exacted a toll on millions of people across northern India, where many cities have now been under a meteorological red alert. The warning — declared for the north-northwest band of the country, starting from northern Rajasthan and Punjab and stretching to Bihar in the central-east of the country — says that there is a very high likelihood of heat illness and heat stroke in people of all ages. These months have also been dry, triggering a spate of forest fires in the mountains of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Estimates suggest that the snow cover that feeds India’s lifeblood rivers such as the Ganga is at its thinnest since 2003, and data from the government’s reservoir management authority shows water storage, especially in the north, is far lower than what is usual for this time of the year.

In the Capital, the heatwave has had dire consequences for the most vulnerable populations. Residents are experiencing high temperatures in a narrow band of 10.7°C, offering little relief even at night. This prolonged exposure is linked with severe health impacts, including headaches, dehydration, fatigue, and muscle cramps. Then there is a significant economic impact on the city’s street vendors, who have reported a loss of income and a decline in customer numbers. In a recent study, nearly 50% of such vendors reported a loss in earnings and 71% said they struggled to access medical help in such circumstances.

The way this summer has unfolded may well be a sign of things to come when rising global temperatures are expected to make such weather extremes routine. To address these issues, the authorities need to implement heat action plans more stridently. Policies to protect the vulnerable, their health and livelihood are crucial — and solutions need to include immediate financial assistance as well as new public infrastructure to mitigate heat stress. Action is needed before it becomes too late.

Voters have spoken, what did they say?

A deeper analysis of constituency-level data suggests that the BJP’s footprint has increased in eastern and southern states, but voters in many of its stronghold states have sent a negative message

Even as Narendra Modi took oath as the Prime Minister (PM) of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government for a third consecutive term on Sunday, political pundits continued to analyse the surprising election verdict. The BJP ended up winning 240 seats, well short of the 272-majority mark — though the alliance comfortably crossed the magic figure with 293 seats — and a far cry from the 400-plus target of the Modi-Shah election machine.

In the post-poll analyses by commentators, two contentions deserve careful consideration. First, that BJP’s electoral debacle was the result of the Opposition managing to prevent the division of anti-BJP votes, and second, that BJP’s performance was driven by a decline in only a few states. To evaluate these two contentions, we analysed parliamentary constituency-level data on the BJP’s performance in 10 key states that

together account for 326 seats in the Lok Sabha. We chose the 10 states to reflect the national variation in the BJP’s performance, with five showing the largest seat gain and the other five registering the largest seat decline for the BJP between 2019 and 2024. The former five states, which we will together call Group 1, are Odisha (+12), Telangana (+4), Andhra Pradesh (+3), Madhya Pradesh (+1) and Chhattisgarh (+1); the latter 5, which we will collectively call Group 2, are Uttar Pradesh (-29), Maharashtra (-14), Rajasthan (-10), Karnataka (-8) and West Bengal (-6).

In Group 1, which accounts for 103 parliamentary seats, the BJP increased its tally from 51 in 2019 to 72 in 2024. In these states, the BJP also increased its strike rate from 50% in 2019 to 85% in 2024. Additionally, in the 82 constituencies that the BJP contested in these states in both 2019 and 2024, it improved its average vote share from 41% in 2019 to 50% in 2024. Most notably, in the six constituencies of Andhra Pradesh where the BJP contested in both 2019 and 2024, it increased its average vote share from less than 2% in 2019 to around 49% in 2024; and in the 15 constituencies in Telangana where the BJP contested in both 2019 and 2024, its average vote share increased by more than 15 percentage points. Even in the constituencies it lost in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it

managed to increase its average vote share by 40 and 20 percentage points respectively.

In Group 2, which accounts for 223 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP’s seats fell from 152 in 2019 to 85 in 2024. Taking account of the seats contested, the BJP’s strike rate in Group 2 states fell from 77% in 2019 to 44% in 2024. In the 191 seats that the BJP contested in both 2019 and in 2024 from the states in this group, the BJP’s average vote share fell from 50% in 2019 to 45% in 2024. Among these states, Rajasthan witnessed the greatest decline of around 11 percentage points in the BJP’s average vote share across the 24 constituencies in which it contested in both 2019 and 2024. Similarly, in the 25 constituencies that it contested in Maharashtra in both 2019 and 2024, the BJP suffered a nine percentage point decline in its average vote share.

To round out our analysis of the BJP’s electoral performance, we also focused on two subsets of constituencies, first, which it won in both 2019 and 2024 and second, which it won in 2019 but lost in 2024.

Our analysis of the first subset suggests that in constituencies that the BJP won, it could not hold on to its 2019 vote share. For example, in the 32 seats in UP that the BJP won in both 2019 and 2024, its average vote share declined by 11 percentage points. Similarly, across the 14 seats



A large decline in the BJP’s average vote share in 191 constituencies across several states suggests voter dissatisfaction with the party (HT PHOTO)

in Rajasthan and the 6 seats in Maharashtra that BJP managed to win in both 2019 and 2024, its average vote share declined by 7 percentage points. Emblematic of this trend, even PM’s vote share in Varanasi fell from around 64% in 2019 to 54% in 2024. This is lower than the 56% vote share he won against Arvind Kejriwal in 2014.

Turning to the second subset, we see that in these seats the BJP’s average vote share fell by around 10 percentage points. Most notably, in the 10 seats of Rajasthan that the BJP won in 2019 but lost in 2024, its average vote share declined by around 16 percentage points. Similarly in the 17 seats in Maharashtra that it won in 2019 but lost in 2024, its average vote share fell by around 10 percentage points.

In conclusion, constituency-level analysis helps address the two contentions we started with.

We find, first, that BJP managed to increase its footprint in eastern and southern states. While this did not compensate for the BJP’s seat loss in its stronghold, it nearly reversed the decline in its vote share. Though such

states account for only about one-fourth of the total seats in the Lok Sabha, this is substantial enough to give pause to detractors of the BJP in drawing any pan-India message from the verdict. Second, we find that a significant chunk of BJP voters moved away in states traditionally considered its bastion, with the notable exceptions of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. This decline cannot be attributed to local factors in a few constituencies. While Opposition unity may have led to the consolidation of the non-BJP votes in UP, a large decline in the BJP’s average vote share in 191 constituencies across several states suggests that there was voter dissatisfaction with the BJP. Whether this decline in the BJP’s vote share is because of anti-incumbency, local factors, or because of the government’s policies and ideological push, is a question that future research will need to address.

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{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob



It’s time to reset rules of the game in South Asia

By inviting the leaders of key neighbouring countries to the swearing-in ceremony of the new council of ministers, New Delhi has made its intentions clear: It plans to double down on efforts to engage the neighbourhood and regain its influence. The neighbourhood is India’s most important strategic theatre. But it’s not certain whether proactive outreach alone will help New Delhi regain its influence, let alone primacy, in the region.

The fact is that China has changed the rules of the game in South Asia. A historically non-South Asian country, China was traditionally focused on consolidating its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, rather than in South Asia. By doing so, Beijing implicitly accepted India’s primacy in South Asia. That is no longer the case.

By proactively engaging South Asian countries in all aspects, from defence deals to developmental assistance, sprinkled with occasional domestic political interference, Beijing has effectively altered the diplomatic landscape. Furthermore, by challenging India’s primacy in the region and trying to make it a Chinese sphere of influence, Beijing has undermined the traditional geopolitical order in South Asia. Put differently, China is no longer playing by the traditional rules of the geopolitical game in South Asia. We can sugar coat this reality by convincing ourselves that China is only seeking to co-exist with India in the region. In reality, however, China is seeking dominance.

In the face of this new reality, India’s strategic response has been to course-correct its

South Asia policy (translated as “be nice to your neighbours”), and play catch-up with China.

So, what does this strategy of catching up involve? On the ground, it translates into spending more money in South Asian countries, fast-tracking and bringing about more effectiveness into project delivery, trying to outbid and outdo China in sensitive regional projects, and expressing unhappiness when China is handed strategically important projects in the region, among others. A second part of this strategy is public diplomacy — the use of soft power to win the region back, or in other words, wooing, appeasing and indulging the States in the region.

But India’s catch-up game in South Asia is too late, too little, and has its limitations. We may need to think differently.

The reason why the current strategy to win back the region by playing catch-up to China is unlikely to work is because those strategies amount to playing by the old rules. The rules that once worked for India won’t work for any longer; instead, they benefit China now. Old rules — give more, spend more, and outbid China — will ultimately only help China because, let’s not forget, China can outspend India in the region.

Moreover, the old rules incentivise South Asian States to use China to balance India and bargain for more — as States caught between two powers often do.

So if the old rules don’t work for India, what should it do? It should change the rules of the game in South Asia. Given that China has broadened the balance of power in the region to its advantage, India should broaden it further to its advantage — by projecting the region as a subset of Southern Asian balance of power within a multipolar Asia.

But how? It can do so by getting its global and regional partners to check China’s growing influence in the region. For that, India will need to abandon its Cold War strategy of keeping all external powers, friend or foe, away from its sphere of influence — since China has already crossed that red line, it’s time for India to cross China’s red line.

To pose that somewhat differently: What do you do when your adversary challenges you in your region? You pull out the oldest trick in statecraft — get the adversary’s adversary (the United States and its allies, in this case) to restore the lost balance of power. The structure of the balance of power in South Asia today is shaped by India, China and the other South Asian States; and all things considered, it is disadvantageous to India. To correct that flawed balance of power, India must bring in others who can work with the country on domains such as security, development, economy and defence, even as, at the same time, the neighbourhood-first push goes on.

Happymon Jacob teaches India’s foreign policy at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and is the founder of the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, a New Delhi-based think tank. The views expressed are personal



By challenging India’s primacy in South Asia and trying to make the region a Chinese sphere of influence, Beijing undermined the traditional order (PTI)

{ KAMALA HARRIS } VICE-PRESIDENT, THE US



If the world fails to respond when an aggressor invades its neighbour, other aggressors will undoubtedly become emboldened.

At the summit on peace in Ukraine



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



State, UT polls hold the key to stability at Centre

Despite initial obstacles, the Narendra Modi-led government is back in office for its third term. But will it be stable?

There is no immediate threat to the government. However, over the next four months, it will face an *agnipareeksha* (trial by fire) as three states and one Union Territory (UT) — Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand — go to polls. The outcomes of these elections could reshape the political landscape.

In J&K, the Supreme Court has ordered assembly elections — the first since Article 370 was repealed on August 5, 2019 — to be held by September. These elections are critical for many reasons. For one, it will show whether voters support or reject the development projects, the division of the state into two UTs, and the abrogation of Article 370. The recent resurgence in terrorist attacks has prompted fresh questions, but the track record of our armed forces has been excellent, and it is inappropriate to doubt their efficacy in combating terror. So, will the government be able to handle the situation?

The Lok Sabha elections in J&K yielded noticeable results. The people defeated Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, ex-chief ministers (CMs) of univided J&K. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did not contest in the Valley, but it did win two seats in Jammu. An independent candidate won one of the remaining seats, while the National Conference won the rest.

The People’s Democratic Party (PDP) is collapsing, but the National Conference has emerged as the strongest party in the region, although Omar Abdullah lost. The BJP needs to expand its base to capture key seats. Will the saffron team accomplish its long-held dream of getting a foothold in the Valley? The Congress is in a terrible state. Will it look to cross the bridge with the help of an alliance? The narrative of this UT will be shaped by the sentiment of the electorate. The world is watching.

Now, let’s discuss Haryana. In 2019, the BJP won 10 Lok Sabha seats here. This time, it had to settle for half that number, with the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party joining forces against it. This combination received 47.61% of the votes. The BJP received 46.11% of the votes, but its vote share increased by about 10% compared with the last assembly elections. The Congress has also performed significantly bet-

ter, receiving 15.59% more votes than the last assembly elections.

The case of Maharashtra is even more interesting. It had more political actors fighting for their identity than any other state. Uddhav Thackeray has re-established his influence while Sharad Pawar has proved himself yet again with his party winning eight of the 10 seats it contested. The INDIA bloc won 30 of the 48 seats here. Before the election, Maharashtra was seen as a stronghold of the BJP and its allies. People in Maharashtra, like those in Haryana and J&K, have rejected manipulative politics. Ajit Pawar, who tried to project himself as the leader of the Nationalist Congress Party, has been rejected, with his faction winning just one seat. CM Eknath Shinde saved face by winning seven seats but fell behind Uddhav’s state-wide appeal. The situation could pave the way for the spectacle of “*aya ram-gaya ram*” (party switching) politics before the assembly elections in Maharashtra.

Finally, Jharkhand. This state, since its inception, has been doomed to corruption and the imprisonment of its top leaders. Hemant Soren, its former CM, is behind bars on corruption charges, but the government has not fallen. Soren’s wife Kalpana has won the Gandey by-election and is now an MLA. However, his sister-in-law, Sita, who had contested the Lok Sabha election from Dumka on a BJP ticket, lost.

This election has brought to the fore not only the troubles in the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) but also in the Soren family. Nonetheless, the INDIA bloc, which includes the JMM, appears to be forming a powerful alliance of tribal, Christian, Dalit, and Muslim populations. Despite winning nine of 14 seats this time, the BJP has suffered a setback. Here, too, it has no leader with state-wide appeal.

The message is clear: The BJP needs to address local issues in these states, but without leaders with statewide clout, it has to rely on Prime Minister Modi’s appeal. If the results are below expectations, the NDA allies may become apprehensive. The INDIA bloc holds power only in Jharkhand, and if the election outcome turns against it, the limited momentum it gained on June 4 will be lost.

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



WORDLY WISE

A GENUINE LEADER IS NOT A SEARCHER FOR  
CONSENSUS BUT A MOLDER OF CONSENSUS.

— MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## A FITTING FRAME

Italy meet showcased shifting political landscape in North America and Europe, and India’s growing salience for G7

CONGRESS PARTY’S CRITICISM that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has travelled to the G7 to burnish his international image must be taken as part of the sparring between a newly charged-up Opposition and the government that has come back with a reduced majority. All global summits are photo-ops for national leaders everywhere to display their global reach to domestic audiences. The leaders of the seven western nations and invited special guests from across the world for the outreach session showed up in picturesque eastern Italy after all the arduous work, including the drafting of final statements, was done by their diplomats. All they needed to do was to look good and shake hands with other leaders. Having said that, the fact is PM Modi did not have to do anything special in Italy to enhance his image.

Winning a third term as prime minister was more than enough to raise his prestige among his peers in the West and beyond. At the summit, Modi looked tall given the precarious situation the G7 leaders find themselves in. In the US, President Joe Biden is struggling to fend off the challenge from Donald Trump who might well win the presidential election in November. In Canada, Justin Trudeau has become unpopular and will be lucky to win another term. Across the Atlantic, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is all set to lead the Tories to a defeat in the general election set for July 4. On the continent, France’s Emmanuel Macron and Germany’s Olaf Scholz are being battered by a resurgent political right. In Japan, PM Fumio Kishida has poor ratings and is coping with the fallout from corruption scandals involving party colleagues. The only exception is Italy’s Giorgia Meloni, who is emerging as a powerful new voice in Europe. Unsparing western commentators have compared the G7 leadership crew at Italy to “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and dubbed it as “Meloni and the six lame ducks”.

India’s internal arguments about its presence at the G7 summit betray a certain ignorance about the shifting political landscape in North America and Europe and a lack of awareness of India’s growing salience for the G7. American and European analysts point to the growing weaknesses of the West and its internal divisions and critics bemoan the fecklessness of its current leadership. Meanwhile, India’s position in relation to the West is rising thanks to its economic growth and its geopolitical role as a “swing state”. Next year, India’s aggregate GDP is expected to overtake Japan’s and, a couple of years later, Germany’s. That would put the size of India’s economy ahead of all G7 countries except the US. The deepening geopolitical tensions with Beijing, the imperatives of restructuring the global economic order to reduce dependence on China, and the need for the US and Europe to reconnect with the Global South have all created the conditions for a new strategic compact between India and the West. The challenge for the political class and the policy establishment in Delhi is to reflect on the contours of such a compact and the strategies for leveraging it to generate greater prosperity for the Indian people.

## THE SKILL GAP

Andhra CM Chandrababu Naidu’s call for a skill census is important, draws attention to a growing concern

SOON AFTER TAKING charge, Andhra Pradesh’s new Chief Minister, N Chandrababu Naidu, announced a flurry of decisions such as an increase in pensions and revoking the Land Titling Act. Possibly the most noteworthy decision, however, has been the order for a skill census. On the campaign trail, Naidu had said that through a skill census, he would gauge the skill levels of people and compare it to the global skill requirements. “This will help us address the skill shortcomings and make people more employable. Thus, it will automatically lead to welfare,” he said. There are many reasons why Naidu’s call for a skill census should be welcomed.

For one, it brings the state of unemployment in Andhra Pradesh in sharp focus. While it is well-known that India has been facing considerable unemployment related stress, most of the attention is centred around the so-called BIMARU states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But data from the official Period Labour Force Survey for 2022-23 — the last full-year report — shows that Andhra Pradesh is worse-off than many such states. For instance, at 4.1 per cent, Andhra Pradesh has a significantly higher unemployment rate (for all aged 15 years and more) than not just the national average (3.2 per cent) but also many states like Bihar (3.9 per cent), UP (2.4 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (1.6 per cent). Moreover, the unemployment gets worse when one zeroes in on the youth cohort (15 to 29 years). Youth unemployment rate in Andhra was 15.7 per cent — much higher than the national average of 10 per cent as well as states like Bihar (13.9 per cent), UP (7 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (4.4 per cent) and Rajasthan (12.5 per cent). Further, data suggests that getting higher education doesn’t seem to help matters. At 24 per cent, the unemployment rate among graduates in Andhra Pradesh was higher than Bihar (16.6 per cent), UP (11 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (9.3 per cent) and Rajasthan (23.1 per cent).

However, the unemployment crisis in India is not just about unemployment — it is also a crisis of unemployability. And this is not a secret. The 2015 policy of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship said: “Our country presently faces a dual challenge of paucity of highly trained workforce, as well as non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills.” The skill census is a step towards addressing, what a 2018 NCAER report calls, “India’s skilling paradox”: Dwindling opportunities in agriculture, much potential for jobs in manufacturing and services, but not enough people with the right skills. It will have important takeaways for course correction in the education system as well.

### FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

WILL THE RECENT elections halt India’s democratic backsliding? Or, are the results simply a temporary democratic breather, and the older trends will return before long? Over the last 10 years, India has come to be known as a democratic backslider. It was not the only such polity. Others included Turkey, Hungary, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and the United States under Donald Trump. But given India’s size, it was clear that if India could halt its democratic erosion, it would be a great boost for democracy worldwide. Can India do so?

Before we answer this question, we first need to analyse what the concept of democratic backsliding entails. It does not imply democratic collapse, only democratic attrition, or a grinding down process. It is not to be viewed in binary terms, meaning democracy (1) or dictatorship (0). It is conceptualised on a scale, 0 to 1, meaning the closer a polity is to 1, the more democratic it is, and the closer it is to zero, the more authoritarian it will be.

Second, while recognising that there cannot be a democracy without elections, the concept also says that democracy has two dimensions: Electoral and non-electoral. The first applies to how free and fair the elections are, and the second to how democratic the polity is in the years that fall between elections.

But how is democracy to be measured between elections? Most of all, it covers freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religious practice and minority rights. The first deals with matters such as whether citizens are free to speak, whether the press is unconstrained, whether the universities have the liberty to teach and do research freely, etc. The second is essentially a point about civil society. Are citizens free to form non-state organisations? The third and fourth criteria merge in India, for India’s predominant minorities are religious, not racial as in the US.

Third, democratic backsliding also means that, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s when military coups used to disrupt democracies, elected civilian politicians can now cause erosion. Often, such undermining is only about the period between elections, while elections are freer. But sometimes, to reduce electoral competition, elected leaders also start manipulating elections, even jailing opposition

Election results will be assessed by the democratic spaces they open up in between polls

How, then, will the election results influence the next few years? Let us take each non-electoral democratic feature by turn. Freedom of expression has never had a huge political base in India. All political parties have undermined it at some point or the other. India’s First Constitutional Amendment also puts some legal constraints on free speech, which many governments have politically exploited to silence critics. It is the scale of the attack that distinguishes the Modi era, not an attack on citizen freedoms per se.



AAKASH JOSHI

THEY WANT YOU to think they care. As north India suffers a debilitating heatwave, the apps that have made the lives of the better-off so much easier, implore customers to offer delivery “boys” a glass of water. For men and women chasing targets, rushing from home to home so that we do not have to step out of our air-conditioned cocoons, it is a fair ask.

But what are the Blinkits, Zomatos, Zeptos and Swiggys of the world doing for their “partners”? In Delhi, at least six of these partners confirmed that they do not get hazard pay, nor any help from the companies that use their labour as the basis for their much-touted “innovation”. But then, our homegrown startups are just learning from the best in the world.

Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon and now body-builder and space taxi provider for his rich pals, is worth nearly \$200 billion (or about Rs 1.7 lakh crore). A worker at Amazon’s warehouse often earns less than Rs 11,000 per month. At that pittance, several workers at its five warehouses in Manesar, Haryana, have been made to take an oath that they will not “drink water” or use the toilet unless they meet their daily targets — a demand that is practically impossible if labour laws around work-day lengths and timings are followed. Amazon, of course, is notorious for its inhuman treatment of labour, including in the US. But it, at least, has employees. Others just have “partners”.

A combination of guaranteed deliveries, quick sorting and sourcing and the abundance of a vast army of labour to carry out this task

## HIGH COST OF CONVENIENCE

Insensitive oath in Amazon warehouse shows there is no fair play in gig economy

underpins India’s delivery-led “innovation”. Delivery partners are not employees — they have no job security, no recourse when mistreated, and no benefits. This “partnership” model has been used to the greatest effect by Uber, globally. It undercuts labour costs, while forcing (the jargon MBAs use is “incentivising”) “partners” to work longer hours — driven not by a boss but by the sunk costs of purchasing vehicles, and other investments made to become “gig workers”.

What allows companies to keep workers casual, celebrating their “partners” for PR purposes while ignoring protests demanding basic rights? What makes it so easy for them to push people to the indignity of “oaths” that are dehumanising? In his book, *What Went Wrong with Capitalism*, investor Ruchir Sharma looks at America and finds, in essence, that the consolidation of a few companies and the socialisation of losses (through bailouts and bad regulation) and inequality — between companies and within society — is a major culprit.

Then, there’s the fact that many of the plutocrats of today are no Henry Ford. Like Bezos and Deepinder Goyal, Ford, too, took existing technologies and innovated on the process. And while neither Bezos nor Goyal “invented” GPS or basic programming languages, they did create sourcing and delivery infrastructure. Ford, however, insisted that a worker in his factory be paid enough to afford the product they were manufacturing. Can the same be said today? At Rs 11,000-13,000/month,

get, but it generated serious Dalit and OBC worries about constitutional revisions and affirmative action that could not be picked up in time. This is also perhaps why all exit polls were unanimous about a Modi victory. Voters were afraid of telling pollsters that they voted against the BJP/NDA. Social science theory calls this “preference falsification”.

Though constitutionally protected, civil society freedoms also don’t have a broad political base in India. Exceptions aside, political parties watch NGOs and their reach with considerable ambivalence. The resurgence of civil society will depend heavily on judicial support. Historically, courts are stronger when executives are weaker. The judiciary, if approached, may now feel freer to reverse attacks on non-governmental institutions.

Minority rights are more likely to be a clear beneficiary of these elections. The two biggest alliance partners, TDP and JDU, substantially depend on an OBC-Muslim voter base. TDP is even committed to reservations for Muslims. For these parties, Delhi is important because it can promote their state interests. The *ghus-paithiye* (infiltrators) logic, if used again by Delhi, will only make JDU and TDP electorally weaker in their states. One should, therefore, expect declining enthusiasm in Delhi for a uniform civil code, a return to the National Registry of Citizens (NRC), and a ban on inter-faith marriages (something quite conceivable if the BJP had won 370 seats). Lynchings or bulldozers may not substantially decline, for they are a state-level phenomenon.

PM Modi has always equated democracy with elections. He read the 2019 electoral victory as giving him the mandate to impair the non-electoral aspects of democracy and impose his undeterred will. With a loss of 63 seats in 2024, compared to 2019, and a short-fall of 130 seats, compared to the 2024 target, the BJP may have to scale its majoritarian project down. One should not expect a full erasure of the party’s impulses and instincts.

The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences at Brown University, where he also directs the Saxena Center for Contemporary South Asia at the Watson Institute



## JUNE 17, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### CONGRESS LEADER SHOT

TERRORISTS GUNNED DOWN Hardial Singh, acting president of the Jalandhar District Congress (I) Committee (rural), and hacked to death the *mahant* of a *dera* in Jalandhar district while night curfew restrictions were further extended in Punjab. Hardial Singh was shot dead at Goraya bus stand in Jalandhar district by two armed persons. One of them opened fire at the Congress (I) leader who ran towards a nearby shop for safety.

### PROPOSED IAS RULES

THE CENTRE PROPOSES to make a major

change in the service rules for IAS, IPS and other all-India services so that officers of one state cadre can be shifted to another. The move is being contemplated in the wake of experiences where some all-India services officers reportedly colluded with criminals. It is aimed at ensuring that no officer is allowed to remain in his parent state cadre throughout his career.

### INCOME TAX MEASURES

THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED that all income-tax cases involving incomes up to Rs 25,000 per year and salary cases assessed in salary circles up to an annual income of Rs 50,000 will be assessed on the basis of the

returns filed by the assesseees. This is one of the measures introduced by the Finance Ministry to liberalise procedures, mitigate the hardships of salaried taxpayers and help income-tax officers concentrate on big cases.

### POONCH BOMB BLAST

A POWERFUL COUNTRY-MADE bomb exploded in Poonch, shattering the calm that prevailed in the curfew-bound border township during the last 24 hours. The explosion, twentieth in a series of blasts in the township since June 5 did not result in any loss of life or damage to property but its impact shook the surrounding buildings and government offices.

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# THE IDEAS PAGE

## A chance to reach out

Election results offer opportunity for India to redefine South Asia's trajectory. Government must address concerns of neighbours



SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE INDIAN GENERAL elections have captured global attention but perhaps they were most intently watched by Delhi's immediate neighbours. As a rising regional economic powerhouse on the cusp of becoming the world's third-largest economy, India's political trajectory profoundly impacts South Asia's stability, security, and prosperity. The high stakes have led to diverse reactions and perspectives across the neighbourhood. The BJP-led NDA securing a third consecutive term has triggered speculation in South Asia — from Dhaka to Islamabad and from Kathmandu to Colombo. Nations sharing borders and ties with India are scrutinising the poll result and seeking to decipher the ramifications of their relationships with the regional powerhouse.

In Dhaka, the BJP's electoral victory has evoked a mix of optimism and apprehension. The continuity in leadership could facilitate progress in ongoing initiatives that have seen bilateral trade grow threefold from around \$5.3 billion in 2012-13 to over \$15.9 billion in 2022-23. India is also a major investor in Bangladesh, with investments exceeding \$3 billion across sectors like energy, telecommunications and manufacturing. Overcoming territorial issues, through the Land Border Agreement of 2015 for example, has been a positive development.

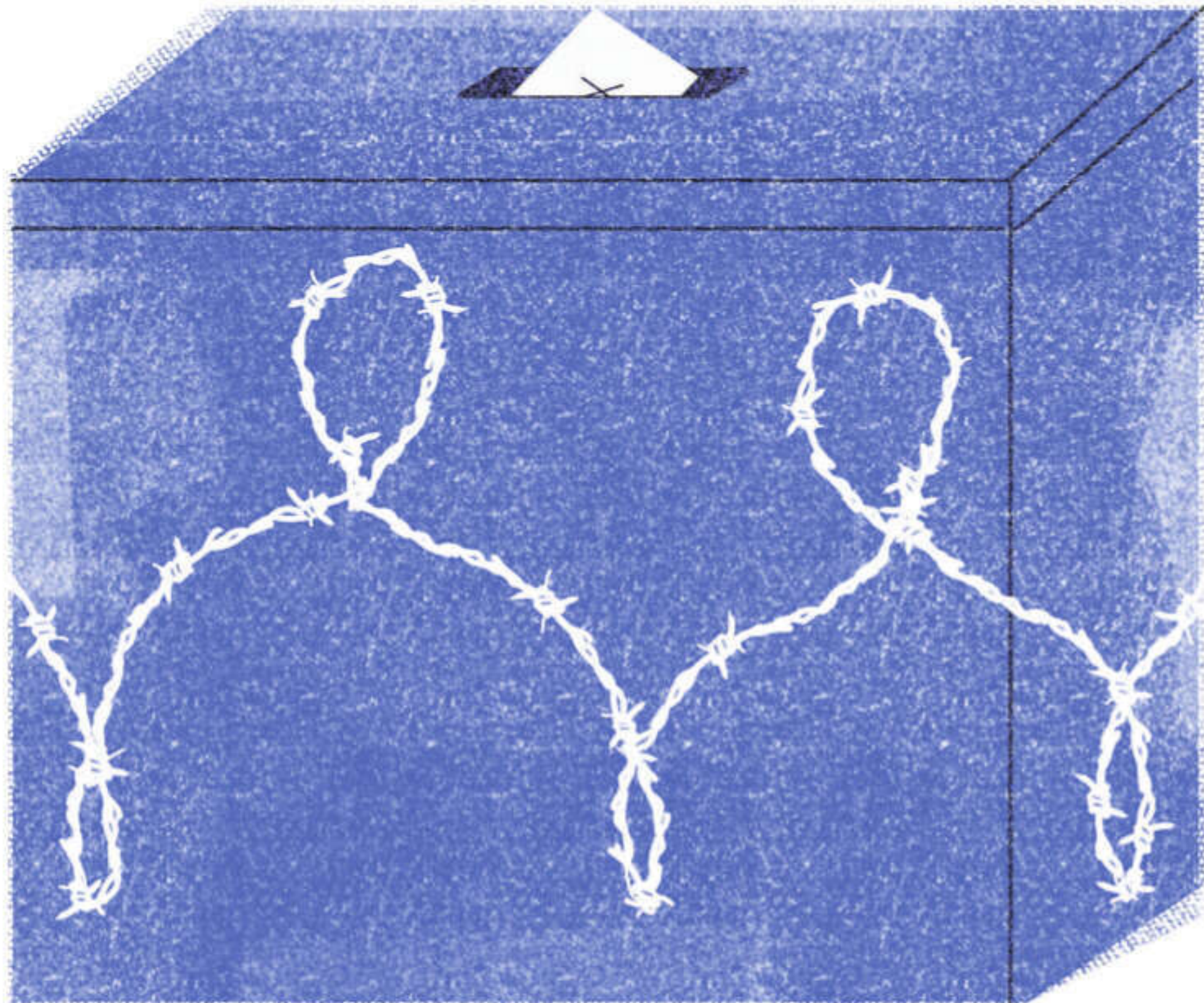
However, certain long-standing issues pose potential challenges. The protracted Teesta water-sharing dispute, which began in 1983, has taken an interesting turn with China being awarded a contract for a comprehensive river-management project. India's subsequent but delayed interest in it has placed Dhaka in a delicate position.

With its close political relations and deep socio-cultural and historical ties with India, Bangladesh has maintained a cautious stance on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called the Act "unnecessary" and Bangladeshi foreign and home ministers cancelled visits to India after it was passed. Further, the BJP's pledge to implement a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) has raised questions about its potential impact on Bangladeshis.

As Bangladesh manages its multifaceted relationship with India, it aims to judiciously balance cooperation while safeguarding its core interests. PM Hasina's government has adeptly fostered close ties with the BJP as well as the Congress, nurturing unprecedented growth of bilateral relationships. This was underscored by the fact that Bangladesh was the only neighbour to receive an invite to the G20 Leadership Summit last year under the Indian presidency.

As expected, Pakistan's reaction has been apprehensive, fearing the BJP's hardline stance could complicate the Kashmir dispute and diminish prospects for dialogue. However, bilateral trade between India and Pakistan has increased in recent years, reflecting improved economic ties.

Nepal harbours concerns over India's ap-



CR Sasikumar

proach to regional cooperation, development assistance, and hydropower projects due to its heavy trade reliance on India worth over \$13.59 billion in 2022-23. It faced fuel shortages due to blockades and diplomatic fallout with India during the 2015 crisis. That seems to have opened the door for China as India's historical clout with its small landlocked neighbour started eroding. Things have never been the same.

While Bhutan's relationship with India is expected to remain largely unaffected, Sri Lanka and Maldives are wary of a potentially renewed push from India for regional influence in the strategically vital Indian Ocean region.

India's goal of becoming the world's third-largest economy by 2027 and a developed economy by 2047 when it celebrates its centenary anniversary hinges on deepening economic engagement with neighbours. Initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement could facilitate cross-border movement of goods, services, and people and promote regional connectivity through infrastructure, energy cooperation, and people-to-people ties. The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity identifies 167 projects worth \$50 billion, aimed at enhancing regional integration. Areas of shared interest also include combating climate change, fostering sustainable development, and enhancing educational and cultural exchanges.

While opportunities for collaboration ex-

While opportunities for collaboration exist, India's neighbours may face challenges in engaging with the new government over concerns regarding domestic policies and historical grievances. The new government's foreign policy approach will shape the regional security dynamics. Addressing factors behind border incidents and security concerns, smuggling and human trafficking, militarisation and radicalisation is vital for a long-term resolution.

ist, India's neighbours may face challenges in engaging with the new government over concerns regarding domestic policies and historical grievances. The new government's foreign policy approach will shape the regional security dynamics. Addressing factors behind border incidents and security concerns, smuggling and human trafficking, militarisation and radicalisation is vital for a long-term resolution.

The election results offer a pivotal opportunity for India to redefine South Asia's trajectory towards harmony. The newly-elected leaders must sensitively address the concerns of the neighbours. Prioritising people-to-people ties, economic interdependence, and dialogue can pave the way for a secure future rooted in mutual respect and shared progress.

The path is challenging, but a thriving, harmonious region makes it a worthwhile endeavour for India in its pursuit of leadership, both in the region and globally. Positive change via constructive engagement and sustained dialogue is the need of the hour in South Asia. This could be a tall order for a region historically more fractured than integrated.

The writer is chairman of the international think tank IPAG India, New Delhi with a presence in Dhaka, Melbourne, Dubai, and Vienna

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As education becomes expensive and the job market is saturated, youths see no reason to stay back in Nepal. While education abroad is no guarantee of success, we have collectively failed to assure students of the quality of education we are offering at home."

— THE KATHMANDU POST

## Don't put justice on hold

New criminal laws could undermine hard-won rights guaranteed by SC. They should not come into effect before audit of their utility and impact



INDIRA JAISING

THE MINISTER FOR Law and Justice has announced a National Litigation Policy. This, he is reported to have said, is intended to reduce high legal costs and decrease the number of cases in which the government is a party, as well as the load on the courts. At the same time, the Home Minister has said that three new criminal laws will be brought into force with effect from July 1.

At the heart of every criminal law is the need for its compliance with criminal procedure. This is because criminal law has the potential to result in the deprivation of the citizen's life and liberty. Article 21 states that no person shall be deprived of life and liberty except by procedure established by law. The procedure referred to here is the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), now replaced by the three new criminal laws. The Indian Penal Code defines substantive crimes and tells us what behaviour is criminal and what is not. This too has been reworded and replaced and new crimes have been created. What are the implications of this for the citizen who may find herself an accused in a criminal case? Will the three new laws reduce legal cost and save court time as intended by the National Litigation Policy or increase the burden of costs on the accused and the burden of backlog on the courts?

In every criminal case, it is the state itself which brings the case against an accused and is a litigant before the court. The three new criminal laws reword almost every section of the three fundamental criminal laws, the IPC, the CrPC and the Indian Evidence Act. These laws have been in operation for over a century and have received interpretations at the hands of the Supreme Court of India (SC). Predictability and certainty of criminal laws is one of the fundamental principles of the rule of law. People base their conduct on laws in existence and modulate their conduct to avoid criminality. When there is uncertainty, the life and liberty of citizens is in grave danger as the consequence of violation of criminal laws is arrest.

With effect from July 1, unless stopped, we will have two different systems of criminal justice in operation. Substantive laws cannot be retrospective; procedural laws can be, unless they negatively impact the accused. Now, in every case, it may be argued that the new procedure negatively impacts the accused and these disputes will take their own time reaching the SC. Until then, we will all live with a sense of uncertainty about our right to life and liberty, not knowing which law governs us.

All these will add to the burden of an already overburdened judiciary, leading to interminable delays. No audit has been

done of the likely impact of three new criminal laws on the delay that will be caused, or the infrastructure needed to upgrade the delivery of criminal justice. The National Judicial Data Grid shows the galloping pendency of criminal cases across all courts in India — over 83,000 cases overall. This backlog will only increase by an estimated 30 per cent, leading to a virtual denial of access to justice.

In addition to this, there are the questions of the creation of several new offences which will impact our life and liberty. Notwithstanding the fact that section 124A of the IPC, which defines sedition, is challenged and stayed by the SC, it has been repackaged in a more virulent form and enacted in the new criminal law (Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita Act, 2023). While the earlier law made no reference to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the new law introduces this as an offence for the first time. The result is that an ordinary riot can be elevated to the level of an attack on the sovereignty and integrity of India.

The Supreme Court in *Lalita Kumari vs Government of Uttar Pradesh* (2013) held that a First Information Report (FIR) must be lodged if a cognisable offence is disclosed. Only in certain rare cases where there is a possibility of mala-fide intentions of the complainant or commercial rivalry is suspected, a preliminary inquiry is conducted before lodging the FIR.

The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, mandates a preliminary inquiry in every cognisable offence, made punishable for three years or more but less than seven years [Section 173(3) of BNSS]. This shows scant respect for SC judgments and heralds an era in which the liberties protected by the Court can be overridden by the legislature.

Provisions of the UAPA, an Act which is stringent enough, negating the rights of the accused, has been incorporated in the new law. Sections 15, 16, 17, 18, 18A, 18B, 19, 20 of the UAPA which deal with terrorist act, punishment for raising funds for terrorist act, punishment for recruiting persons for terrorist act, etc., have been incorporated by and large in Section 113 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita Act, 2023.

This will make it possible to be prosecuted for the same offence under two different laws by two different agencies — the NIA and the local police of the state. These developments herald the beginning of an era in which our hard-won rights guaranteed by the SC can be undone in Parliament by a government which has the numbers to govern.

With the announcement of the National Litigation Policy, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, ought not to come into force until we are guaranteed speedy access to justice through a judicial audit of these laws on the extent to which the backlog of criminal litigation will increase and their impact on the fundamental rights of the accused.

The writer is senior advocate, Supreme Court, and trustee, Lawyers Collective



BISWAJIT MOHANTY

## Revival after defeat

Can Naveen Patnaik draw upon his experience and reinvent BJD in Odisha?

IN THE AFTERMATH of the defeat faced by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in the Lok Sabha elections, a message on social media attributed to Naveen Patnaik as the chief minister who elevated Odisha's stature on the global platform. Another extended gratitude to Patnaik for his multifaceted contributions to Odisha's development. The messages offer a sense of Patnaik's popularity in the state that lasted over two decades.

Patnaik, the youngest son of Biju and Gyan Patnaik, had stayed clear of the tumultuous world of politics until duty beckoned. After his father's death, beleaguered Janata Dal leaders implored him to enter Odisha's political arena, fearing the party's decline. Entering politics proved to be a daunting task for Patnaik, as he found himself entangled in power struggles with local satraps like Srikant Jena and Bijoy Mohapatra. He also lacked proficiency in conversational Odia. Yet, he successfully managed to navigate the scene, "sidestepping scrutiny and deflecting criticism", and retained his image as a simple, pleasant man "incapable of (the) villainess of an ordinary politician," as his biographer Reuben Banerjee writes. He went on to become one of India's longest-serving chief ministers. Before entering state politics, he served as a two-time Union minister under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government.

Maintaining secular credentials while facing communal politics at the national and state level is no mean feat. He upheld this

image by disengaging his party from the NDA government. In subsequent years, he ensured the BJD's survival against the rising tide of Hindutva politics. He retained his non-controversial image by maintaining a distance from all national political parties. His electoral success can be attributed to his non-interference in politically sensitive issues. His commitment to eradicating corruption, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring clean governance resonated across the Odia community. This style of governance continued for the next 24 years.

Patnaik entered politics at a critical juncture, when Odisha was grappling with social and economic adversity after a devastating super cyclone destroyed lives and left countless displaced without proper assistance from the Congress government in the state. Widespread discontentment simmered among Odias towards the Hemananda Biswal-led government, owing to its infighting, corruption, and administrative paralysis because of the persistent interference of political mafias. Odisha's social and economic indicators lagged significantly behind neighbouring states. More avenues were needed for its overall development.

Under Patnaik's chief ministership, Odisha underwent a significant transformation, particularly in disaster management. His adept handling of cyclones earned appreciation from the then chief of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

(UNDDR), Mami Mizutori, who highlighted the Patnaik government's practical approach of "strengthening disaster risk governance, investing in preparedness and scenario planning while spreading a greater understanding of disaster risk." *The New York Times* lauded Patnaik's contributions in an article titled, "How Do You Save a Million People from a Cyclone? Ask a Poor State in India".

Patnaik brought a fresh approach to politics during his tenure as the chief minister. For him, politics seems to be about doing things differently. He prioritised people's issues over the identity politics of caste and religion. His pro-poor image and pro-people welfare policies, coupled with an effective delivery system routed through an efficient bureaucracy, brought in a new era of citizen-centric welfare politics. Industry and the service sector became the two major driving forces of the state economy. The state's economy grew 7.1 per cent between 2012-13 and 2019-20; in the financial year 2022-23, it reached 7.8 per cent.

He nurtured sports in Odisha and elevated the state's status in sports. He invested in infrastructure like modern hockey stadiums and supported the national team's endeavours to compete in the Olympics. It is commendable that he inspired future generations of athletes by turning Odisha into a sports hub.

Despite all these, the BJD secured 46 per cent of the urban vote share, 39 per cent of

the women's vote share, and a fragmented tribal and Dalit vote share in 2024, losing its dominance. It seems that Patnaik's over-dependence on bureaucracy, especially V K Pandian who had a tight grip over the BJD's legislators, became a point of contention. The BJP, encashing on this situation, campaigned against reliance on an outsider to govern Odias, which struck a chord with the voters who value identity more than welfare schemes.

The challenge before Patnaik is to keep his flock together in a crisis. The BJD has an opportunity to reflect on and adapt to the new circumstances and new turn in the political mindset of Odia voters. The party should reassess the reasons behind its defeat and formulate fresh strategies for the next stage.

Patnaik's role as an Opposition leader in the wake of BJP's rise to power in the state will be interesting to observe. His effectiveness in controlling his group and Odisha politics would depend on his ability to have a nuanced understanding of everyday politics and ability to articulate the voices of people to frame alternative policies. Watching his and the BJD's next steps will provide valuable insights into the future of Odisha politics.

The writer teaches Political Science in Deshbandhu College, New Delhi, and is part of CSDS, Lokniti

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A SYSTEM FAILURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Untidy NEET' (IE, June 15). The unprecedented number of perfect scores raises questions about the integrity of the exam process while the high cut-offs create their own set of problems. The concerns raised, especially about the rumours of question paper leak, undermine the credibility of the NEET. Although conducting an exam of this scale is challenging, NTA has been conducting it for 10 years. So, logistical and technical issues should have been resolved by now. If brushed under the carpet, there can be only two options: One, to scrap NEET; two, to change India's reputation of blindly disregarding quality over quantity. This undermines our ambition to become a knowledge economy with an upskilled workforce.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Untidy NEET' (IE, June 15). The integrity of the testing system is under cloud after several egregious actions by the NTA. Don't the authorities realise that they are imperilling not only the aspirations of thousands of students but also the future of the healthcare system? These problems fuel the intense resentment against NEET in many states, especially in Tamil Nadu, where a retired judge listed how NEET favours students from affluent families and gives undue advantage to the CBSE stream of education. NTA and the Centre have a lot to answer for.

SS Paul, Nadia

### FOLLOW RULE OF LAW

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Vadodara home test' (IE, June 15). A Muslim woman who was allotted an apartment under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana in Vadodara, has been denied possession by Hindu residents on religious grounds. This has posed a trinity of social, administrative and constitutional challenges. First, PM Narendra Modi's home state Gujarat is imbued with such social disharmony that it has negated his slogan of "Sabka Saath". Second, VMC has failed to uphold the victim's constitutional rights, instead it is shifting the burden onto the court. Third, the question is: Will the rule of law, the hallmark of democracy, be enforced by the state? The silence of the BJP and Centre is telling.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

### HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'What next?' (IE, June 15). Voters are driven by the basic needs as conceptualised by Maslow in his "Hierarchy of Needs". "Roti, kapda, makaan", health, education, employment, welfare and safety will remain central. Religion, group identity, nationalism will only occasionally take centre stage. Every political party must focus on addressing these needs. They will also do well to remember, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time."

Manish Mishra, Bhopal



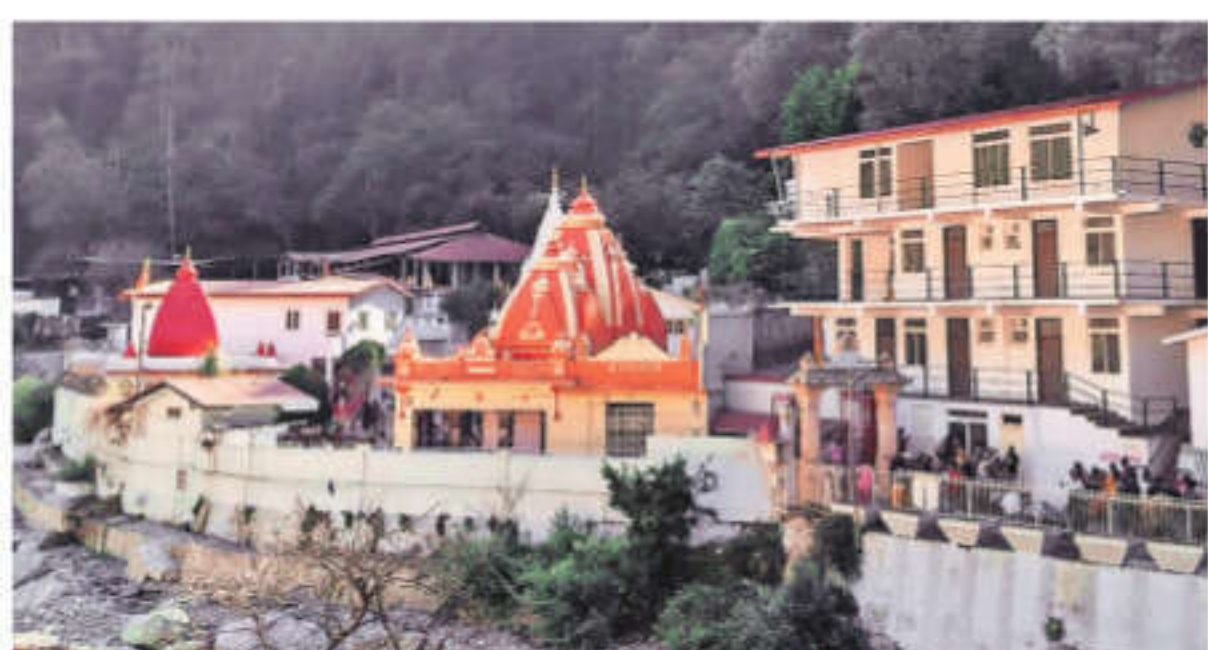


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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

EXPLAINED CULTURE

## SIGNIFICANCE OF JOSHIMATH AND KOSIYAKUTOLI, NOW RENAMED



Entrance to the Jyotirmath monastery (top). The Kainchi Dham Ashram in Nainital district. *Wikimedia Commons*

AVANEESH MISHRA  
DEHRADUN, JUNE 16

THE CENTRE has approved the Uttarakhand government's proposal to rename Joshimath tehsil in Chamoli district as Jyotirmath, and Kosiyakutoli tehsil in Nainital district as Pargana Shri Kainchi Dham, according to an official statement last week.

The development has come after Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami announced the renaming of the two tehsils last year. The decision is in line with the BJP's policy of going back to the older name of cities, as part of its focus on 'cultural revival' and linking it to nationalism.

### Story of Jyotirmath

Joshimath is believed to be originally called Jyotirmath, after one of the four cardinal *mathas* (monasteries) that 8th-century philosopher Adi Shankaracharya is said to have established to promote the Advaita Vedanta philosophy. The area got its name after Adi Shankaracharya visited it to perform penance under a tree here, known as the Amar Kalpavriksha. The name "Jyotirmath" comes from the divine light of knowledge he is believed to have attained, with *jyoti* meaning divine light.

However, over time, in colloquial usage, Jyotirmath became Joshimath. In recent years, residents demanded to rename the tehsil as Jyotirmath.

According to the government, the renaming would cement the area's status as a spiritual centre and would boost tourism.

Joshimath is an ecologically sensitive region, where unchecked development projects have been a cause of concern. Last year, massive cracks were reported across hundreds of buildings and roads of the tehsil due to land subsidence.

### The Kainchi Dham Ashram

The name "Kosiyakutoli" comes from the Kosi River which flows through the Nainital district and is important for the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand.

"Kutoli" refers to a village or settlement. In the Kumaoni language, naming a place after prominent geographical features is common practice and the names are often connected to the local culture.

Renaming Kosiyakutoli to Pargana Shri Kainchi Dham aligns its identity with Neem Karoli Baba's Kainchi Dham Ashram, which was set up here in 1962. Neem Karoli Baba was a renowned spiritual guru who had devotees across the world. He is best known for his teachings on bhakti yoga and devotion to God. He passed away in 1973.

Among his famous Western disciples were Apple co-founder Steve Jobs and former Harvard University professor Ram Dass, who helped spread his teachings across the world.

Thousands of devotees flock to the Kainchi Dham Ashram every year, especially on June 15 — the anniversary of its founding.

With the renaming, the site is also poised to gain further prominence among tourists, according to the authorities.

EXPLAINED CONSERVATION

## Another home for cheetahs

Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in western MP is set to become the second home for cheetahs in India. It has been described as 'perfect' cheetah habitat, but introducing the feline predator will come with its challenges

ANAND MOHAN J  
BHOPAL, JUNE 16

THE GANDHI SAGAR Wildlife Sanctuary will be the second home for cheetahs in India, after the Kuno National Park. The Madhya Pradesh government has announced that it has completed its preparations for the ambitious project.

The final call on when the cheetahs will be imported from Namibia and South Africa will be made after the monsoons, during which the cats may be vulnerable to infection, especially with their winter coats on.

### What makes Gandhi Sagar an ideal habitat for cheetahs?

The sanctuary is spread across an area of 368.62 sq km, in the districts of Mandsaur (187.12 sq km) and Neemuch (181.5 sq km) in western MP, on the border with Rajasthan.

It sits atop a flat rocky plateau, with the Chambal river cutting the sanctuary into two almost equal halves. The Gandhi Sagar dam, constructed on the river in 1960, lies within the area of the sanctuary, and so does parts of its reservoir, 726 sq km large in area and third largest in the country.

Due to the rocky terrain and exposed sheetrock, the topsoil is shallow. This is behind Gandhi Sagar's savanna ecosystem comprising open grasslands interspersed with dry deciduous trees and shrubs. The riverine valleys, however, are evergreen.

MP's wildlife officials say that Gandhi Sagar makes for "perfect" cheetah habitat.

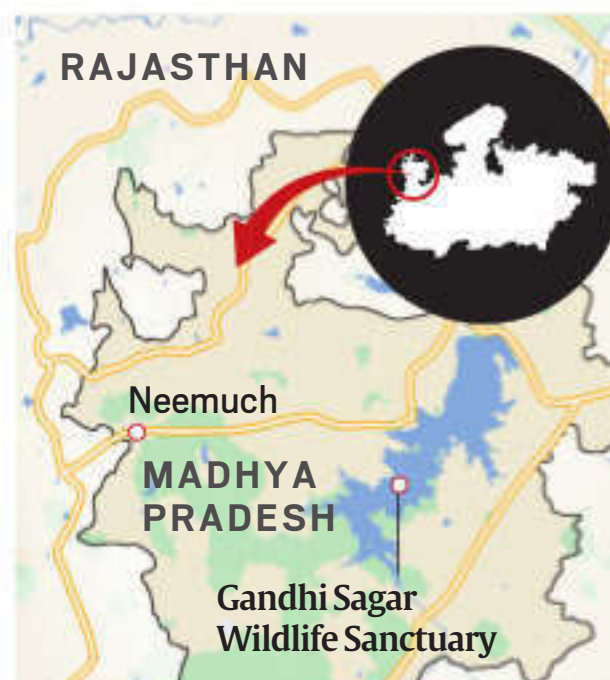
"The landscape has much promise. It looks like Maasai Mara [a national reserve in Kenya known for its savanna wilderness and wildlife including lions, giraffes, zebras, hippos, elephants, and cheetahs]. Gandhi Sagar has the best habitat for the cheetahs [in India] after Kuno," a senior official told *The Indian Express*.

Officials, in fact, see the potential of expanding the cheetah habitat in Gandhi Sagar to an area of around 2,000 sq km. But that will depend on the coordination between Rajasthan's Bhainsrodgarh sanctuary, as well as the territorial divisions of Mandsaur and Neemuch.

Expanding the core area will rely "heavily on the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to come up with a unified management plan," officials said.

### How have officials prepared for introduction of cheetahs in Gandhi Sagar?

But before the introduction of cheetahs,



The Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary (left). *Instagram/@gandhisagarwildlife\_official*

the sanctuary still needed to be "prepared" for their arrival. Currently, an area of 64 sq km has been developed for the cheetahs, at a cost of Rs. 17.72 crores.

Wildlife officials have been busy constructing a soft release enclosure (or boma) which, according to them, would "ensure a suitable and secure habitat for the cheetahs upon their arrival". This enclosure is 1 sq km in area, with four equal partitions.

Authorities are also constructing a hospital which would cater to the needs of cheetahs.

Moreover, wildlife officials are currently in the process of conducting a comprehensive status assessment of herbivores and predators in the sanctuary to gauge the existing ecological dynamics.

The Chairperson of the Cheetah Steering Committee was tasked to oversee and evaluate the overall readiness of the sanctuary to "ensure that the sanctuary is adequately equipped and prepared to support the successful integration and conservation of cheetahs within its natural landscape".

### What is the biggest challenge to making Gandhi Sagar a viable cheetah habitat?

In one word: food. For cheetahs to sustainably survive in Gandhi Sagar, the first step is thus prey base augmentation, i.e. increasing the number of animals that the wild cats can prey upon.

Male cheetah siblings form coalitions comprising three to five members, whereas females live more solitary lives (unless they are with their litter). On average, a cheetah coalition is expected to make a kill every three to four days.

According to a Wildlife Institute of India report, "considering the finite growth rate of ungulates to be ~1.33, a population of about 350 ungulates are required for a single cheetah coalition family" (Y V Jhala et al, "Assessment of cheetah introduction sites and proposed action", 2021). Ungulates are members of a diverse clade of animals, primarily consisting of big mammals with hooves (like deer).

"About 1500 chital, 1000 blackbuck, and 350 chinkara should be translocated to Gandhi Sagar... this prey base would suffice for 7-8 cheetah family/coalition," the WII assessment said.

MP's wildlife officials told *The Indian Express* that "prey animals such as chital (spotted deer) and gaurs (Indian bison) have been relocated from Kanha, Satpura and Sanjay tiger reserves to Gandhi Sagar."

But, an insufficient prey base is still an issue in Gandhi Sagar, much like it has been in Kuno. Officials are now pushing for around 5,000 antelopes to be relocated to Gandhi Sagar. This too will have its own hurdles, including "stress related mortalities" during the capturing and relocation process.

### What are some other challenges that cheetahs will face in Gandhi Sagar?

Just like in Kuno, the leopard population in Gandhi Sagar will pose a threat to cheetahs, with the two feline predators competing for the same prey, and possibly even clashing with each other in wild encounters.

In fact, apart from leopards, the sanctuary has several other co-predators as well, including sloth bears, striped hyenas, gray

wolves, golden jackals, jungle cats, Indian foxes, and marsh crocodiles.

Moreover, experts have also stressed on the enhancement of protected areas across the region.

While the forest department stressed that poaching was not a problem, the 2021 assessment found that despite the reasonably good status of the habitat, ungulate densities are extremely low, perhaps due to meat-eating communities residing in the area.

Unlike Kuno, highways and human habitation pass right outside the boundary of the protected area in Gandhi Sagar.

### How will Gandhi Sagar be developed over time?

According to the 2021 report, the "first phase of augmentation should target the section west of the Chambal river so that cheetah reintroduction can commence there as soon as sufficient prey is available".

Wildlife officials too suggested the same, saying that developments within Gandhi Sagar should initially focus on the "Neemuch side of Chambal". The Chambal river acts as a "barrier to casual movement of wildlife" between the two halves of the sanctuary.

At present, the eastern side (Mandsaur side) sees more human activity. The Gandhi Sagar township, housing employees of the hydroelectric project on the dam, is located on the eastern end of the sanctuary.

Today, the banks of the reservoir see some agriculture and livestock rearing, with the reservoir itself being used for commercial fishing.

## A new way to predict El Niño, La Niña

ANJALI MARAR  
BENGALURU, JUNE 16

HYDERABAD-BASED Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) has developed a new product to predict the emergence of El Niño and La Niña conditions — they are different phases of El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) — up to 15 months in advance. The product is known as the Bayesian Convolutional Neural Network (BCNN).

### What is ENSO?

ENSO is a climate phenomenon which involves changes in the temperature of waters in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, coupled with fluctuations in the overlying atmosphere. It can alter the global atmospheric circulation, which, in turn, influences weather across the world.

ENSO occurs in irregular cycles of 2-7

years and has three different phases — warm (El Niño), cool (La Niña), and neutral. In the neutral phase, the eastern side of the Pacific Ocean (near the northwestern coast of South America) is cooler than the western side (near the Philippines and Indonesia). This is due to the prevailing wind systems that move from east to west, sweeping the warmer surface waters towards the Indonesian coast. The relatively cooler waters from below come up to replace the displaced water.

In the El Niño phase, however, wind systems weaken, leading to lesser displacement of warmer waters. As a result, the eastern side of the Pacific becomes warmer than usual. In the La Niña phase, the opposite happens.

### What is BCNN?

The new product uses the latest technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), deep

learning, and machine learning (ML) to improve forecasts related to the ENSO phases.

The model's prediction relies on the fact that El Niño or La Niña are connected to the slow oceanic variations and their atmospheric coupling, which gives sufficient lead time to issue early forecasts. It calculates the Niño3.4 index value — used to determine the different phases of ENSO phases — and makes the forecast.

### Why is BCNN significant?

There are largely two kinds of weather models used for forecasting. One is the statistical model, which generates forecasts based on various information sets received from different countries and regions. The other is the dynamic model, which involves a 3D mathematical simulation of the atmosphere done using high performance computers.

The BCNN, however, is a combination of the dynamic model with AI. This helps it fore-

cast the emergence of El Niño and La Niña conditions with a 15-month lead time — unlike other models which can give a prediction up to six to nine months in advance.

### What were the challenges?

Typically, researchers need historical weather data — spanning several decades, and even centuries — to feed into models to generate forecasts. While rich data are available for land, there is a scarcity when it comes to seas and oceans. This gap has hampered the weather and climate prediction accuracy.

The INCOIS addressed the issue by taking data from historical runs (1850-2014 period) from the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project phases 5 and 6 (CMIP5 and CMIP6), thus augmenting the training dataset. CMIP is an experimental framework, which allows climate modellers to simulate various scenarios to test the past climate and project the future climate situations.

## Capsaicin contradiction: why chilis burn but humans love to eat them

ARJUN SENGUPTA  
NEW DELHI, JUNE 16

FOOD SAFETY authorities in Denmark have recalled three types of South Korean spicy instant noodles over possible risks of "acute poisoning". According to the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, "the capsaicin content [in the noodles] is so high that it can pose a health hazard", especially to children. Capsaicin is the chemical which makes chili peppers spicy.

### Fiery mind trick

Capsaicin is most abundantly found in the "placenta" (white membrane to which seeds are attached) of some chili peppers — fruits of plants of genus *Capsicum*, which were introduced to the rest of the world from South and Central America by Christopher Columbus.

The chemical binds to TRPV1 receptors in humans' nose, mouth, skin, and insides. These receptors help in detecting heat (and pain), and are most commonly activated by

a rise in temperature. But capsaicin 'tricks' them into reacting, even though there is no actual temperature rise. The brain, thus, believes that the body is on fire, causing the painful, burning sensation associated with consuming chilis.

The body then tries to cool down — hence the sweating, and the red face (capillaries just below the skin dilate, as blood rushes to the surface of the body, where it can radiate heat away more easily). The runny nose or teary eyes (if capsaicin happens to come in contact) are the body's attempt at expelling the heat-causing element. So are the gut cramps and diarrhoea.

### Evolutionary benefits

In 2001, biologists Josh Tewksbury and Gary Nabhan conducted a feeding experiment on some birds and rodents. They found that while the former tended to avoid chilis, the latter ate them like candy ("Directed Deterrence by Capsaicin in Chilies," published in *Nature* in 2001). The researchers attributed this to the fact that birds do not have TRPV1 receptors, unlike rodents (and mammals).



Chilis evolved so as to not be consumed by mammals. *Wikimedia Common*

Tewksbury further found that unlike rodents, birds acted as seed dispersers. The seeds they consume (and excrete) germinate at high rates, whereas rodents tend to crush seeds while chewing. Capsaicin, thus serves a specific evolutionary purpose for chili plants. ("Evolutionary Ecology of Pungency in Wild Chilies" published in *PNAS* in 2008).

Later research has also found that the chemical protects against certain fungi and insects.

But developing capsaicin comes at a cost. It consumes a significant amount of the plant's limited resources, especially nitrogen and water. This makes spicy chilis more prone to droughts (David Haak, et al "Why are not all chilies hot? A trade-off limits pungency" published in *Proc R Soc* in 2011).

### Humans love the burn

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom once said, "Philosophers have often looked for the defining feature of humans — language, rationality, culture and so on. I'd stick with this: Man is the only animal that likes Tabasco sauce".

It is clear that chilis evolved so as to not be consumed by mammals, but (many) humans still love it. Today, the five domesticated chili species have been bred to more than 3,000 different cultivars (or cultivated varieties) which vary in terms of colour, taste, and pungency.

Some experts argue this love comes from the antimicrobial benefits spicy foods possess (not just chilis, but also other foods like peppercorn or wasabi). "Countries with hotter climates used spices more frequently than countries with cooler climates," biol-

ogists Jennifer Billing and Paul W Sherman wrote in "Darwinian Gastronomy: Why We Use Spices" (published in the *QRB* in 1998).

This is because food spoils much faster in hotter environments. Native Americans, for instance, used (and continue to use) chilis not just to add a spicy kick to food but to preserve it.

"People who enjoyed food with antibacterial spices probably were healthier... They lived longer and left more offspring," the researchers wrote.

Psychologists have a different view. In their pioneering research paper, Paul Rozin and Deborah Schiller argued that chili lovers "come to like the same burning sensation that deters animals and humans that dislike chili... eating chilis [like] riding on roller coasters... can be considered instances of thrill seeking or enjoyment of 'constrained risks'" ("The nature and acquisition of a preference for chili pepper by humans", published in *Motivation and Emotion* in 1980). Emphasis here on the word 'constrained' — the burn is 'simulated', much like a roller coaster drop, meaning that chilis do not actually pose a 'real' risk.

### Word of caution

However, too much capsaicin can still be harmful. In high concentrations, the chemical can produce heartburn, gastrointestinal pain, and diarrhea. Moreover, long-term ingestion of high levels of capsaicin may lead to several chronic gastrointestinal disorders.

But 'poisoning', as flagged by Danish authorities, is rare as the levels of capsaicin that need to be ingested before it becomes toxic. If humans are as sensitive to capsaicin as mice, a person weighing 70 kg would have to consume roughly 2.5 litres of Tabasco sauce to overdose (Manirakiza, Covaci and Schepens in "Pungency Principles in Capsicum" in *Capsicum: The Genus Capsicum* 2003).

But there is still more scope for research, and given capsaicin's gastrointestinal effects, high dosages are avoidable. Danish authorities acted after a social media trend, which saw children and teenagers daring each other to eat "a strong bowl of noodle soup". Spice eating challenges are not new, and previously, have been known to be deadly. In September 2023, a Massachusetts teen with a congenital heart defect died after participating in a spicy tortilla chip challenge.



# 13 IDEA EXCHANGE

## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

### ON STATES AND INVESTMENTS

Our companies were happy with Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These states have been effective in receiving our investment and helping our companies develop

**Shubhajit Roy: How do you read the results of the elections in India and what does it mean for the India-Italy relationship?**

My first comment on the election is: congratulations to India and all Indians, to Prime Minister Modi for his historic third mandate and to the Opposition dynamics in India... Every time someone sets an example of democratic life, India is always there, and this time, with the largest elections ever held, even more... This is also good for the continuity of the relations between Italy and India. With our Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni succeeding in the recent EU elections, there will be stability between the two countries that will sustain their relationship.

**Shubhajit Roy: When you came to India in December 2019, the relationship between the two countries was not at its best. It was against the backdrop of the Italian Marines Case and the AgustaWestland corruption allegations. What was your brief then?**

When I arrived here in New Delhi, there was a lot of important work to do, to finalise the agreement on the Marines and the AgustaWestland issue. My predecessors had worked a lot on this... And finally, in 2023, we had the opportunity to elevate the relation to a strategic partnership: It meant working on sensitive sectors, such as defence, cybersecurity and mobility. Mobility will be one of the main challenges in the coming years... Last year, our government announced a plan to take in 500,000 more legal migrants in Italy... On the one hand, it is strategic for the Italian economy because we need more workers and talent from India. Not only in the agro-industry business but also in the health sector and in manufacturing... On the other hand, I hope that with the further opening of universities exchange programmes and joint and dual degrees, we can have more students from Italy in India... Also, the number of workers and migrants from India to Italy will increase in the coming three to four years. Currently, we host one of the largest Indian communities in the European Union — 210,000 Indians live and work in Italy on a regular basis. They come mainly from Punjab, Haryana and Kerala. Last year, we delivered 21,500 (over 58 per cent compared to 2022) new work permits and stays in Italy.

**Shubhajit Roy: How did the needle move towards a more progressive immigration policy with the Meloni government?**

The Italian government is focusing on the fight against irregular migration. There is a demographic decline in our economy, for which it is fundamental to have the right number of workers and talent, otherwise we will see a decline in GDP growth, wealth and well-being of the Italian people. So, India will be one of the most interesting pilot projects to increase the number of legal migrants to Italy.

**Shubhajit Roy: Now that Finmeccanica has recast itself as Leonardo, is there a perception that the defence relationship can move forward, despite its past?**

Absolutely, I can tell you that something has already happened. Leonardo is very active to promote new partnerships. Companies working in the field of electronic warfare are also very active... There is a joint venture to produce electronic warfare equipment between Bharat Electronics Limited and Elettronica. We have some sectors where we can provide added value. For example, with helicopters, torpedoes, guns and radar, Leonardo can promote partnerships with industrial players here in the framework of "Make In India" programmes... In the coming years, there will also be a potential for growth for Fincantieri and joint shipyards. In the last few months, we had meetings in Delhi of the joint defence group for industrial collaboration and of the military joint committee, and an exchange of experiences between the two administrations. In October, we will also have the aircraft carrier Cavour here in India.

**Shubhajit Roy: Last year, we saw Italy leaving the BRI (China's Belt and Road Initiative). Has that had an impact on Italy's relation with India?**

We are developing a relationship with China as are other European partners. The idea of withdrawing from the BRI was also based on the outcome of this agreement. At the same time, we have relaunched an advanced partnership with China, as Germany and France have done. But another important initiative that will diversify the corridors between East and West — the India-Middle East-Europe Economic

### WHY VINCENZO DE LUCA

Italian ambassador Vincenzo de Luca came to India in December 2019, just before the pandemic, and worked on the transformation in India-Italy ties over the last four-and-a-half years. Since 2012, ties had been adversely impacted by the Italian marines case and corruption allegations on an

Italian defence firm for the purchase of VVIP choppers. During his tenure, both issues were resolved and Prime Minister-level visits resumed. Against this backdrop, the Italian envoy, whose term ends this month, is best placed to explain the transformation in the ties and the path forward

### ON INDIAN WORKERS IN ITALY

We host one of the largest Indian communities in the European Union — 210,000 Indians live and work in Italy... Mobility is of importance because we need more workers and talent from India

# ‘Modi and Meloni share the same vision about relationship between tradition and present challenges, and Europe and India’

Vincenzo de Luca, Ambassador of Italy to India, on their migration policy, the significance of the European Union elections and the role of China in world politics. This conversation was moderated by Shubhajit Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*



Ambassador of Italy to India Vincenzo de Luca (right) in a discussion with Shubhajit Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express* Abhinav Saha

Corridor (IMEC) — will give India and Italy further opportunities for collaboration... In line with the IMEC framework is the Blue-Raman digital connectivity cable that will link France, Italy, the Middle East and India. Already financed and largely implemented, it will become operational in the first half of 2025.

**Shubhajit Roy: What is the rapport that the two leaders — Meloni and Modi — share?**

I think they are very direct leaders. They express their thoughts without too much formality. They share the same vision about the relationship between tradition and present challenges. They give importance to cultural diversity, identity and also to the relationship between Europe and India in the global scene.

**Divya A: How do you view the European Parliament elections and the results where right-wing parties are making significant advances?**

Yes, there has been an important result for the right-wing parties, but in any case, you have also to consider that Italy will play an important role in the new governance. We have to see how the leaders decide on the new leadership of the European Union, the President of the Council, the President of the Commission and the President of the Parliament.

**Shubhajit Roy: How is Italy different from Hungary, where the right-wing is in power?**

The Italian government has adopted a position in favour of more European agreements that are effective and sustainable, for instance, on migration and on economic governance, with the reform of the Stability Pact and Growth Pact. Coherently with what its predecessors did, our government is trying to alleviate the measures that could have a strong impact on highly indebted economies... But, specific topics aside, the line is to continue to work for a more effective Europe, and for a Europe that delivers better... On Ukraine, the line of the Italian government has always been quite clear, aligned with the European Union and NATO. We will see what the decision will be in the coming weeks and months. But there will be no major change in the Italian position, which has been further strengthened by the vote in this election to the European Parliament.

**Monojit Majumdar: There is a perception that there is a degree of dissonance between Euro-sceptic leaders such as Prime Minister Meloni and leaders of Hungary or Slovakia**

**and how they look at Europe and its imperatives. For instance, PM Meloni has been very clear about Ukraine, she's been completely aligned. Is there any friction of sorts?**

Prime Minister Meloni is pursuing a policy in favour of a more effective Europe, more coherence between Europe and NATO. She has developed a positive relationship with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. The European Union is not just two or three countries, it is 27 countries. You take into account different positions when you strike a balance and you decide what the line of the European Union is. Italy could play an important role in reaching out to other countries and not only to two or three. Also, the support Prime Minister Meloni has received in this election will allow her to have a bigger say in Brussels.

**Monojit Majumdar: Can you give us a big picture on China and the threats and the opportunities that it poses in the new world order?**

I believe the position of Italy is also the position of the European Union: Italy and Europe need to find a balance of interest, dealing with China as a partner on global issues and as an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, being aware of the two alternative principles and models of governance. The challenge for Europe is to engage China on global issues, because you cannot negotiate anything on climate change or global health without China. Certainly, we have to discuss with China how to rebalance the economic multilateral relations. This does not mean decoupling from China, but creating a sort of level-playing field in terms of market access opportunities.

**Shubhajit Roy: Do you think China is**



**playing a constructive role, say, in the war in Ukraine?**

For the time being, we would expect more pressure from China on Russia, and we hope that it can play a role in stopping the war and facilitating an agreement.

**Shubhajit Roy: How do you see the endgame in Ukraine?**

We are trying to stop Russia's aggression and get a fair peace for Ukraine. Don't forget, it was not a war of Ukraine against Russia, it was an invasion of Russia on Ukrainian territory. So we have to stop this aggression, which is a violation of territorial sovereignty, if we want to ensure peace and stability. The international community, including India, is sensitive to this principle enshrined in the UN Charter. That's why we are trying to involve more and more countries in the perspective of stopping the war and respecting the fundamental right to territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine... We hope that the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland can further contribute to the process of reaching a new situation in Ukraine and also start a new course, but all this takes time.

**Shubhajit Roy: But would you say the sanctions that Europe imposed on Russia did not damage them enough for them to come down to the table?**

I don't think that the sanctions did not damage Russia at all. Certainly, it had serious consequences, for example because you could not export gas in Europe, which was the main market for Russia. For us, it was a challenge. We had to shift the supply of gas from Russia to other sources, and we were able to do it in a very short period of time, especially with our company Eni... We are increasing the capacity of the pipelines from Algeria, Azerbaijan, Libya and LNG from Qatar and other African

countries. Thus, we have been able to drastically reduce or eliminate the supply of gas from Russia. Of course, this is not the end of the Russian economy but it has a significant impact, and maybe it will have consequences also in the coming years.

**Alind Chauhan: Could you talk about the farmers' protests that took place across Europe earlier this year. How are you dealing with these protests?**

With the new Parliament and new Council in Europe, we will see how to deal with it. Certainly, we will have to make the energy transition more sustainable, in terms of social impact... Once we establish targets, we need to make sure that they do not have an unsustainable social costs. This is an issue in Europe, in India and all over the world... Europe was the first region in the world to set a very ambitious target. But I also have to say that if Europe had not fixed these targets 30 years ago, would there have been such a negotiation on climate change? Would there have been such a participation of all actors? I think that Europe played an important role in mobilising international public opinion. This was its merit. The problem may be that in Europe, the speed and extent of those policies have not been the most effective one in terms of social impact, even if the idea of a "just" transition is already deeply rooted in Brussels and dedicated funds have been deployed in the Union's budget. This has to be re-addressed by the new European Commission, the new Council and the new European Parliament. I think Europe cannot withdraw from a leading role in promoting action on climate change... But the direction is that we have to better balance the implementation of the targets with the impact on the more vulnerable social classes, in particular farmers, and the more vulnerable countries in the world. That's the challenge for everybody, not only for Europe.

**Monojit Majumdar: By November, we may have Trump back in the White House. How does Italy look at this?**

It depends very much on the composition of the new political leadership of Europe. Of course, with the US, with Trump or Biden, the relationship remains fundamental because we are allies, NATO partners... Regardless of who will be president, it will depend on how the new president will manage the present tension and conflicts and what the situation will be at the time of the election.

**Liz Mathew: How much role did the Church play in resolving the Enrica Lexie issue (in which two Italian**

**marines were charged with the killing of two Indian fishermen off the coast of Kerala in 2012), and how much did that incident affect India-Italy relations?**

The Catholic Church was not involved. There was direct contact between the two governments. There were no intermediaries. Yes, the issue affected Italy-India relations a lot in 2012, 2017 and 2018.

**Shiny Varghese: The Italian luxury furniture market in India has almost increased by 25 per cent. What are your challenges?**

If I were to project bilateral trade between Italy and India in the mass market and consumer goods sector, furniture and interior design would certainly be one of the most promising in terms of growth. In fact, we already are increasing our exports here... Moreover, we will have some designers from Italy who will establish partnerships with Indian companies in the future... Indian design could also be present, to a certain extent, in the Italian market. To give you an example, in some months, there will be an opening of a shop in Milan by an Indian company that produces high-level Italian design... Design and fashion will become another part of the bilateral relation. The biggest potential for Italian fashion and design in Asia is here in India. At Istituto Marangoni, which is the number one school for fashion in the world, 27 per cent of the students come from India. Therefore, Marangoni is exploring opportunities to create a hub in India.

**Rinku Ghosh: What are some of the memories that you're taking back, after four years?**

I can mention one archaeological site that was really fantastic — Hampi in Karnataka. Italy has 59 UNESCO sites and India has 42, but I think the number will go up because India has enormous potential. Hampi is an example on how to promote and protect (an archaeological site).

**Shubhajit Roy: You've visited many states and interacted with several state governments. Which states were the most receptive and which were the most challenging?**

Our companies were very happy with Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These states have been effective in receiving our investments and helping our companies develop. The city with the highest number of Italian companies is Pune, where we have about 50 Italian plants. Perhaps, the most challenging states are the ones where we haven't been present for a long time.



## COALITION DYNAMICS COULD REFLECT IN GST COUNCIL MEET

THE next GST Council meeting, to be held on June 22, will be a crucial one. Coming after a gap of eight months, the first meeting after the NDA government returned to office also comes in the backdrop of a reduced mandate for the BJP in the Lok Sabha. The meeting is critical as it's expected to address several issues including review of GST rates on online gaming, bringing petroleum products, electricity, and real estate under GST, besides considering rate rationalisation. Conventionally, the Centre has one-third of votes in the Council while states have an upper hand, collectively holding two-thirds. This means states will have their say on policy decisions in any case. Still, some believe the Council may hit a deadlock on key issues as states sense a weaker Centre and the coalition government may mar its hand in pursuing reforms like before.

Rate rationalisation, the topmost item among all, is unlikely to see any immediate change. That's because the Group of Ministers (GoM) appointed to consider the rate restructuring is yet to finalise its recommendations. Moreover, given the recent assembly elections, the GoM itself may see a restructuring. Currently, essential and semi-essential goods constitute 70-80% of India's consumption, and attract a levy of 5-12%. The multiplicity of taxes has led to inverted tax duty classification issues leading to legal disputes; the Centre wants to reduce the current rates of 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28% into three slabs. Will this lead to a consolidation of the two slabs namely 5% and 12% or 12% and 18%? If so, analysts warn against rate tweaking as it could increase the tax burden of lower-income groups.

The other critical aspect includes petrol and diesel that are excluded from GST, but are subject to VAT, central excise duty, and central sales tax. While the Centre imposes taxes on the base rate, states determine their individual rates. It comprises a significant chunk of their tax revenues. Given states' high debt burden, particularly Andhra Pradesh, which happens to be home to the NDA's key coalition partner TDP, it will be interesting to see how the Council navigates the issue. Perhaps it can begin with low impact petroleum products such as natural gas before considering a full-fledged rollout. As the tax regime turns eight next month, reforms process shouldn't take a backseat.

## THE BURDEN OF HOPE ON SURESH GOPI

SURESH Gopi's victory in the recent Lok Sabha election is not only symbolic of BJP's growth in Kerala but also underlines the burden of hope that rests on his shoulders. He is the sole BJP Lok Sabha member from Kerala and one of only two ministers representing the state in the Modi 3.0 administration. His win can be attributed to a combination of two factors – his personal appeal and the increasing support for BJP among the Kerala electorate, including among the sizeable Christian community. What's significant to note here is that while the party lost narrowly in Thiruvananthapuram – where it has been coming second since 2014 – and came a close third in two other constituencies, its sole, and historic, victory in Thrissur was sealed with a sizeable margin (close to 75,000) and vote share (37.8%), highlighting the importance of Suresh Gopi and his success for BJP's plans in Kerala.

It's a fact that even before this election, the BJP was pinning its hopes on Suresh Gopi to open its Lok Sabha account in Kerala. And he delivered what the party desperately needed. Now, he needs to deliver as an MP and minister. The BJP has been making small gains in Kerala in successive elections but those weren't this significant. This time the BJP-led NDA polled 19.24% votes – an increase of nearly 4% in comparison to 2019. From finishing second in just one seat in 2019 to winning one and finishing second in another in 2024, the BJP's gains are impressive and it truly seems to have transformed itself from an also-ran to a winnable party. It now has the platform to catapult itself to the pole position in Kerala politics. But that can happen only if it continues to build on its gains. That could be a challenge given Kerala's unique demography and its historical reluctance to deviate from bipolar politics involving two main fronts led by the CPM and the Congress. That's where leaders like Suresh Gopi, whose popularity transcends caste, religious, and political barriers, can play a role.

Suresh Gopi's inclusion in the Union ministry should not be seen just as a reward. It's a reaffirmation of party leadership's faith in him. Having said that, it must be wary of his tendency to attract controversies. He must tread carefully and watch his words while continuing to work for the people, as he has been doing, and fulfilling his ministerial obligations. The actor must see this as an opportunity to perform as a politician and help his party in the process. The burden is huge as he carries the hope of people who elected him and the ambitions of his party.

### QUICK TAKE

#### INCLUSIVE HOODS WELCOME

THE news that 33 Hindu residents of a housing complex in Vadodara are trying hard to push out the lone Muslim allottee just for her religion is worrying, but not surprising. Such overt and covert pushes for ghettoisation have been happening in Indian cities for long. But what's equally disheartening is the apparent silence on the issue from at least 425 other allottees in the cooperative society. It's a central government housing scheme and the 44-year-old mother allotted one flat works at an outfit under the skills ministry. Yet, old prejudices die hard. The more inclusive our neighbourhoods, the lower will be the bigotry and deeper the harmony.

WHY didn't the BJP meet its expectations in the recent Lok Sabha elections? While Narendra Modi's opponents celebrate for apparent reasons, the results have undoubtedly left BJP supporters surprised, stunned, or both.

For many of Modi's supporters, '*Akki baar, 400 paar*' was a battle cry, a motivational prop for an ambitious target. A comfortable majority was, however, taken for granted. The 240 tally left them bewildered, scurrying for reasons responsible for this unexpected poll outcome.

While in a democracy the voter is the kingmaker, the electoral setback forced the Modi fan club to introspect. The unexpected loss was attributed to several factors, including alienation of party *karyakartas* because of their neglect by leaders, selection of bad candidates, wholesale lateral entry of outsiders to the fold, resulting in heartburn in cadres, and alleged indifference of the RSS to the election process.

Some of these reasons are valid but hardly impact the poll outcome. Were Congress and other constituents of the INDI Alliance free from these faults? Was everything hunky-dory with the BJP during the 2019 polls? In this respect, 2024 wasn't very different from 2019.

Didn't such a problem exist in states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Tripura and Madhya Pradesh, where the party won all seats? Or in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Odisha, the states where the BJP performed equally well?

What explains the abysmal results of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal? There is something more than meets the eye. Apart from issues such as caste matrix, jobs and price rise, the opposition's deftness in building a convincing narrative gave a surprising twist to the poll outcome.

A confident Modi banked on his achievements to win a third term. But his opponents—a pack consisting of Islamists, leftists, evangelists, dynastic parties and foreign powers inimical to India—engaged him on a different turf. They successfully moved the debate from the performance of his 10 years in office to a clutch of acerbic narratives, in which they excel.

While the 2014 BJP victory was a surprise, the 2019 one shocked the pack. Modi's onslaught on poverty, war against corruption, ruthless elimination of terror; high economic growth, restoration of normalcy in Kashmir without firing a shot and India's growing stature in the comity of nations rattled them. It was clear: India was on an ascent, and the electorate wanted PM Modi to stay for long.

What explains BJP's unexpected performance at the elections? Part of the reason could be the claims the opposition made, part the ruling regime's smugness

## NARRATIVES THAT CHANGED THE POLL WIND

BALBIR PUNJ

Author of the recently published *Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*



SOURAV ROY

Apart from dynastic political parties, the narratives against Modi were set by a pack of foreign-funded NGOs, media, and academia sections rooted in the leftist lexicon. This pack, wired with global institutions, uses wokeism and time-tested toolkits to manipulate the system, influence public discourse and meet its ideological ends.

The BJP losses were directly proportional to how the insidious narratives impacted voters, which differed from state to state. Modi's performance was pitted against a manufactured perception and propaganda that spun narratives based on unfounded prejudices, unsubstantiated allegations, white lies and half-truths. The pack stoked fear in vulnerable sections of society.

The opposition narrative rested on five key points. First, the BJP would change and “end” the Constitution. Second, Modi controlled all constitutional institutions including the Election Commission. Third, the BJP was persecuting minorities. Fourth, Modi was a friend of the rich and an enemy of the poor. Fifth, Modi would finish reservations for scheduled castes and tribes.

Changing the Constitution is no big deal. The document, a cornerstone of our democracy, has been amended over 100 times since it was adopted, mainly during Congress regimes. Amending the Constitution isn't the same as finishing it.

Ending existing reservations for any section was a false alarm. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has repeatedly said reservations would continue till discrimination against weaker sections doesn't end.

## UJJAIN: THE HOLY CITY OF INTELLECTUAL ATTAINMENT

RENUKA NARAYANAN

### FAITHLINE

lingam represents this even today.

A *lingam* in heaven and a *lingam* in the netherworld are believed to be in alignment with earth at Mahakaleshwar. The Mahakaleshwar Jyotirling is thus considered the centre-point of earth. Moreover, this is the foremost of the Twelve Jyotirlingas that hold up the sacred geography of India from Kedarnath to Rameswaram.

The *Panch Kos* or pilgrim circuit of Uj-



Legend says Lord Shiva agreed to abide forever in Ujjain as Mahakaleshwar, the Lord of Eternity, after destroying demon Dushan before he descended on the city. A naturally-manifested stone *lingam* at the Mahakaleshwar temple marks this even today

jain takes us through an energy field of 84 temples. When the stars are in alignment every 12 years for the Kumbh Mela, known in Ujjain as '*Simhas*' or 'Leo in the Ascendant', it is believed the constellations are represented on earth by the city's temple geography. The next *Simhas* at Ujjain is from Sunday, April 9 to Monday, May 8 in 2028.

Just as creation has no meaning without Nature, Shiva is incomplete without Shakti. Her presence is consecrated at the Harsiddhi Shaktipeeth temple through one of the most poignant events in Indian belief—the death of Sati. The Harsiddhi Temple at Ujjain commemorates the site where Sati's elbow is believed to have fallen.

Ujjain became known as a place of intellectual attainment. Thus, no less than Sri Krishna was sent to study here with his

PM Modi, too, has spoken in the same vein many times.

The recent results have proved that the allegations against the Election Commission and questions on the credibility of electronic voting machines were part of a conspiracy to delegitimise Modi.

The rich-poor binary was baseless; the biggest beneficiaries of the Modi regime are the poor. According to the IMF, India has sharply brought down extreme poverty. Another World Bank working paper said that the number of those suffering extreme poverty in India dropped from 22.5 percent in 2011 to 10.2 percent in 2019.

When we speak of atrocities on minorities, we seem not to remember the murders of Hafizul Sheikh (West Bengal, 2024), Aijaz Ahmad Sheikh (J&K, 2024), Babar Ali (Uttar Pradesh, 2022), and Sheikh Wa-seem Bari (J&K, 2020). Is it because they chose to be aligned with the BJP? Did their blood matter any less for it?

The opposition narrative about saving democracy, institutions and constitution is a sham. The opposition is fighting to save political dynasties and the corrupt within its ranks. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal claimed that an election victory for the opposition would result in his release from jail.

Modi's welfarism covered all 140 crore Indians without any discrimination whatsoever. Still, Muslims do have grievances against him, the way they had against the Congress during the pre-partition era. Those in doubt can refer to the Pirpur Committee report published by the Muslim League in 1938. It implied that Hindus, Hindu communalism, and the Congress were synonymous. This report was later used to argue for the partition of India.

The hard fact is that BJP-RSS were resting on their laurels too soon. Comparatively easy victories in 2014 and 2019 had turned them smug. They had won a battle, but not the war to retrieve India from a colonial narrative, a British legacy.

Narrative is a powerful instrument. It has successfully laundered the Communists of their sin of supporting the vivisection of the country based on religion and transforming them into secular icons. Rahul Gandhi, a product of dynastic politics who remote-controlled the UPA 1 and 2 governments without any accountability, is a poster boy of democracy and social justice. The ones dividing Indians on the basis of caste and mocking Hinduism carry the 'secular' moniker. That's the power of narrative—something the Modi clan didn't realise and paid heavily for.

(Views are personal)  
(punjbalbir@gmail.com)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Conduct census

Ref: A to-do list for India's new ministers (Jun 16). In the absence of a recent census, a majority of our country's population is unable to access schemes, benefits and services. Hence conducting the next census, essential for planning, should also come under the priority category for the home ministry.  
**N Rama Rao, Chennai**

#### Extend concessions

Ref: Trial test for Vande Bharat sleeper trains to start on Aug 15 (Jun 16). It is a good decision to introduce sleeper berths in Vande Bharath trains, but the railway department also has to ensure basic cleanliness in all coaches and punctuality of trains as far as possible. It should also consider the requests of senior citizens and the disabled to extend concessions in charges as there was before.  
**Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad**

#### Good decision

One feels it is really a good decision of the AIADMK to boycott the Vijkravandi bypolls as it would by and large favour only the ruling dispensation. That said, blaming the DMK for boycotting the bypolls is a defence mechanism for the AIADMK. The party is currently crestfallen after its humiliating defeat in the Lok Sabha polls. It needs to do a lot of homework to emerge victorious in the assembly election in 2026.  
**S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai**

#### Road development

The change of government in Andhra Pradesh is a welcome sight. There is an urgent need to develop the road that connects Kakinada to Rajahmundry, which also has an airport. A distance of approximately 60 km takes over two hours to complete because of the incomplete highway project.  
**Ravi Hegde, email**

#### Good politician

Opposition parties can learn so much from former Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik. Even though his party suffered defeat in the assembly elections, he accepted the verdict graciously. He didn't blame EVMs or any political party. He even attended the swearing-in ceremony of the BJP ministry and congratulated the new CM. This shows he is not a petty politician.  
**S Ravindranath, Bengaluru**

#### Dedicated artist

The demise of multifaceted legend Rajeev Taranath has left a void in both the music and literature world that can never be filled. It is said he practised the sarod for 18 hours at a stretch sometimes, till his fingers started bleeding.  
**PV Prakash, email**

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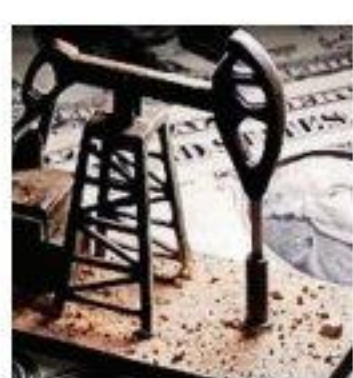
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## Petrodollar, It's Alive & Flowing

Unchanged even if Riyadh sells oil against yuan

Reports of demise of the dollar as a reserve currency, because Saudi Arabia may price oil in other currencies, to quote Queen Victoria upon hearing the news of her own supposed demise, are exaggerated. For starters, the end to the so-called 'petrodollar agreement' between the US and Saudi Arabia this month has not been confirmed by official sources. Possibly because there may not have been an iron-clad agreement, supposedly inked in 1974, in the first place. It could have evolved out of a need for Saudi Arabia to deploy the surplus it was earning from oil sales and US efforts to push its industrial exports in the kingdom. The arrangement has worked well all these years. But times have changed with new buyers, such as China and India, seeking to buy oil in their local currencies. Those efforts may bear fruit. However, it does not change the fundamentals of the oil market.



Big buyers have some bargaining power in the kingdom over choice of currency. But Riyadh remains the strongest strategic ally of Washington in the Arab world. It will need dollars to buy arms from the US. China holds nearly 10 times as much dollar reserves as Saudi Arabia, and it has not been able to make a serious dent on the dollar's role as reserve currency. Finally, the trade in oil uses dollars in just about everything, from buying to transport to insurance. This is not going to change even if Saudi Arabia begins to sell oil against the yuan.

The oil trade is done in dollars because it keeps things simple. India's experience with buying Russian oil in local currency is a case in point. Moscow has a worry over the surplus it is accumulating, which can either be used for inward investment or for lending to India. Neither option is as desirable as selling oil in dollars and using those proceeds at will. Riyadh may see some benefit in using oil to pay for Chinese exports. However, it can do that even now with dollars. The oil industry is not likely to question the dominance of the dollar as the medium for trade.

## Mend Manipur, For India's Sake

It's been more than a year now, and Manipur is yet to find peace. In May 2023, violence broke out between Kuki-Zo-Hmars and Meiteis. Fearing for their lives, members of the former community retreated to the hills, while Meiteis evacuated from the hill districts to the valley. The division between the two regions has only become more pronounced, with fresh violence breaking out in Jiribam in the state's western-most boundary earlier this month, forcing many to evacuate to neighbouring Assam. In the past year, more than 200 people have been killed and 60,000 displaced. Yet, there has been minimal political outreach by GoI, or political stakeholders from the northeast region, to mend the fractured relations. With a new government in Delhi, addressing the crisis in Manipur must be made top priority.



Ensuring social peace is essential for every Indian state, including — perhaps especially — those perceived as 'peripheral'. It's not only crucial for the state in question but also for the peace and stability of neighbouring states, and the 'union' of India. The Manipur crisis is leading to a spillover to neighbouring states. However, these states, burdened with their own socioeconomic challenges, are reluctant to accommodate them, the only exception being Mizoram. Apart from internal tensions, trouble in India's border states provides fertile ground for 'external interference'. Persisting with a de facto hands-off approach with Manipur can dilute its people's sense of belonging to the national mainstream.

Despite the ongoing tension, and possible disenchantment with the democratic process, Manipur's voter turnout in the Lok Sabha elections was an impressive 81.64%. It's now the Indian state's responsibility to keep its part of the democratic deal.



### JUST IN JEST

Travelling by plane is so meh — instead, have a ticket to ride a train forever

## True Freedom Lies In Train of Thoughts

People define freedom in all sorts of crazy ways. Traveling is one particular favourite. Plenty of folks in the West are ditching the ball-and-chain of paid housing and soul-crushing loans, and opting, instead, for the freewheeling lifestyle of camper vans. But hold on to your horseless carriages, because Lasse Stolley, a 17-year-old German lad, has taken this craving for freedom and sprinted ahead — in a different direction. This young coder has bid farewell to the creature comforts of his northern German home and taken up residence on a Deutsche Bahn railcar.

For about \$10,000 a year — cost of an unlimited rail ticket — Lasse has transformed himself into a train-residing nomad. He clocks an impressive 600 km a day, meandering around Germany and Europe in first-class style. He eats in dining cars, sleeps in bunks, sink-launders his clothes, and bathes in community centre showers, his very own palace on wheels. 'Life on the train gives me the freedom to choose where I want to go at any time. Breakfast by the Baltic Sea in the morning and enjoy the sunset in the Alps in the evening — the possibilities are endless,' he says, sounding like the rail-evangelist for the ultimate rail pass. In an age where jet-setting has become meh, Stolley's lifestyle is a reminder of true luxury of freedom. Indian Railways, any thoughts on your tracks?

Manufacturing isn't about jobs but key to balancing trade deficits, securing geopolitical security

## A Manufactured Straw Man



Somnath Mukherjee

In a famous barnstorming speech, then-US senator Richard Nixon, battling charges of embezzlement of election funds, made an emotional appeal to voters. He invoked his modest background, attacked his opponents and, most memorably, declared his intention to retain one 'gift', a dog his kids called Checkers.

Since then, the 'Checkers Speech' has become famous in the US as a storied instance of the 'straw man' phenomenon. His critics had said nothing about a pet dog. But Nixon pivoted the narrative by putting Checkers at the centre of the critique. He succeeded, winning his nomination and election as Dwight Eisenhower's vice-president in 1952.

Straw-man invocations are common to politics and policymaking debates. For example, the debate on India's attempts at recovering its manufacturing mojo has pivoted around a straw man — jobs. Unfortunately, supporters and critics have ping-ponged the same straw man.

Supporters claim manufacturing is important because it will help create lots of jobs. Critics, like former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan, say India has lost the manufacturing race. They cite scant job creation in PLI projects, and advise focusing on services to create jobs. But, beyond politics, manufacturing is not about jobs. Not in India, not anywhere else.

► China, the world's largest factory, with a manufacturing output of \$5tn, employs around 100 mn workers in manufacturing — that's less than 20% of its workforce.

► India, with a manufacturing out-

India can't afford to leave itself politically vulnerable due to a weak manufacturing base



Wake up and smell the straw

put of \$500 bn, employs 27-62 mn workers (depending on the survey one is quoting) — that's less than 15% of workers.

So, manufacturing is not a massive jobs sink. As Indian manufacturing approaches Chinese levels of productivity, chances are that it will need fewer workers, not more. With increased automation, the employment intensity of manufacturing is on a secular decline. For example, Bajaj Auto, India's largest two-wheeler manufacturer, produced less than 2 mn two-wheelers in 2008-09. In 2023-24, production doubled to nearly 3.7 mn. During the same period, the total number of workers employed by Bajaj remained roughly the same.

No wonder bulk of the population, even in highly industrialised Asian countries, is employed in services. In China, despite its monster manufacturing capacities, half of its workers are employed in services. But it's not about jobs at all because of the following factors:

► Balance trade deficits An economy high on services and limited manufacturing runs into an issue with trade deficits. Most services are non-tradable — a barber or chef, for example, can't deliver his or her services remotely across territories. An economy that has limited tradables — goods and services that can be exported across large distances — typically ends up with large trade deficits. While some services can be traded, like IT, there are limits to their scalability.

Global services trade comprises about one-third global goods. No wonder countries with limited manufacturing capacities (relative to their economic size) also tend to have structural current account deficit (CAD). Britain and the US are good examples from the developed world.

However, access to a reserve currency affords developed countries more policy options to deal with structural CAD compared to emerging markets.

India's CAD has been structural, and a perpetual policy constraint for the country since Independence. While it now has wider pools of capital flows to finance the deficit, it still has an overbearing impact on efficiency in policymaking. Whether determining trade policy or arriving at an appropriate

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monetary policy stance, a structural CAD forces trade-offs between economic stability and income growth.

It is no longer just an economic policy constraint but a geopolitical one as well, as recent events around the Russia-Ukraine war so vividly demonstrated. Imagine Russia having a structural CAD while its forex reserves were frozen. Enhancing India's manufacturing capacities is imperative for both economic and national security.

► Derisk supply chains High dependence on China for active pharmaceutical ingredients (API), rare earth minerals (critical for various industries including semiconductors) or heavy machinery for the industrial value chain, present large, un-diversifiable risks. Recent experience with Covid vaccines, where countries ring-fenced vaccine supplies — as well as vaccine raw materials — for their use, illustrated that point sharply.

As the world convulses towards new geopolitical cleavages after three decades of a 'relative pause of history', India can't afford to leave itself politically vulnerable due to a weak manufacturing base. Even as India's economy tops global charts on growth, imports from China topped \$100 bn in FY24. Recent news about factories running idle and waiting for Chinese technicians to operate them vividly drives home the story of dependence.

This is too important a business to be lost in a straw-man debate. India needs a larger manufacturing base, and a jobs 'debate' is a waste of time.

The writer is chief investment officer, ASK Wealth Advisors

## Time to Reskill the Skilling Plan



Atul Tiwari

Countries with advanced skilling ecosystems integrate national priorities and industry initiatives through a collaborative framework. Governments handle investment, regulations and standards, while the framework creates demand for skills with financial and non-financial incentives, involving employers in the skilling and employability effort.

Over the last decade, 'Skill India' has enhanced access to quality education and skilling, including establishment of new ITI capacities, big increase in apprenticeship engagement, creation of new-age and future skill courses, launch of DPI of skilling in the form of Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH), and rolling out short-term training programmes under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).

NEP 2020 envisions integrating skilling into all education forms, inspiring reforms like National Credit Framework (NCF) and National Curriculum Framework (NCF). NCF integrates credits from school, vocational, higher education and work experience, while NCF incorporates

curricular skilling into secondary education and beyond.

It's the right time to marry supply-side interventions in skilling and education with the market-led incentive framework to bring India Inc as a committed partner of the effort. Other countries provide a model for building industry stakes in their skilling ecosystems that include:

► Regulatory tools Involving industries as co-investors by using tax levies, exemptions and GoI incentives, such as matching funds or rebates. Singapore's mandatory Skills Development Levy (SDL) of 0.25% of wages is used for programmes through a Skills Development Fund. South Korea's levy-rebate system makes firms that prepay levies between 0.25% and 0.8% of wages eligible for tax rebates, with additional reimbursements for SMEs.

► Levy for apprenticeship Britain has a levy for apprenticeships with preferential benefits for SMEs. Large companies with a wage bill of more than £3 mn a year pay a 0.5% annual levy of the total excess wage bill.

► Flagship programmes Britain has curated a list of 400-plus reskilling courses across sectors expected to face maximum disruption. 'Get help to retrain' platform offers free courses with access to these qualifications. Another instance is Australia, which has instituted a fringe benefits tax (FBT) exemption towards reskilling investments of 'at-risk' employees.



Folding policy

► Learning accounts Creating digital individual 'learning accounts' to guide and track individual progress and customised subsidies. South Korea manages and accumulates diverse learning experiences for educational credits or vocational qualifications, incorporating both academic and vocational systems.

► Customised data-led value-added services Singapore develops job transformation maps through surveys, labour trends, predictive analytics and expert input to tailor workforce recommendations to market needs.

► Joining forces Orchestrating collaboration between large organisations and MSMEs via mentorship programmes. The Queen Bee initiative by SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) has tagged 20-plus large organisations with 700 SMEs, with several examples of tangible benefits accrued in the ecosystem.

► Skilling schools Meister (secondary) schools in South Korea specialise in vocational training that meets

local industry demands and facilitates students' transition from school to work.

While all the above practices may not be replicable in India, some out-of-the-box solutions are needed to ensure a direct stake of India Inc in the skill development effort.

Can India's own set of social contributions — CSR and labour cess — be brought closer to skilling? If GoI's key focus should be on quality assurance, can the responsibility of skilling be shifted from government to industry through a demand-led model in which skill vouchers are given to firms for undertaking upskilling/reskilling of their workforce at eligible training centres?

On the investment side, India could consider introducing an element of skilling in schemes like PLI and inbound foreign investment. Such skill investments shall have guaranteed market alignment, compared to government programmes, where some time lag to understand and implement changing trends is inevitable.

All these, and many more innovative solutions, may emerge if India takes a holistic view of skilling and employability, and takes measures to build a stake in skilling for all stakeholders. This is as important as supply-side investments for building a dynamic and sensitive skill ecosystem.

The writer is secretary, skill development and entrepreneurship ministry, GoI

## We Don't Need 'Israel-Type Solution'



Rahul Pandita

You must have seen it on TV or on social media — a group of schoolgirls visibly in distress, hyperventilating and crying. It starts with one, and soon, everyone in the classroom is afflicted by the same symptoms and begins to behave in the same fashion. It's an example of 'mass hysteria', or what medical sociologist Robert Bartholomew calls a 'software problem' of the nervous system.

Many Indians beyond the aforementioned schoolgirls may have developed a similar 'software problem'. Let's call it ITSI — 'Israel-Type Solution' illness. Those who get it begin to believe that every problem in the world can be taken care of by resorting to an 'Israel-type solution'.

Suppose you were to tell someone who suffers from ITSI, 'There is too much salt in the curry,' he or she will say, 'Israel-type solution!' You say, 'My friend is not responding to my text.' His or her answer will be 'Israel-type solution!' You get the picture. There are quite a few things worth

emulating from Israel. It's inspiring how Israelis have kept alive the memory of the Holocaust; how they use innovation to manage their precious water resources; their ingenuity in the field of agriculture. But, right now, Israel does not offer a scaffolding from which one can say something good about it.

The state has — and there is no other way of describing it — perpetrated genocide against the people of Gaza. Since diplomatically India and Israel have come closer, India can, and should, choose to keep its long-term strategic interests in mind. But that is at the state-to-state level. At an individual level, the problem begins when those suffering from ITSI begin to clamour for



Rubble-rousers

an 'Israel-type solution' in Kashmir. This is dangerous.

But more than dangerous, it's an insult to the sacrifice Indian soldiers in Kashmir have been making, not from 1990 but from 1947. India may have committed some violations. Yes, when you fight terrorism, some mistakes are bound to happen. But, by and large, the army has been a moral force in Kashmir. In this context, India has no need for any brute and blind solution in the Valley or elsewhere, 'Israel-style'.

In Kashmir, the terrorist ecosystem has been dismantled. Overgrown workers and other sympathisers are under tremendous pressure as they realise that the law has been catching up with them, and the 'good old days', when a village-level politician's phone call would get them released, are over. The Kashmir problem is not over, of course. But it is under control. And, for this, we didn't have to resort to an 'Israel-type solution' and bomb children.

Even now, India provides ample chances to a terrorist hiding in a house to come out and surrender, so that his or her life can be spared. Not long ago, we would even hand over their bodies to their families after they died in encounters. We stopped doing it because of how it sometimes galvanised youngsters to take the path of radicalism.

But even in the face of cowardly

attacks leading to the death of their comrades, our soldiers have never ransacked a civilian's house and rode on a toy horse belonging to a child, as the media have shown Israeli soldiers do in Gaza, who most likely died due to our actions. We have never stolen women's makeup from their drawer, or laughed over bodies buried in the rubble caused by our fighter jets.

While fighting militancy we have never let go of — to use an Urdu word that Yogendra Yadav used recently in a different context — 'iqbal'. This Iqbal, or resplendence (gained from being a moral force), and 'Israel-type solution' do not go hand in hand. India is currently facing challenges in the Jammu region. But it is with the same Iqbal that we will take care of that, too.

So, we need not learn anything from Israel on such matters. In fact, it would augur well for Tel Aviv if they learnt from India and adopted an 'India-type solution'. Because the only solution is to stop bloodshed and violence, not make sure through terrible brutality that it continues one generation after another.

The only 'Israel-type solution', if at all required, is to banish ignorance and the foolhardiness of confusing brutality with bravery.

The writer is author of 'Our Moon Has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir'



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Celebrating Eid-ul-Adha

NAJIB SHAH

Religious festivals strengthen bonds in diverse societies. They provide an opportunity for everyone to learn about each other's beliefs. Eid-ul-Adha, the festival of sacrifice, is traditionally celebrated by sacrificing an animal. It commemorates the act of a father, Prophet Abraham, obeying the dictat of God, who tests his devotion by asking him to sacrifice that which is dearest to him. Abraham prepares to offer his dear son; angel Gabriel intervenes at God's behest, and a goat is sacrificed, instead.

The animal sacrifice is not a propitiatory ritual; the focus is not on animal sacrifice but on the message behind it. The festival is a celebration of the test of faith. It is a celebration of a kind and merciful God who acknowledges man's devotion and obedience.

This Eid also marks the culmination of the rites of Haj, one of the pillars of Islam, which involves a visit to Mecca and re-enacting the events carried out by Prophet Abraham. It marks the end of the Islamic calendar and the beginning of a new year. As they say every ritual, if performed with imagination and care, enables people to enter a different, timeless dimension. As we celebrate the sacred rituals of our faiths, we must never forget the stories behind them. We should endeavour to abide by all that is good in our faiths. Real sacrifice in these frenetic times when the pursuit of happiness keeps us busy would mean giving a little bit of our time and money for the greater good of society.



### Lux Aeterna György Ligeti

György Ligeti's 'Lux Aeterna', a choral composition of haunting beauty, is a testament to the power of human voice and depth of musical innovation. Composed in 1966, this piece for 16 solo singers is a marvel of polyphony, where individual lines of music interweave to create a tapestry of sound that suspends time itself.

The title, Latin for 'eternal light', hints at the work's ethereal quality. The Hungarian-Austrian composer achieves this through micropolyphony, a technique he pioneered, where closely spaced lines move at different speeds and in different directions, creating a shimmering cloud of sound. The effect is one of a continuous, flowing river of



harmony that envelops the listener in a serene, complex soundscape.

'Lux Aeterna' gained widespread recognition after being featured in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, 2001: A Space Odyssey, where its otherworldly sound perfectly complemented the visual odyssey through space. The piece invites introspection, and evokes a sense of the infinite, as if each note were a star in the vast expanse of the universe. Ligeti's masterpiece is not just music, it's a meditation on the sublime and the transcendent. In it, Ligeti offers us a glimpse into the divine.

### Chat Room


## Mind the Trade Gap, Export More

Appropos the news report, 'Exports Shine Bright in May' (Jun 15), for a developing country like ours, a trade deficit is inevitable. But the fact that it rose to \$23.8 billion in May 2024 should serve as a wake-up call for GoI. We should keep exploring higher exports of visible goods to ensure trade surplus, or at least a lower trade deficit. High imports affect national income, output, employment and growth. Of course, commerce secretary Sunil Barthwal's remark that the widening trade deficit is not a concern considering foreign direct investment and foreign exchange inflows is well taken. After all, the country's balance of payments would assume more significance than its balance of trade at a given point in time.

S RAMAKRISHNASAYEE  
Chennai



CONTRAPUNTO



It is error alone which needs the support of govt.  
Truth can stand by itself

-THOMAS JEFFERSON

# EC, Talk Better

Controversy over Mumbai North West LS poll result must be settled quickly by the commission

That the Mumbai North West Lok Sabha victory would snowball into a controversy was almost a given. When Shinde Sena nominee Ravindra Waikar beat UBT Sena candidate Amol Kirtikar by 48 votes after recounting of both EVMs and postal ballots, concerns of a miscount amped up to strong suspicions of misconduct in opposition camps. UBT Sena and others allege three serious counts of wrongdoing.

One, Shinde Sena candidate's agent/associate used a mobile phone inside the counting area. None except the Returning Officer can carry a mobile phone into counting centres. Call records of this phone are under police investigation. Two, following SC's order to store all VVPAT machines with symbol loading units, UBT Sena has sought technical inspection of the same – but EC website apparently has no SOP for such a technical probe, so it's vague what the “probe” might entail. Three, allegations centre on RO at the NESCO centre, the site of irregularities.

That very day, both Kirtikar and party workers raised alarm over the counting. Once the presence of an unauthorised phone was established, surely EC could have reacted immediately by putting out a statement. This kind of incident puts EC in the spotlight, not simply the state poll commission. And every such incident contributes to the chatter. For instance, before counting day, opposition sought EC walkback on allowing postal ballots to be counted after EVMs. Law says postal ballots be counted first. Why tweak that in the first place?

Kirtikar has written to EC with his complaints. Mumbai North West has pressed all the buttons for those asking for complete transparency of the election process. EC is firm about sanctity of its processes; it holds results speak for themselves. It argues due process is underway. But reality is instances where EC doesn't make its response public run the risk of getting a life of their own online. EC must necessarily communicate to today's alert electorate on its due processes.

In the internet era, EC has faced civil society scrutiny like never before. Reliability of EVMs, including VVPATs, its “unhackability”, is at the core of EC's business of trust. Elon Musk's tweet, unrelated to India's election, that EVMs should be done away with, can only add fuel to the fire. EC has yet to make a statement on breaches of protocol. It must engage with the electorate more – on processes, its parallel paper trails, and its MO in the event of a breach.

# Swiss Fantasy

Ukraine-Russia peace conference without Moscow in the room, is more spectacle than substance

More than 90 countries participating in a weekend conference to forge a peace plan for Ukraine, suggested its ambition was realistic. But this was an out and out misreading. Because one crucial country was not invited: Russia. International mediators are not going to get far without first bringing both Ukraine and Russia to the same negotiating table.

**Western prioritisation** | This conference in Switzerland was preceded by a G7 commitment to a new \$50bn loan for Ukraine, securitised through interest on the frozen assets of Russia's central bank. An architect of this plan, US treasury secretary Janet L Yellen says that it's about “getting Russia to help pay for the damage it's caused”. This is quite a distinct goal from a ceasefire or peace.

**Russian maximalism** | Even less formidable goals – from food security to return of Ukrainian children – cannot be accomplished without negotiations with Russia itself. The great stumbling block, of course, is “the realities of today” that are Putin's precondition to negotiate. He wants to hold on to the Ukrainian territory gained through incremental advances on the battlefield, and more. Such maximalism has been propped up by the surprising resilience shown by both Russia's military and economy. And now an additional factor is, calculating that he will get a better deal by waiting it out till Trump is US president.

**Middle ground** | A March opinion poll found that Ukrainians under 35 are the most pessimistic about victory and the most willing to accept limited war outcomes. Two years of death and destruction later, the bitterest truth is actually identical for Zelenskyy and Putin. It is that victory remains elusive for both Ukraine and Russia. This is what international diplomacy must build on. A shared truth is more fertile ground for compromise, than an unshared conference.

# Fashion vs Fahrenheit

Neanderthals matched dress to weather, we don't

The weather is a handy icebreaker. We say 'too hot' and 'such a cold winter' to fill awkward pauses. Harmless, obvious statements like these further the cause of human interaction, and let us all occupy the planet in consensual boredom. In fact, entire marriages have gotten by on weather reports – ‘I love you’ replaced by ‘looks like rain’. Novelists go on and on about the snowclad and the sun-dappled... But all ye who take its name in vain, beware! Weather wreaks revenge by being utterly unpredictable. It blows hot and cold.

However humid it may be, no human being is willing to sacrifice sartorial levels for comfort. At the ministerial swearing-in ceremony in Delhi recently, conducted in the open air, everyone came in bandhgalas and Banarasis. Brocade was the dress code. This despite the fact that due to an insufferable summer the city is stewing in its own juices. Deep underneath such finery, where the innermost fabric scratches skin, is where global warming gets personal. We are all about style statements. In strappy white linen when it's freezing and quilted jackets when sunny, pants cut at the ankle as if expecting floods, hair left loose in gyms. Spanx under skinny jeans two sizes small even if vital organs asphyxiate.

There was a time when cavemen ripped off the fur of the first bear they met to keep warm. In summers Neanderthals turned up naked for business meetings. Wardrobes used to be straightforward, attuned to climate conditions. But in the era of selfies, being photo-ready trumps discomfort. A grand occasion, like say a wedding or funeral, cannot succumb to whimsical temperatures. The kanjeevarams and Nehru jackets must be unpacked, drycleaned and donned on D-day, just like the white chikankari kurtas must be teamed with mournful cream or beige dupattas. Brides and bridegrooms gently steam on stage in all their dolled-up finery. A corpse seldom minds the thinness of cotton sheets inside icy morgues.

Vanity at some point meets ACs and central heating, when entering a door means frostbitten Narnia or the fires of hell. In a magical reversal of Celsius, you are now boiling or shivering. Suddenly covered in goosebumps, rubbing your arms, shifting closer to people for warmth, like the Little Match Girl lighting her last matchstick. Or beaded with perspiration and expected to remove your sweater, your sole outerwear. That's when you insist it's actually cold and borrow someone's shawl.

# Note For FM: Save For India

Declining savings rate is a red flag in a growing economy. Unemployment as an election issue showed how low savings-led patterns of growth have a political cost



**Narendar Pani**

With general elections behind us, FM can take a step back from celebrating high growth rates and the size of the Indian economy to look more closely at some points of concern. Election results were a reminder that India's growth rates haven't always translated into an improvement in critical social indicators as well as in employment.

The conventional wisdom that inequality does not matter if growth is high enough to lift large numbers above an economists-defined poverty line, is losing some of its political sheen. Besides, there are warning signals in the growth process itself. Prominent among these red flags is the challenge of declining savings rates.

**Savings trend since 1991** | The proportion of Gross Domestic Savings to GDP since liberalisation began has followed an inverted U curve. It rose steadily from 23.3% of GDP in 1990-91 to 37.8% in 2007-08. Since then, there has been an equally steady decline, reaching 28.2% in 2020-21. Studies have shown that the increase was largely achieved through increased inequality. As the share of the rich in GDP rose, income moved from the poor who consumed most of their earnings to the rich who could afford to save more.

Increasing savings by raising the share of the rich in GDP, necessarily limits, if not squeezes, the share of consumption of the poor. This pattern cannot continue indefinitely.

In a democracy, there is political pressure to transfer resources to the worst off through welfare measures. While these measures could be dismissed as freebies, they've become a political necessity. There's also the possibility that, beyond a point, a rising share of income

for those at the top of the economic pyramid may only lead to assets being held outside the country, without a sustained effect on domestic savings. And there are signs that this has become an increasingly significant factor.

**Price to pay for shift to tech** | Decline in the rate of savings hasn't had an immediate impact on growth. Rise in FDI has made up for some of the shortfall in domestic investment. There has also been a structural shift in the Indian economy towards more productive sectors. But these are not unmixed blessings.

FDI can fluctuate quite sharply. The shifts to more productive sectors are no doubt very good news as far as growth rates are concerned, but this increase in productivity often comes from movement towards more capital-intensive work practices. This can leave large sections of the labour force out of work.

With employment already becoming a political issue, there'll be a price to be paid for a sustained shift to labour-substituting technologies. Lower domestic savings rates thus raise the prospects of both fluctuating growth rates as well as patterns of growth that are insensitive to employment.

Revising domestic savings rates would need a review of economic strategies that have taken deep root since liberalisation. In his 1991 Budget speech, Manmohan Singh suggested opening up the economy to make Indian industry more competitive. When that did not always happen, the economy became more dependent on foreign investment, both FDI and Foreign Institutional Investment (FII).

**Losing out on small investors** | Efforts to make India more attractive to FIIs included sustained pressure to move from multiple regional stock exchanges to two

large stock exchanges in Mumbai. Closure of regional stock exchanges had a negative impact on the still-developing links between local savings and investment in emerging corporate entities.

The regional stock exchanges helped businesses with local reputations to raise local capital. The more successful among these businesses could then move on to the national and even international stage. The Ambanis may have been the more striking story of movement from small business to a global empire, but they were not the only ones.

The emergence of local economic players also suited another dominant, but usually ignored, trend in the Indian economy: the movement from agriculture to industry. Agrarian families with access to traditional capital had an opportunity to move into local industry, and then use their local reputations to tap regional capital. This also allowed small savers to invest in the enterprises of families they had long known about.

The closure of regional stock exchanges cut a critical link in this chain. The large stock exchanges were associated with much larger Initial Public Offers (IPOs), where the minimum investment was well beyond the capacity of very small investors. From a capital market in the 1980s where investors with no more than ₹1,000 could apply for shares in IPOs, we moved to a regime where such investors had no place.


**Beyond a point, a rising share of income for the top of the economic pyramid may only lead to assets being held outside the country, without a sustained effect on domestic savings. This is already a significant factor**

**Revive regional stock exchanges** | A meaningful strategy to raise the savings rate would need to build links between small savers and the local, national and global economies. This would require mobilising local savings in ways that develop the relationship between local investors and small savers. This could include the revival of regional stock exchanges as small cap exchanges, as well as other financial innovations that recognise all levels of the economic pyramid from the bottom to the top.

*The writer is JRD Tata Chair Visiting Professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru*

# Why Govt Jobs Should Be Less Secure

Dismissing or demoting bureaucrats must be made simpler to ensure efficiency and accountability. Without this, no administration can achieve the speed of development it desires



**Praveen Gedam & Arghya Sengupta**

With a new govt taking charge, the spotlight turns to bureaucrats who'll work to fulfil its mandate. The tenure and service conditions of bureaucrats are often overlooked, but are critical to ensuring the whole govt works in concert to achieve its development goals. Highest in criticality is the ability of govt to hire and fire civil servants.

**Mis-firing officers** | Most of us haven't heard of a govt employee being fired. This tells us how super secure govt jobs are. That's one reason why lakhs of highly educated people apply for lower-level govt positions every year, and why govt servants are often preferred over higher paid private-sector employees in arranged marriages.

Such security of tenure was a key feature of govt jobs globally as well, but has changed over time. In India, it hasn't.

**Pleasure to permanence** | Traditionally, all civil servants served at the “pleasure” of the Crown. This meant that the monarch could dispense with their service at any time. When India became a democratic republic, this was sought to be balanced by the need to create an independent and empowered bureaucracy. This led to the incorporation of Article 311 of the Constitution based on which disciplinary laws for govt servants were enacted. But the process laid down has become so complicated over the years that it's almost impossible to dismiss someone from a govt job. The only exception is if the person is convicted by a criminal court, another rarity in India for govt servants. The pendulum has swung from pleasure to permanence.

Unlike private sector, where bosses can fire someone for not doing her job well, in govt it's practically impossible. No doubt, job security is of paramount

importance. But it also means that it's extremely difficult to get rid of employees who're not discharging their duties. Anecdotal, we know of numerous cases where an engineer was unaware of standard guidelines for construction, a police officer prepared a criminal chargesheet under civil laws, and a clerk couldn't even write the name of his office. Most of them, and countless others like them, continue to ‘serve’.

**Long & winding process** | Here's how extant disciplinary rules work in practice. The process starts with gathering evidence, followed by a showcause notice, some-

that time, every stakeholder other than the employee involved has moved on, and the problem leading to the inquiry isn't seen as important anymore. As a result, the employee is usually declared not guilty.

**Urgent reform needed** | For an efficient, modern, service-oriented bureaucracy, this process must be simplified. It should be completed within three months, during which other stakeholders (say, seniors and affected persons) are still around and consequences of misconduct of the employee are fresh in memory. Second, the quantum of punishment should also be an effective deterrent. At least for corruption, inefficiency, lack of delivery, insubordination, gross negligence and frequent absenteeism, major punishments such as dismissal or demotion should be made mandatory.

**Idea for first 100 days** | That said, protection from undue influences needs to be kept intact or even bolstered by shielding bureaucrats from arbitrary transfers (legally not punishments, but in practice so) through enacting suitable rules. The Indian bureaucrat is rightly praised for holding the vast and diverse country together, and guiding it towards progress. But at the same time, she is also criticised, again rightly so, for being slow and inefficient.

As India celebrates 75 years of its Constitution and with govt ready to unveil its first-100-day plan, it's time to rethink how govt itself works. Listening to people and reducing friction are important.

A part of this can be achieved by ensuring faster and tougher punishments for bureaucratic inefficiencies while increasing protection of bureaucrats from undue influences. We must move away from the idea that govt jobs should be secure and permanent at any cost. Instead, let us start instilling accountability by ensuring that the dead wood is weeded out regularly and expeditiously. This will be one reform that will change the face of govt service for 100 years.

*Gedam is Divisional Commissioner, Nashik. Sengupta is Research Director, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy*



**Calvin & Hobbes**

HERE WE ARE, HIGH ON RIGOR MORTIS RIDGE, STEELING OURSELVES FOR THE TERRIFYING DESCENT INTO GRIM REAPER GORGE!

WHY DO WE RISK LIFE AND LIMB IN A VERTICAL FREE FALL, WHEN WE COULD BE SAFE AT HOME BY THE FIRE?

BECAUSE IT IS MAN'S INDOMITABLE NATURE TO SCARE HIMSELF SILLY FOR NO GOOD REASON!

IF YOU MAKE IT HOME TO THE FIRE, YOU CAN TELL ME HOW IT WAS.

SEE? THIS IS WHY THERE WERE NEVER ANY GREAT ANIMAL EXPLORERS!

# Knowledge Of The Self Liberates Us From Sorrows

**V Balasubramaniam**

Adi Shankaracharya said, “Though ignorance, avidya is beginningless – it is completely wiped out by the emergence of Vidya, knowledge.”

Ignorance never goes away unless knowledge, its opposite, is born. The moment we learn what a pot is like, our unfamiliarity with it is over. Similarly, when we learn what a camera is like, our lack of knowledge of how it works is addressed.

Vedanta reveals that all our sorrows, fears, anxieties, stress, and confusion are not because we do not know physics, maths, or other subjects; they are because we do not know ourselves. Only knowledge of the Self liberates us from all sorrows and leads to a state of fearlessness.

In Vivekachudamani, Shankara-

charya states that all our sufferings are only due to a lack of awareness of our true nature. Just as a lack of understanding of physics can only be remedied by learning about physics, an absence of self-awareness can only be remedied by acquiring Self-knowledge.

Action cannot sublimate ignorance. Knowledge does verily destroy avidya just as light eradicates deep darkness. Trying to sweep darkness out of a dark room is futile. Even if an army of men carry the darkness in baskets and pour it out, the room will still be dark. Sweeping is not the right method of removing darkness. Only light can remove darkness, however thick it may be. Similarly, ignorance in us can be overcome by the pure light of Self-knowledge. That is why it is said

action cannot sublimate ignorance; knowledge is its only antidote. By removing avidya, one uncovers the Self.

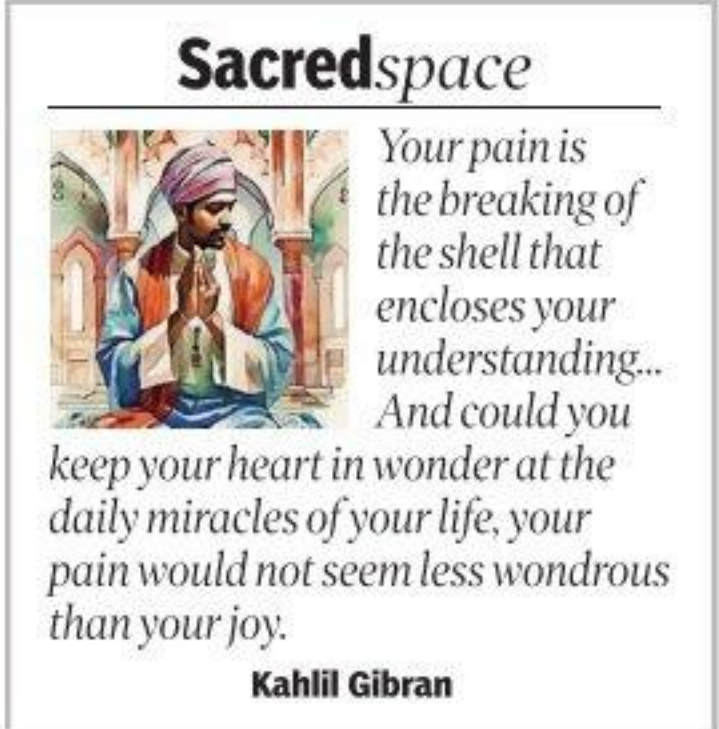
The Bhagwad Gita states that the Lord does not take the virtue or sin of any; knowledge is enveloped by ignorance, and thereby, beings are deluded (5.15). Our scriptures clearly say ignorance is the problem, and knowledge of the Self is the only solution.

When *ajnan*, unawareness, is removed, there is nothing more to be done. Everything is clear, like daylight. Ignorance is like night; when it passes, you are in the daylight of enlightenment. Sometimes, we see thick mist enveloping a garden. If we try to grab it, nothing comes into our hands. It is not a wall; we can walk through it. Still, it obstructs our vision and hinders our

progress. The mist continues till the bright sunlight emerges. Thereafter, it evaporates. Similarly, this inexplicable ignorance causes troubles and endless sorrows in our consciousness. It can be dispelled only by the flash of Self-knowledge.

As a child, one looks, touches, tastes, smells, and listens to the sound, which is a word naming the object being perceived. In this way, ignorance is shed, and knowledge is gained, first of forms and names, then of colour and other related attributes. Later, finer distinctions, including shades of colour, various sizes, and shapes, become apparent.

Ignorance is present in every individual; it is like a dark place where the light of knowledge is essential. It is a cause of bondage and will disappear, just as a solitary lamp dispels darkness in a dark room.



**Sacredspace**

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding... And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy.

Kahlil Gibran