



## Turnout conundrum

The low voting percentage in many States is a cause for concern

With just one phase left in the general election 2024, a stocktaking exercise on voter participation across the country reveals a significant dampening in turnout in this set of elections in comparison to the 2019 and even the 2014 general elections. There are State and regional level variations – voters in the east, northeast and many in the south typically voted higher than those in west, central and north India. Yet, barring some exceptions such as Telangana and Karnataka, where voter turnout registered a small increase from 62.8% to 65.7% and 68.8% to 70.6% among others, there has been a general decline in voting across States in 2024. As an analysis in *The Hindu* revealed, not only was there a dip in turnout in percentage terms, but there was also a decline in voter turnout in absolute terms in 132 of the 485 constituencies that went to polls in the first six phases. The high number of seats that encountered a dip in voter participation is unprecedented since the latest delimitation that was conducted prior to the 2009 general election. A closer look at the numbers shows that there was a significant bump in the total electorate (eligible voters above the age of 18 years) in 2014, and slight increases in 2019 and 2024. But it was only in 2024 that voter turnout dropped dramatically in many constituencies.

This drop in turnout can possibly be explained by political factors. Was there lower enthusiasm to vote in States which did not feature a strong contest among the parties in the fray? Does this explain the relatively low turnout in Gujarat (60.1%, a 4.4 point drop from 2019), where the Bharatiya Janata Party is in a dominant position or Kerala (71.3%, 6.6 point drop) where both the main rivals, the Left and the Congress along with their allies, are part of the INDIA bloc nationally? Has inter-State migration been a factor which possibly explains the low turnout in the northern and central States? Bihar, for example, has seen a significant gender gap, with women voters far outnumbering men in participation in percentage terms. Have the heatwave conditions contributed to electors deciding to stay at home? These are questions that deserve a closer look at data and the Election Commission of India must play a role in answering some of them. India has always enjoyed a higher degree of participation relative to other electoral democracies and a significant drop, as seen this year, is cause for concern. Voter apathy over the longer term can undermine the democratic process itself. People get the government they deserve when they vote, and the government they do not deserve when they do not vote.

## The last lap

Rafael Nadal's spirit no longer seems able to power his body

For a good part of the last two decades, everything at the French Open seemed like a prelude to one man's crowning moment on the concluding Sunday of the tournament. The year 2024, however, has turned out differently for Rafael Nadal, who had clinched the singles title on 14 of his 18 prior visits, as he made an emotional first-round exit on Monday, losing to fourth seed Alexander Zverev in straight sets. It was only the fourth time in 116 matches that the Spaniard had lost on Parisian clay, and the moment, more than any in recent times, had a valedictory feel to it. Ever since he suffered a hip injury at the 2023 Australian Open and missed the rest of the season, Nadal's tennis future has been a huge question mark. The 22-time Major champion has not been very optimistic himself, for he perhaps knows that at nearly 38, and with an injury ravaged body that has allowed him to play just 12 times this year, the end is near. Yet, that has not stopped him from taking to the court with childlike enthusiasm. He played in Barcelona, Madrid and Rome – places where he has collectively secured 27 trophies – soaking in the fans' adulation in what has come to resemble a much-deserved victory lap.

To be sure, Nadal has not closed the door on returning to his favourite stomping grounds on the red dirt in 2025. His immediate target is the 2024 Paris Olympics, whose tennis event will be held at Roland-Garros in late July-early August. But there is little doubt that the ground he once guarded with an iron fist is fertile for an almighty jostle to anoint a new king. World No.1 Novak Djokovic, the 24-time Major and three-time French Open champion, would have been the obvious favourite if his form had not nose-dived. He is without a title this season and has revamped his entire support staff to jump-start his year. Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz are both coming in after recovering from injuries. Alexander Zverev, who won the Rome Masters, seems dialled in but will have to deal with a domestic abuse trial in parallel. Casper Ruud, who won Barcelona and Geneva recently, will hope to go all the way after two straight runner-up finishes at Roland-Garros. Among women, three-time champion Iga Swiatek is the overwhelming favourite, and is expected to be challenged by Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff. For India, the singles challenge ended prematurely with Sumit Nagal's loss, but Rohan Bopanna and Yuki Bhambri will aim to fly the flag high with their respective doubles partners.

The Chakkipat neighbourhood of Agra in Uttar Pradesh was adorned with flags of B.R. Ambedkar with the tagline *kalam ka badshah* (master of the pen), an allusion to the seminal role of Ambedkar in drafting the Constitution of India. We spoke to a group of young Jatav men, once a core vote bank of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). As the BSP's graph has trended downward, these men had voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 general election, but they will not support the BJP this time. The reason, the Constitution – “Dr. Ambedkar means everything to us. We don't think it's too easy to change the Constitution, but we believe the BJP wants to change the Constitution.”

**The rhetoric of electoral dominance**  
Why has the Constitution emerged as an explicit site of contestation in this election? The proximate trigger was the BJP's declaration of “400 *paar*” (a reference to its assertion of winning 400 seats) and remarks, by some leaders, early in the campaign, that total electoral domination in this election would empower the BJP to change the Constitution. Opposition leaders were quick to mobilise. BSP leader Mayawati's nephew and former BSP national coordinator Akash Anand gave rousing speeches. Indeed, days after Ms. Mayawati sacked Akash Anand, the Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav took to X (formerly Twitter) to publicly remark that even traditional voters of the BSP are voting for the INDIA bloc to save the Constitution. The Congress's Rahul Gandhi has taken to symbolically waving a copy of the Constitution at his campaign rallies. The Opposition has declared this election to be a battle for “saving the constitution” and it is having resonance on the ground.

Scholars make an important distinction between constitutional principles and ordinary laws. Constitutional principles frame fundamental rights and are of a “higher order” that every citizen must obey. Ordinary laws, on the other hand, are rules, often guided by constitutional principles, that govern society. Ordinary laws, in India, regularly police our spaces. They discriminate and are used coercively by the state in ways that undermine freedoms and disempower citizens. Laws that police who you can marry, whether you can use the Internet and what you can eat are some illustrations of this. However, these laws can also be challenged



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and changed. Constitutional values provide the basis for challenging discriminatory law.

Historian Rohit De's book, *A People's Constitution*, offers a powerful account of how ordinary citizens have mobilised around constitutional principles throughout independent India's history to secure rights. Challenging social and economic deprivation and preserving equality of status are at the heart of India's constitutional project. As former Chief Justice of India Y.V. Chandrachud powerfully notes, in the Minerva Mills case, the Constitution provides us “the obligation of securing to the people liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity and the assurance that the dignity of the individual will at all costs be preserved”. It is when these very constitutional values are challenged that the Constitution rather than law enters the domain of mass politics.

A young BJP supporter from the Pasi community makes this clear. “I am happy with Narendra Modi..... But I absolutely don't want a Hindu *raashtra*.” When we ask him what Hindu *raashtra* means, he responds in one word: *bhedbhav* (discrimination). A young Yadav farmer on the outskirts of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh concurs, “The constitution matters because it protects us... it gave us reservations. *Humein Samvidhaan bachana hai* (the Constitution must be protected).”

### An interplay in north India

The interplay between the Constitution and political mobilisation has fundamentally shaped the trajectory of democratic politics in North India. Reservations found place in the Constitution primarily as compensatory provisions to redress historical disadvantage emerging in the 1990s as the primary mobilisational tool for asserting representational claims of lower caste groups in the 1990s. The Modi juggernaut, with its ability to forge a cross-caste coalition, appeared to have shifted the arc by forging a cross-caste, Hindu coalition. For much of this decade, the logic of caste-based mobilisation seemed to have receded in the background, allowing the BJP, to introduce and pass the 103rd Amendment to the Constitution mandating 10% reservations for economically weaker sections (EWS) amongst unreserved (read upper caste) categories, to muted opposition.

The reemergence of the grammar of the Constitution, rights and reservation in the 2024

The fact that the ordinary Indian is worried about the Constitution is of far greater political significance than the question of who wins the election

# Still no sign of the language of equity and inclusion

The general election 2024 is almost nearing its end. Yet, when the Election Commission of India (ECI) made the announcement for the election in March, the long video televised and propagated on social media, stood out for one detail – the absence of sign language interpreters. This is a small, but significant, example of the ways in which everyday life in India excludes Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) citizens.

India's push for equity in education, health care, and rights cannot succeed without dismantling ableist barriers that exclude DHH people.

Consider the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness, to prevent and treat hearing impairment and provide medical rehabilitation. While it is well-structured, it does not focus on the quality of life. It discusses theoretical aspects of screening procedures and hearing aid prescription, but does not mention the Indian Sign Language (ISL) which is an integral form of deaf communication. The Social Justice Ministry set up the ISL Research and Training Centre in 2015 officially, but ISL is still not recognised as an official language. Despite the National Education Policy 2020 recommending the standardised teaching of ISL across schools, its use in education systems remains sparse even in schools for the deaf.

### Sign language versus oralism

The Indian education system still focuses on “oralism”, where deaf people are taught to use their voices and lip read, instead of using their hands to communicate.

Most educators in deaf schools are not trained in ISL. Instead of creating better access and remediating marginalisation, the current deaf education system focuses on “rehabilitation”, asking the deaf to adjust to their surroundings instead of removing social barriers. An exclusive focus on oralism has been criticised for creating an isolatory social structure for deaf people in an inherently ableist world. On the other hand, integrating sign language has been found to help deaf children in cognitive development and prevent linguistic deprivation; over 70 countries recognise national sign languages legally, which makes education and critical information truly

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Equity in education, health care, and rights in India cannot succeed unless the ableist barriers that exclude Deaf and Hard of Hearing citizens are removed

accessible to deaf citizens.

Our ableism is reflected in how invisible the deaf are in India.

### A headcount in India

In the 2011 Census, there were five million hearing-impaired people in India. The National Association of the Deaf counts 18 million. The World Health Organization estimates nearly 63 million Indians to have significant hearing impairment. However, they rarely find inclusion in our lives. Only 5% of deaf children find themselves in school, and it often takes them much longer to graduate, thanks to an oralist course structure.

Despite government initiatives to employ the deaf, they often struggle to secure employment. Protests erupted in 2020 due to recruitment favouring those with less than 40% hearing impairment. Multiple petitions to recognise ISL have been stonewalled, citing the adequacy of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, (RPDA) 2016 for preserving and advancing the language. This failure, despite several protests, is a covert yet overt act of marginalisation.

What does everyday life look like for deaf people? Public transport announcements, TV shows, directions within public structures, and even calling helplines are made insurmountable tasks due to a lack of accessibility. Minuscule everyday things taken for granted by others become wars won after years of litigation and advocacy. Although Doordarshan pioneered a weekly news segment in ISL in 1987, its precedent has not been taken up by private news channels. While films, Indian Premier League 2024 cricket matches and OTT shows have come up with accessible options, we have a lot of slack to pick up.

Opportunities for the deaf community remain limited to housekeeping jobs, wait staff, and data entry operators. The private sector has programmes in place for accessibility and inclusion with captioning and interpreter services. However, the government sector has made little progress. Several state- and national-level protests have been mounted by the deaf over the years. Their demands for accessible education and better employment have been met with *lathi* charge or lackadaisical promises.

election must not be misread as harking back to the Mandal politics of yore. There is something far more significant at play here. The rhetoric of “changing the Constitution” challenges the very principles upon which this country was founded. And it is this that is causing dissonance among voters with the BJP's logic of cross-caste political mobilisation. The Yadav voter we spoke to articulated this clearly: “The Constitution protects our fundamental rights. It ensures equality between castes and communities.”

The fact that the ordinary Indian is worried about the Constitution is of far greater political significance than the question of who wins the election. Against the backdrop of total dominance that the BJP projected at the start of the electoral campaign, the concerns over the Constitution, expressed by the ordinary voters, are constitutive of growing anxieties over democratic erosion. And it constrains the democratic legitimacy of the government even if the BJP comes to power again, as projected.

### A mirror to contradictions

But the constitutional discourse, as it is emerging, also mirrors the deep contradictions that have shaped contemporary politics in India. It is instructive that even as Dalit voters speak of the Constitution and rights, the constitutional principle of “secularism” and religious equality was a concern expressed primarily by Muslim voters, who spoke repeatedly against “Hindu-Muslim” politics. Secularism, via the Constitution, found voice during the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act back in early 2020, but only among Muslims.

Arguably, the heightened polarised rhetoric adopted by the Prime Minister in recent weeks is a response to the re-emergence of caste coalitions with the Constitution as the centre-piece. Hindu voters are not blind to the communal nature of this rhetoric. However, this is not their primary concern. Their preoccupation is primarily with caste-based discrimination and reservations. The silence around the constitutional aspiration of secularism remains conspicuous against the backdrop of the deeply poisonous and divisive Hindu-Muslim rhetoric that has dominated this election.

If the 2024 election is indeed a battle for the Constitution, then the silences tell us as much about the critical fault lines that our polity has to confront, as it does of the possibilities of a more substantive politics of rights and equality.

Despite the RPDA, policy changes mean little in the face of such lethargy in implementation.

The deaf community faces challenges and additional discrimination with access to health care as most hospitals in India lack interpreters. Complications increase for mental health-care access to the deaf community due to a lack of training in language interpretation. The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 promises mental health care for all, but it is not effectively implemented, with only 250 certified sign language interpreters and no clear data on ISL-trained mental health professionals.

### What needs to be done

The present situation demands diverging from ableism towards accessibility. ISL should be recognised as a language officially, and its use must be naturalised in schools and colleges, for hearing and DHH students alike. It should be taught by DHH individuals, further buffeting their employment opportunities. The hearing population should be able to practise ISL in everyday situations to achieve fluency in the language.

Health-care systems must be updated so that the deaf population has easy and accessible communication at all levels. DHH patients benefit from receiving care from language-concordant physicians. However, the regulatory medical, dental, and nursing commissions impose significant barriers on DHH individuals aspiring to health-care professions. Inclusivity will not only make the health-care workforce more diverse and inclusive but will also mainstream ISL interpreters.

Deaf programming should be par for the course across media channels. Channels with English language programming often have accessible subtitles. However, Hindi and other regional languages do not have ISL interpretation or subtitles. Government event announcements should have live ISL interpreters, a common feature in several countries. One can hope that with timely interventions in the right direction, we may witness real-time ISL interpretations in the next election mandated by the ECI.

Finally, more issues exist than are highlighted in this article. The authorities concerned should pay heed to the DHH community and its needs.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A moment for introspection

Every once in a while, a case comes up which questions our collective conscience, our justice system (or the lack of it) and rampant corruption at all levels. The Pune car crash case has brought out the extent to which our system goes to protect the guilty if they are influential. The unimaginable dereliction of duty at all

levels, from police officers to even doctors, has shocked the nation. Even more sad is the extent to which the parents of the accused are going all out to protect their child. This case should be an eye-opener to review the law regarding juvenile offences. Minors are no longer minors given the gravity of the offences they commit. So, even the punishment should be in

accordance with the crime, with no concession for age.

**Sharada Sivaram,**  
Ernakulam, Kochi, Kerala

### Safety norms

There are established fire safety norms while constructing hospitals, malls, cinemas, apartments and other structures. But these are often violated by builders to save money. Government authorities

accept bribes and permit irregularities. It has become a habit to raise a hue and cry only when such tragedies occur but turn a blind eye later. Structures must have proper fire and

electricity safety devices, which must be checked.

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### Cranking up

Slowly, but certainly, Indian

### Corrections & Clarifications

A clarification in respect of the Editorial, “Cannes do” (May 28, 2024): In 2024, Payal Kapadia won the second highest honour or the Grand Prix, but in 1946, when the Palme d'or or the top prize was called the Grand Prix, Chetan Anand won for his film, *Neecha Nagar*, along with several other films including David Lean for *Brief Encounter*.

cinema is catching up with the best in the world arena and securing an armful of awards at Cannes. The win for *All we imagine as Light* is a pointer. The most enthrusting aspect is that young women are behind the history-creating success stories. *The Elephant Whisperers* was just the beginning. **Ayyaseri Raveendranath,** Aranamula, Kerala



# The question of Palestine’s UN membership

Israel’s war on Gaza has raised several ethical, political, and diplomatic questions. One diplomatic development that has attracted a lot of interest is Palestine’s renewed application for membership of the United Nations (UN). Ironically, its quest is stuck at the UN Security Council (UNSC) due mainly to the geopolitical calculations of the U.S., which argued that membership should follow and not precede a negotiated solution to the long-standing conflict.

This is not the first time that Palestine has attempted to obtain UN membership. In 2011 too, its request was opposed by the veto-bearing U.S. in the UNSC. Since then, Palestine enjoys only non-member observer status.

This year, in April, after the UNSC failed to agree on Palestine’s request because of the lone veto cast by the U.S. in its capacity as a permanent member, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) stepped in to voice support to the Palestinian application. On May 10, the UNGA overwhelmingly adopted a resolution affirming Palestine’s eligibility to assume full membership in the UN. It also urged the UNSC to favourably consider Palestine’s request.

### Norms and politics

The UN requires membership seekers to be “peace loving” states and to be able and willing, in its judgment, to carry out the obligations of the Charter. While the criteria were liberally interpreted, the procedural threshold laid down for admission turned out to be decisive and difficult, and was dictated by the political exigencies of the five permanent members (P5) in the UNSC at any given time. As such, membership applications require recommendation without the express opposition of any of the P5 before the UNGA accepts the admission request. In other words, the UNSC’s recommendation is ruled out if any of the P5 casts a negative vote



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by exercising their veto power, whereas no such veto power applies in the UNGA except that the decision should be cleared by a two-thirds majority.

When Cold War politics stalled numerous admission requests in the UNSC in early years, the UNGA sought the World Court’s opinion on whether the UNGA had the power to admit states in the absence of the UNSC’s recommendation. The Court ruled in 1948 that the UNSC’s recommendation is a prerequisite for the UNGA to exercise its power. Subsequently, the deadlock in the UNSC was broken to recommend all pending applications. This marked successive decades of steady increase of the total membership from the 51 founding members to 193 today. It would not be off the mark to note that membership of the UN is invariably viewed as a sought-after confirmation of sovereign statehood of the countries which gained independence from foreign rule or occupation.

The example of Mongolia is comparable to Palestine’s plea. When Mongolia’s membership application was stuck in the UNSC, the UNGA intervened with a resolution similar to what was done in the Palestine case, suggesting that Mongolia deserves a favourable recommendation by the UNSC. Eventually Mongolia became a member in 1961.

### India’s approach

India joined 142 member countries in supporting the UNGA in the May 2024 resolution favouring Palestine’s case for membership. India opined that membership status could enhance the prospect of a two-state solution to the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict. Notably, India’s position to the membership question is now entirely in line with the approach articulated during the Nehruvian era – that UN membership should be open to all state applicants without discrimination. In fact, there is not a single instance of India opposing

any country’s membership so far. India supported Pakistan’s admission to the UN in 1947 and also representation of the People’s Republic of China’s in 1971, despite a prolonged border conflicts with the latter.

While it is true that the U.S. or the former USSR/Russian Federation stood in the way of many applicants’ prospects of becoming UN members, China is not free from blame either. After being seated in the UNSC in 1971, the People’s Republic of China vetoed newly liberated Bangladesh’s membership application.

### What is the way forward?

Clearly Palestine cannot assume full membership bypassing the UNSC and the U.S. China and Russia are apprehensive that such bypassing could become a precedent for the admission of Taiwan or Kosovo later. In a less likely scenario, the U.S. might refrain from casting yet again its veto or abstain from voting, as an expression of displeasure with Israel for ignoring its advice to cease attacks against Gazan civilians, thereby paving the way for the UNGA’s approval of Palestine’s membership. Israel might protest and quit the UN. If the UNSC stalemate continues, the UNGA could possibly consider keeping Israel out of its deliberations. Such a bold tactical move, which is short of Israel’s suspension or expulsion that would be impractical without the UNSC’s recommendation, has precedents. South Africa in the apartheid era and the Serb Republic of Yugoslavia during the brutal ethnic cleansing era were barred from participating in the UNGA.

Apart from these theoretical options, accretion of participatory privileges to Palestine, just short of the power to vote in the UNGA and eligibility to be elected to other major principal organs of the UN, from September would signal that might not become right in this age.

# Walking the tightrope on the liquor policy

The LDF government would do well to forge a political and social consensus first

### STATE OF PLAY

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A leaked voice message from a WhatsApp group of members of the Federation of Kerala Hotels Association (FKHA), a powerful and rich lobby of bar owners in Kerala, has sparked a controversy in the State.

The voice note, recorded by an FKHA office bearer, purportedly urged bar owners to pool money to influence the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government’s upcoming liquor policy. The message surfaced days after the Kerala Tourism Department held a routine online meeting of stakeholders, including hotel, resort, and houseboat owners.

The Leader of the Opposition, V.D. Satheesan, who belongs to the Congress, accused the government of dangling the prospect of lifting dry days and extending bar timings in exchange for sizeable back-handers from the liquor lobby. He alleged that the FKHA had sought ₹2.5 lakh each from its 801 members to raise ₹20 crore for the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist). Mr. Satheesan said corruption, and not statecraft or public good, informed the LDF’s policymaking. He also demanded the resignation of Excise Minister M.B. Rajesh and Tourism Minister Mohammad Riyaz, who, he alleged, were at the centre of the plot.

Youth Congress workers marched to Mr. Rajesh’s official residence holding a cash counting machine and demanded his resignation. The same machine was used by the LDF in 2016 as a metaphor for liquor policy-related “corruption” in the United Democratic Front (UDF) govern-

ment led by Oommen Chandy. The LDF’s agitation then cost two UDF ministers their Cabinet berths, though the consequent anti-corruption inquiry came to nought.

The current controversy has therefore evoked a sense of political déjà vu. The UDF is all set to launch anti-government protests, would be reminiscent of the restive days of 2016.

Denying the accusations, the State government says it perceives a political plot to undermine the public’s trust in the LDF’s policymaking. The police have opened a probe to establish the motive for the FKHA’s fundraising bid.

The FKHA has stated that it sought to raise funds from members to build an office in Thiruvananthapuram and not to bribe the government.

CPI(M) State Secretary M.V. Govindan has said that tweaking the liquor policy was not on the LDF’s agenda. “Neither the government nor the party has broached the subject. The UDF is towing a conspiracist line,” he said.

Kerala has one of the highest per capita alcohol consumption rates in the country. The liquor policy has always been a politically turbulent and socially sensitive subject. On the one hand, the Church and Muslim social organisations have always called for a puritanical liquor policy aimed at whittling alcohol availability and putting the

State on a path to total prohibition.

On the other, the hospitality industry has demanded a more liberal approach. The software industry has long complained that the lack of socialising venues with alcohol in Kerala makes the State a disappointing job destination for techies. The government’s recent decision to allow the sale of legal alcohol in designated areas in Information Technology parks has drawn criticism from powerful prohibitionist groups.

In order to balance the demands of the two groups, the government has so far walked a tightrope.

Kerala has grappled with the problem of alcohol abuse for years. Experts have attributed the State’s relatively high suicide rate, domestic violence, street crimes, and divorce rate to substance abuse and addiction. Nevertheless, unreasonably restricting the availability of legal liquor for political reasons, like prohibition, has a proven history of failure globally. Kerala has been no exception. In 1997, for instance, the Congress government banned the sale of arrack. This spawned a liquor mafia that smuggled in spirit from neighbouring States.

The government can also ill afford to ignore fiscal realities. Tourism is a significant revenue earner for Kerala. The hospitality industry has argued that the “unreasonable restrictions” on liquor sales and bar timings have pushed MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) to other “tourist-friendly” destinations like Sri Lanka and Goa. The LDF government would do well to forge a political and social consensus before attempting to tweak the current liquor policy, if at all.

# Many U.S. adults question worth of a college degree: survey

Student debt is mounting and the wages of non-degree holders are increasing

### DATA POINT

#### The Hindu Data Team

A recent report by the Pew Research Center sheds light on the evolving debate in the U.S. regarding the value of a college degree. As economic conditions are changing and the costs of higher education are rising, public opinion on the necessity and benefits of a college degree has become increasingly divided.

The report highlights a significant improvement in economic outcomes for young adults without a college degree. Over the past decade, the employment rates and median incomes of this group have seen a notable increase, narrowing the gap with their degree-holding peers. This trend is reshaping perceptions of the necessity of a college education for achieving economic stability.

At the same time, the cost of attending college continues to escalate. Tuition fees have surged, leading to greater financial burdens on students and their families. The increasing student debt has led many to question whether the long-term financial obligations of a college degree are justified by the potential economic benefits. This financial strain is a critical factor in the growing scepticism about the value of a degree.

Approximately half the respondents in the survey believe that a college education is worth the investment, citing better job prospects and higher earning potential (Chart 1). However, a significant portion remains sceptical, pointing to successful careers attained without a college education as evidence that a degree is not always necessary for professional success.

The report identifies differences in opinion based on political affiliation and educational background. Democrats and people with higher levels of education are more likely to view college as essential for achieving success

(Chart 2). On the other hand, Republicans and those without a college degree are more inclined to question its value.

The evolving labour market also plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward college education. The increasing availability of well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree is influencing how people view the necessity of a degree. The growth of industries such as technology and skilled trades is providing alternative pathways to financial stability and career advancement, making college education seem less indispensable for some.

Chart 3 shows the median annual earnings of U.S. men aged 25-34, working full-time. Since 2014, earnings have risen for young men with some college education as well as for those with a high school diploma. Chart 4 shows the same for young U.S. women. In the past 10 years, the earnings of women with a degree as well as the earnings of those without have risen.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated perceptions of higher education. The shift to online learning during the pandemic, coupled with the economic downturn, has led many to reconsider the traditional college experience. Some respondents express concerns about the quality and value of online education compared to in-person learning. The pandemic has highlighted the need for flexibility and adaptability in higher education, as students and institutions navigated various challenges.

The report suggests that the future of higher education may involve more flexible pathways. Alternatives to traditional four-year college programmes, such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and certification programmes, are gaining traction as viable options for career development. These are more affordable and targeted ways of gaining the skills needed for the workforce and reflect a shift in how education and employment are connected.

## Graduation blues

With economic outcomes improving for young adults without a degree, Americans are questioning the importance of a college education



Chart 1: % saying the cost of getting a four-year college degree today is ...

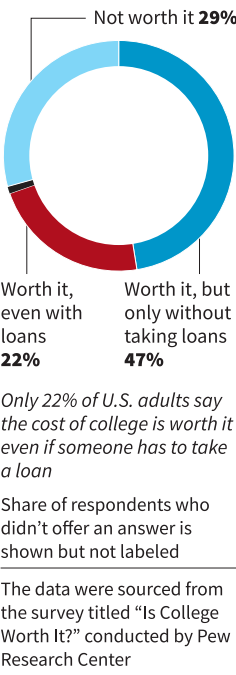
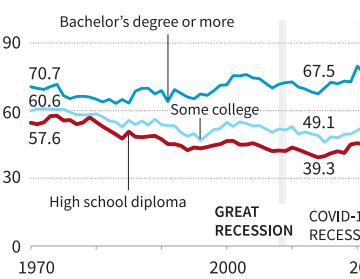


Chart 2 % saying it's \_\_\_\_\_ important for someone to have a four-year college degree in order to get a well-paying job in today's economy

4 in 10 Americans say a college degree is not too important or not at all important in order to get a well-paying job

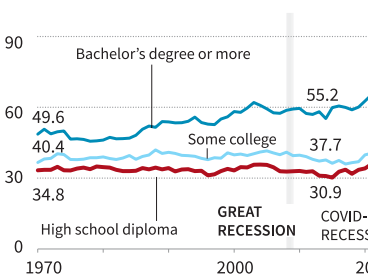
Chart 3: Median annual earnings of men aged 25 to 34 working full time all through 2022. Figures in %



Extremely/Very, Somewhat, Not too/Not at all

Group	Extremely/Very	Somewhat	Not too/Not at all
All adults	25	35	40
Republicans/Republican leaners	17	33	50
Democrats/Democratic leaners	33	38	30

Chart 4: Median annual earnings of women aged 25 to 34 working full time all through 2022. Figures in %



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 29, 1974

## U.S. plans review of programmes of aid to India

Washington, May 28: There are now indications that the United States, whose initial reaction to the Indian nuclear test was mild compared to the much harsher criticism voiced in the news media and sections of the Congress, is now engaged in deciding what, if any, further action it should take.

Reports purporting to originate from official sources here now suggest that the U.S. Administration has called for a high-level inter-agency review of all aid programmes to India (No food or economic aid has gone to India since 1971, though the aid budget includes a nominal sum of \$75 millions for the next fiscal year. The International Development Association is another source from which India obtains U.S. money, but the U.S. Congress has yet to approve the contribution for this multilateral agency). The New York Times in fact quotes one U.S. official as saying that “If there is no cost to India for doing this (conducting a nuclear test), other countries too will go ahead.” The implication of this remark, if it is true, is that if India does not stop further tests, the U.S. will cut off all forms of aid to India.

The initial U.S. reaction to the Indian test was carefully worded by the Secretary of State, Dr. Kissinger, who was at that time in West Asia. It merely said that the U.S. was opposed to all nuclear proliferation because of the impact it would have on world stability. Despite Pakistan’s efforts, the Central Treaty Organisation’s communique issued here last week also bore the mark of the absent Kissinger’s call for restraint.

But since then, a traditionally friendly country like Canada, acting with unaccustomed sharpness, had suspended all aid to India’s atomic programme, and placed under review all other forms of aid.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 29, 1924

## The prickly pear pest

Lands with approximately 40,000,000 acres in Queensland and about 6,000,000 in New South Wales, are invaded by prickly pear. Cockneal insects have been imported from Ceylon and Northern India to check the plague. Various methods have been adopted to control the plants spread including its use as cattle fodder – as material for paper pulp making and alcohol production.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Global turnover of tech firms under the ambit of the new bill

**30** In \$ billion. India's 'Digital Competition Bill' is on the lines of EU's Digital Markets Act 2022. It will apply to firms whose digital services have at least 10 million users locally, bringing some of the world's biggest tech firms under its ambit. REUTERS

Countries that have recognised Palestinian statehood in the UN

**140** Spain, Ireland and Norway are moving to formally recognise a Palestinian state, a step toward a long-held Palestinian aspiration that was fuelled by outrage over civilian deaths in the Gaza Strip following Israel's offensive. AP

The people who died due to heatstroke in Rajasthan

**6** Phalodi in Rajasthan recorded a maximum temperature of 49.4 degrees Celsius on May 27, the India Meteorological Department reported. There is a possibility of surface winds of 25-35 kmph in various parts of the State in the next 48 hours. PTI

The people killed in India and Bangladesh due to Remal cyclone

**38** The toll includes 12 workers who died when a quarry collapsed in Mizoram, which the government attributed to torrential rains as the storm progressed inland. Cyclone Remal made landfall in India and Bangladesh on Sunday evening. AFP

The seats reserved by Delhi University for single girl child

**1** Starting August 1, Delhi University will allocate this seat under a supernumerary quota in all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, marking the first time such a policy has been implemented. ANI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## On fire safety regulations in India

What happened at the Rajkot gaming centre and at the New Born Baby Care Hospital in New Delhi? What are the various laws and guidelines which stipulate rules around fire safety in buildings? How have courts responded to negligence over public safety?

EXPLAINER

G. Ananthakrishnan

The story so far:

A deadly fire at a gaming centre in Rajkot, Gujarat on May 25 killed at least 32 people, bringing focus back on the safety of public buildings and venues. The TRP Game Zone carnage unfolded in the evening, as fire spread inside the structure built with a metal frame and sheets, trapping the victims including several children. Two inquiries have been set up to go into the disaster, one a Special Investigation Team (SIT) by the State government and another by the Rajkot police. The Gujarat High Court *suo motu* took up the incident and made critical observations on the functioning of the State administration, following which the Police Commissioner, Raju Bhargava, Additional Commissioner Vidhi Choudhary, and Municipal Commissioner Anand Patel were transferred. Rajkot municipal officials including town planning officers responsible for the prevention of illegal constructions were suspended, and four people including the operator of the game zone, Dhaval Thakkar, were arrested.

What was the other incident?

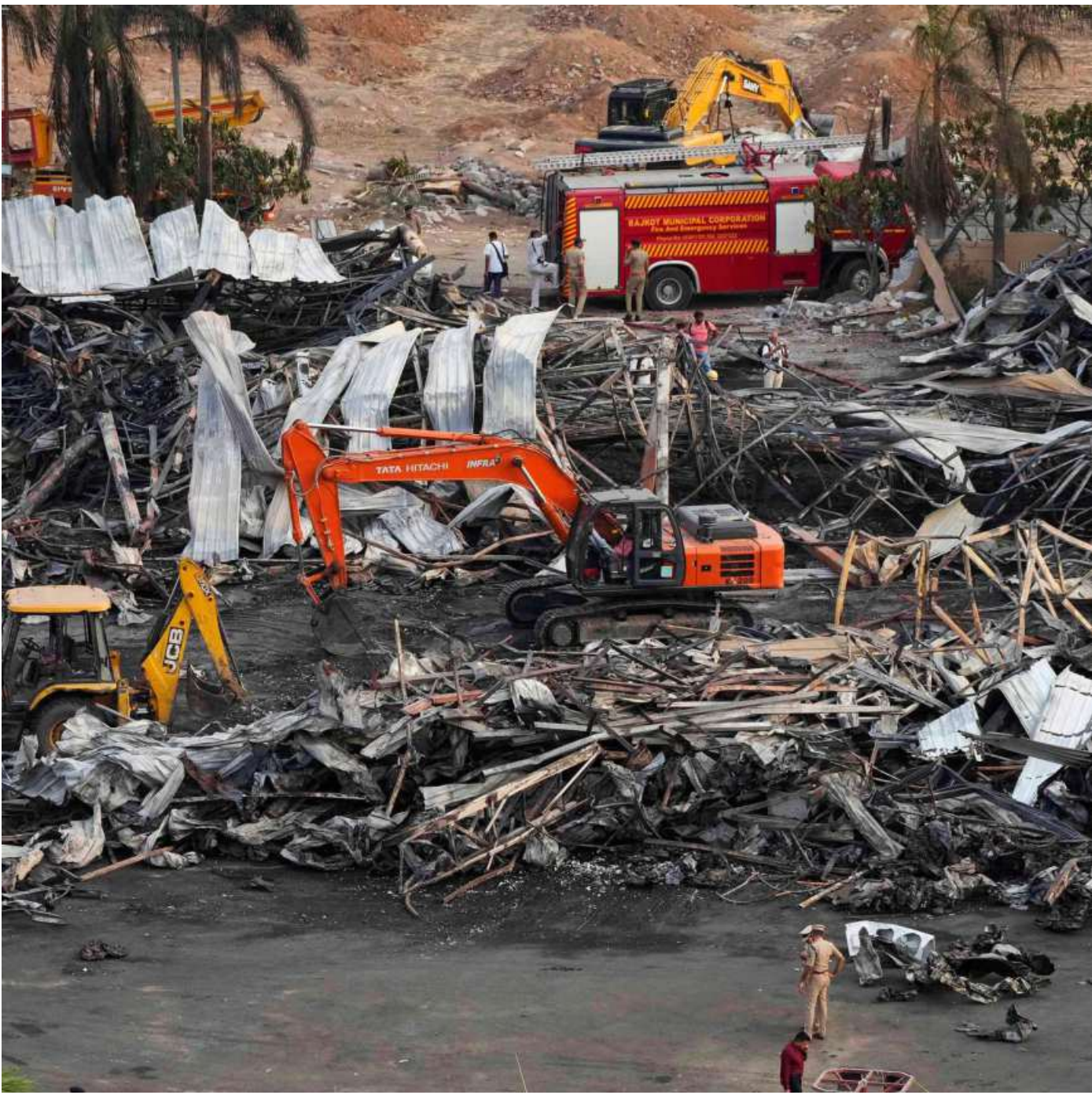
On May 25, seven babies died in a fire in a hospital for newborns in Vivek Vihar, Delhi, leading to the arrest of Naveen Khichi, owner of the New Born Baby Care Hospital, along with the doctor on duty. Preliminary reports suggested that a large number of oxygen cylinders stored in the facility aggravated the impact of the blaze. In both incidents, the focus is on fire certification by the authorities, issue of No Objection Certificates (NOC), and the failure of authorities to take cognisance of illegalities that were happening in full public view.

What fire regulations govern safety?

The Union of India's position on fire safety is that the Model Building Bye-Laws, 2016 and its component Chapter 11 on "Fire Protection and Fire Safety Requirements" provides the necessary framework for State governments, which bear responsibility for fire safety under law. Ensuring adherence to fire safety norms and standards laid down in Part 4 of the National Building Code (NBC) and incorporating mandatory provisions in the process is left to the States.

A structure such as the Rajkot game zone would fall under assembly buildings of the bye-laws, since it is a venue without permanent seating arrangements where 300 or more persons would gather. The definition of assembly buildings is broad under the regulations. They include any building or part of a building where "not less than 50 gather for amusement, recreation, social, religious, patriotic, civil, travel and similar purposes, for example, theatres, motion picture houses, assembly halls, museums, skating, rinks, gymnasiums, restaurants, places of worship, dance halls, club rooms, passenger stations and terminals of air, surface and marine public transportation services, recreation piers and stadia." Hospitals, custodial and penal or mental health institutions are institutional buildings, while educational, business, industry and specialised uses are covered separately.

During the pandemic, amidst a spate of fires, the Health Ministry circulated guidelines on September 28, 2020, stipulating third party accreditation for fire safety and putting a fire response plan



In ruins: A view of the burned down TRP Game Zone in Rajkot. ANI

in place. Chapter 11 of the Bye-Laws clearly lays down fire safety and infrastructure requirements for buildings which are 49 feet in height or more, and those with low occupancies in various categories, for issue of NOC.

In addition, Gujarat's Comprehensive Development Control Regulations 2017 also make it mandatory to get the Chief Fire Officer's opinion even for a temporary structure. The same regulations stipulate that all structures for whatever use must meet fire prevention and safety provisions specified by the Fire Authority, in terms of the Fire Prevention and Life Safety Measures Act, 2013. In the case of the Rajkot game zone, it was built apparently as a non-standard structure to evade regulatory requirements, and the inquiry would reveal whether it was qualified to be used as an assembly building offering leisure and entertainment services.

How have the courts viewed neglect of fire safety?

Among the most high-profile deadly fire accidents that have led to the loss of life, the Uphaar cinema tragedy of 1997 in Delhi resulted in the conviction of the owners of the venue, Sushil Ansal and Gopal Ansal among others for negligence and tampering of evidence. The death of 59 people who were trapped in the balcony of the hall because of illegally installed seats and a blocked exit resulted in a protracted legal battle, with the families of the victims forming an association to seek justice. The Uphaar case was prosecuted with the charge of

causing death by negligence (IPC 304A), hurt or grievous hurt by rash or negligent act (337, 338) by the owners of the cinema, and culpable homicide (304) and other sections in the case of theatre staff and public agency employees, such as the electricity authority. A transformer of the electricity authority that was placed without sanction and allowed without safeguards was thought to have triggered the inferno. The owners had to directly bear responsibility for the wilful structural deviations.

Essentially, the court held the owners of the property, employees and staff from the electricity agency liable for the devastating toll in the Uphaar tragedy for violating the law and later for payment of compensation. On June 13 last year, the anniversary of the blaze, the Association of Victims of Uphaar Tragedy blamed the judiciary for allowing the Ansal brothers to walk out of jail on a reduced sentence.

In the wake of the Rajkot fire, the Gujarat High Court taking *suo motu* cognisance has led to scrutiny of the enforcement of fire and building laws on the one hand, and the identification of several unauthorised venues in the State hosting leisure and entertainment services. The court was told by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation that a recent law, the Gujarat Regularisation of Unauthorised Development Act, 2022 (in force since Jan 2, 2023) was used by an unauthorised game zone to apply for regularisation.

Gujarat has witnessed more than one terrible fire in recent years. The 2019 fire in a tuition centre in Surat's Takshashila

Arcade killed over 20 students and led to calls for tightening of fire safety in public buildings. After Rajkot, the Gujarat High Court took note of the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) before it, and noted that "insult [had been] added to injury" because its earlier orders had not been complied with by the State government.

What can be done to get the law enforced?

The *suo motu* notice issued by the Gujarat High Court extends its directions on fire safety and calls for a government report on action to comply with the Comprehensive Development Control Regulations, fire NOCs, periodic checks under the Fire Safety Act and issue of licences under various Acts. Earlier, the State government had informed the court that 163 hospitals and 348 schools in municipality jurisdictions did not have a valid fire NOC. It cited practical difficulties and lack of trained manpower and infrastructure to achieve full compliance.

Given that there were 241 fires in commercial buildings and 42 in government buildings in 2022, killing a total of 257 people (NCRB data), tightening the implementation of the provisions of the building code and the Model Building Bye-Laws is imperative. Full accountability by the State and enforcement agencies is vital. Temporary and ramshackle structures allowed to come up in urban and rural areas, attracting unwary leisure seekers, run the risk of setting off deadly fires. They need to be tightly regulated for safety.

The writer is a Chennai-based journalist.

THE GIST

On May 25, seven babies died in a fire in a hospital for newborns in Vivek Vihar, Delhi, leading to the arrest of Naveen Khichi, owner of New Born Baby Care Hospital, along with the doctor on duty.

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IN THE LIMELIGHT



Smita Patil and Girish Karnad in *Manthan*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# How *Manthan*’s depiction of class, caste and gender hierarchies remain relevant

Restored by the Film Heritage Foundation with 4K technology, Shyam Benegal’s ‘Manthan’ made a splash at the Cannes Film Festival. Ahead of its theatrical re-release, a look at how the landmark film speaks to today’s agrarian economy

Anuj Kumar

A fictionalised account of how India’s dairy movement took root, *Manthan* combines social drama and commentary to deliberate on the difficult process of deepening democracy. Almost five decades after it made it to theatres, the title reflects the churning of caste and class that is going on in our participatory democratic process even when we have entered the much-publicised Amrit Kaal of our freedom from the colonial yoke.

A product of the times, when parallel cinema was building a bridge between art and commercial movies, director Shyam Benegal refuses to decorate his cinema with false hopes and sermons. He posits an outsider into the stark reality of rural life and through him taps into the spirit, ignorance, and enterprise of village folks.

Like the innovative idea of crowdfunding, Mr. Benegal proposes that social progress and profit can coexist on the same page. On the surface, it is inspired by eminent dairy engineer and social entrepreneur Verghese Kurien’s remarkable experiment but a deeper look reveals the fissures of caste, class, and corruption that are still stopping India from becoming one big cooperative society.

### The narrative

The film gives the idealism of youth a chance to blossom. Early in the film, when protagonist Dr. Manohar Rao (Girish Karnad) reaches Sanganva village to build a dairy cooperative, the local businessman Ganga Prasad Mishra (Amrish Puri) who buys milk from villagers for his private dairy crosses his path. Mishra takes pride in building the economy of the village. Rao doesn’t contest his claim but adds that it is time to move on to a more equitable system where the arbitrariness of the pricing and

the milking of caste and class hierarchies to satiate one person’s greed is done away with. This means reducing the role of the middlemen who make the villagers dependent by doling out loans to them in their time of need and then deciding the prices according to their interests. This pernicious cycle of exploitation still exists, albeit in different forms, as we discovered during the farmers agitation. Trains that go through Punjab are getting inordinately delayed because a section of farmers are still protesting.

*Manthan* sparks this train of thought because economic exploitation marked by systemic challenges continues to haunt the agrarian economy and collective action and advocacy for the empowerment of the underprivileged are seen with suspicion both by the system as well as a section of the community.

Interestingly, as the locals arrive to receive the suited-booted vet who had gotten down from the train, the first sentence we hear is, “Maaf kijiye, gaadi time par aa gayi” (excuse us, the train has arrived on time). Made during the time of Emergency, the film retains its independent voice and makes a sharp comment on the dark period for democracy when it is said that trains had suddenly started running on time. The train sequence segues into a harsher reality where the vet, after alighting from a train, refuses to board an overloaded horse carriage.

### Entrepreneurship and caste

Vijay Tendulkar’s screenplay and Kaifi Azmi’s dialogues tear open the class and caste structures that make the democratic process difficult to realise at the grassroots. Rao’s insistence on equality threatens to disrupt the existing power structures in the village. The cooperative is formed but the swaggering Sarpanch (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) still insists that Dalits form a separate line while selling

their milk. Rao’s educated wife Shanta also has a casteist outlook and shows little interest in her spouse’s battle against injustice.

Unpaved roads, lack of basic health facilities and gender hierarchies are seen alongside lopsided development shown through Govind Nihalani’s long shots of the farm and huts with thatched roofs, and the familiar village sounds created by Vanraj Bhatia – all of which disrupt stereotypes of village life. Preeti Sagar’s “Mero Gaam Kaatha Parey” kept *Manthan* alive in memory when Hindi cinema had moved on to western shores for inspiration.

The film’s heart is on the left but doesn’t give a blank cheque to bookish idealism and keeps questioning the motives and gaze of the urban outsider in the rural milieu. Rao’s motives are not only probed by the smarmy Mishra whose milk business is expected to take a hit because of the cooperative but also by Rao’s well-meaning friend Deshmukh (Mohan Agashe) who is not as emotionally invested in the task as Rao is.

Tendulkar creates an interesting contrast between the playful city guy played by Anant Nag and the committed urban that Karnad essays with his innate grace and poise in perhaps his most convincing and heart-moving performance. Both develop a soft corner for the village girls, or the honour of the community one could say, but their motives are different.

Bindu played by Smita Patil is a complex character played with irresistible conviction. She seems to be yearning for freedom from the shackles of patriarchy but hasn’t developed the confidence and the vocabulary to take the next step. Rao, too, is in two minds. Mr Benegal has beautifully portrayed the unsaid between the two. Their silences and simplicity haunt us long after the credits roll and question the fundamentals of feminism

and fidelity.

Naseeruddin Shah’s Bhola represents the anguished Dalit, who has almost lost his voice because of feudal structures and doubts the concerns of the doctor until Rao shows him the possibility of a level playing field through the power of vote.

Eventually, when Bhola addresses his community to say ‘soch vichari se vote dalna’ (think before you vote), it rings a bell.

The actor who believes in method once told this journalist that he lived in a hut, learnt to make cow dung cakes, and milk a buffalo. He would carry buckets full of milk and serve the unit members to get the physicality of the character right.

### The power of crowdfunding

In 2016, in an interview with this journalist, Mr Benegal, while underlining that the common Indian has always supported good cinema, said that in *Manthan* the source of funding was much more organised and publicised but it was not the only time he worked with the money of common people to tell their story to a larger audience.

In *Antarnaad* (1991) which was based on the Swadhayay movement or self-reliance, the fishing communities of Maharashtra collected money and approached Mr Benegal. Before that in *Susman* (1987), handloom cooperatives contributed to bringing Mr Benegal’s vision of the plight of weavers to life. The tragic irony of the weaver later found its way into Prakash Raj’s *Kanchivaram* (2007) as well.

Before the Film Heritage Foundation came into the picture with 4K technology, *Manthan* was digitally restored in 2011 by Pixion and Cameo Restoration Sound, and that ‘restored version’ is available on YouTube.

However, the poor prints of *Susman* and *Antarnaad* are waiting for an Amul to have a new lease of life.

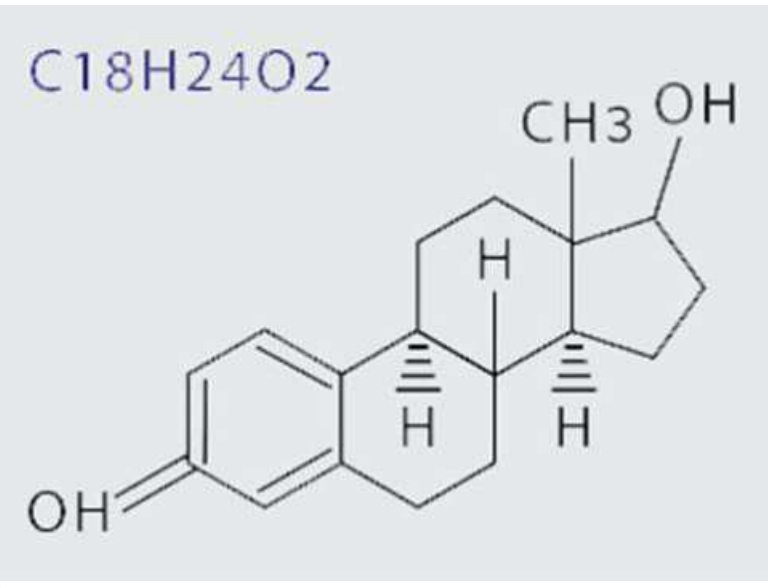
## THE DAILY QUIZ

World Menstrual Hygiene Day is observed every year on May 28. A quiz on the subject

Ramya Kannan

- ❏ **QUESTION 1**  
Cold, winter weather can exacerbate the painful symptoms women feel during periods. What is the reason?
- ❏ **QUESTION 2**  
On an average, how much blood does a woman's body lose during a period?
- ❏ **QUESTION 3**  
The withdrawal of testosterone in adult males can cause nervousness, irritability, lethargy and depression. Often referred to as ‘man periods’, what is the condition called?

- ❏ **QUESTION 4**  
What is the word we know that defines and marks the end of a woman's reproductive years?
- ❏ **QUESTION 5**  
In 1946, a production house that you may quite not associate with the subject made a movie, *The Story of Menstruation*. It was a basic explanation of the purpose and process of menstruation, told largely with illustrations, and naturally, avoiding the subject of sex. Can you guess the name of the production company?



- Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:**
1. The only player to have won two editions of the World Cup as captain. **Ans: Daren Sammy**
2. The players to have won the Cup as wicket-keeper captains. **Ans: M.S. Dhoni in 2007 and Jos Buttler in 2022**
3. This country was involved in two tied matches in the 2012 edition. **Ans: New Zealand**
4. This country has reached the semi-finals six times. **Ans: Pakistan**
5. The common link between Dirk Nannes, Roelof van der Merwe, David Wiese and Mark Chapman with respect to T20 World Cup history. **Ans: They have played for two different countries**
6. The only bowler from a non-test playing nation to pick up five wickets in an innings. **Ans: Ahsan Malik for The Netherlands**
7. This person has stood as an on-field umpire in the most number of matches. **Ans: Aleem Dar (45 matches)**
- Visual: Identify the players and the feat that connects them. **Ans: Rohit Sharma and Shakib Al Hasan are the only players to have played in all eight editions and are in their respective teams for the ninth edition too**
- Early Birds:** Prashant Nain| Abhay Krishan



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

- “Disinterested, uninterested.”  
‘Disinterested’ means ‘not influenced by one’s own advantage, impartial’.  
*You can go to him for advice. He looks at every problem objectively. He gives disinterested advice.*
- ‘Uninterested’ means ‘not interested’.  
*He’s selfish. He is uninterested in others.*  
In American colloquial English, ‘disinterested’ is used in the sense of ‘uninterested’. In Britain, discriminating writers and speakers maintain the distinction between the two words. When a person is interested in something, he shows his ‘desire to learn or know something or his involvement in something’.  
*I am interested in old coins.*  
*I am interested in his welfare.*  
When you are interested, you show interest in something or somebody. When you say that something is interesting, you mean that something is holding your attention, something is arousing your curiosity. When you say ‘I am interesting,’ you are paying a compliment to yourself. When you say ‘I am interested,’ you are showing an interest in something or somebody. There are some who say that they are interesting when they mean that they are interested. Others would say that you are an interesting person if, for example, you are deeply interested in a variety of things.”
- “Low-down (N. C. Chagla, Bombay)”  
“ ‘Low-down’ as an adjective means ‘abject, mean, dishonourable.’  
*He is noted for his low-down tricks.*  
‘Low-down’ as a noun means ‘relevant information.’  
*The journalist wanted to get the low-down on the minister’s dismissal.*  
You try to get to the bottom of a thing to find out all about it; you go deep down.”
- “The present continuous or progressive tense.”  
“In colloquial English, the progressive is used with ‘hope,’ ‘want,’ ‘wonder’ to express tentativeness, politeness. ‘I hope you will come’ means that the speaker’s expectations are high. ‘I am hoping you will come’ is polite and less demanding. The tone is rather deferential.  
*I am wondering if you can come tomorrow.*  
*Are you wanting any assistance, sir? Can I help you?*  
The progressive of ‘go’ is used to denote a future action.  
*I am going to Bombay next week.*  
*She is not going to contest the election.*  
The present progressive is also used to denote events that are likely to take place in the future.  
*He is taking me to a movie next week.*  
*I am buying her a present for her birthday next Sunday.*  
The progressive is also used to denote a change of state taking place over a period.  
*He is getting old.*  
*Our industries are improving.*  
The difference between (a) ‘He is friendly’ and (b) ‘He is being friendly’ is that (a) says that the person is by nature friendly; (b) suggests that the person appears to be friendly at the time of speaking. It is not his nature to be friendly all the time. He shows a friendly attitude at the moment.”  
*Published in The Hindu on March 3, 1992.*

## Word of the day

- Panoply:**  
a complete and impressive array
- Usage:** *He presented us a portrait of the founder of the company in full panoply.*
- Pronunciation:** bit.ly/panoplypro
- International Phonetic Alphabet:** /pænəpli/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject ‘Text & Context’



Formidable brand

The business of cricket has never been better

In terms of the cricket, the seventeenth edition of the India Premier League (IPL) may have ended in a whimper with the Kolkata Knight Riders beating Sun Risers Hyderabad with nine overs to spare. But the truth is that the Board of Control for Cricket’s (BCCI) biggest brand shines brighter than ever from a brand and commercial perspective.

The commercial model is straightforward: the BCCI auctions digital and broadcast rights to a couple of entities, who in turn make their returns from sponsorship and advertising. The teams get a share of the BCCI’s revenues, while they fork out huge sums to ‘buy’ their players. IPL’s commercial success is borne out by its huge stadium and virtual viewership, which has worked well for the gravy train of live streamers, telecasters and advertisers. Viacom 18 bagged digital rights to stream matches for ₹23,758 crore over 2023-27. It lined up 18 sponsors and 250 advertisers. These include Dream11, Tata Motors, PayZapp by HDFC Bank, SBI, Thums Up, Britannia, Pepsi, Jindal Steel, Google and Parle Products. Disney Star, that owns the Star Sports network, bagged the TV broadcast rights for 2023-27, for which it paid ₹23,575 crore. Star Sports too lined up star-studded advertisers. Disney Star announced a couple of weeks ago that the TV viewership for the first 51 IPL matches (out of a total of 74) was a record 510 million. Franchises have built up a committed fan-base over the years. During the IPL, a mini-economy of small vendors comes into being.

IPL has not only changed domestic cricket, spawning various local and State level T20 leagues, it has also served as a template for T20 leagues around the world – Big Bash (both men and women) in Australia, South Africa’s SA20 league, West Indies’ Caribbean Premier League, Pakistan Super League, Bangladesh Premier League, Sri Lanka (Lanka Premier League) and even US’ Major League Cricket. The BCCI has also been conducting the Women’s Premier League, which offers enormous potential in unearthing talent.

The league has opened up an alternative career path for young Indian cricketers, who are talented but unable to able to break into the national team. Here, the parallel with European football leagues is striking. IPL has given these young cricketers a chance to rub shoulders with the best in the world and also benefit from top coaching talent, apart from the financial payoffs at the auctions. It has also served as a template for franchise-based leagues in other sports in India – football (ISL), badminton (Premier Badminton League), volleyball (Prime Volleyball League), table tennis (UTT) and the hugely popular Pro Kabaddi league which has been going on for 10 seasons now.

Corporate-backed leagues have made the pursuit of a career in a range of sports a viable proposition. Yet, the global experience suggests that they could do with more financial transparency.

POCKET



A relook at tariffs, FTAs, GVCs

TRADING GAINS. Merely lowering tariffs and signing FTAs, without improving the business environment, will not help



In a speech at an industry body function on May 17, the CEO of NITI Aayog (CNA) shared insights on India’s possible path forward on tariffs, free trade agreements (FTAs), non-tariff barriers (NTBs), emerging trade issues, the EU’s green measures, global value chains (GVCs). These suggestions ignite a debate about what is best for India. Let’s examine each suggestion in the light of prevailing global and Indian practices.

**TARIFFS** CNA said India should pursue low tariffs to join GVCs. Most trade economists agree. However, we have both positive and negative examples of impact of tariff cuts on manufacturing and trade.

Globally, low tariffs led to the shutting down of most manufacturing in the US and EU and increasing reliance on imports from China. Now, wanting to make critical products at home, the US has regularly increased tariffs and other restrictions since 2018, especially on Chinese imports. The US now uses high tariffs and subsidies to boost local manufacturing, a strategy India is also adopting. Indian tariffs are on the higher side compared to developed country averages. Over the past decade, India’s simple average tariffs have risen from 13 per cent to 18.1 per cent. But a simple average tariff is not a good measure as it ignores trade values. So, what are effective tariffs in India?

In FY 2023, the government collected ₹2,18,680 crore in customs duties on imports worth ₹57,49,801 crore, indicating an effective import tariff of 3.8 per cent. This rate is low because imports used as inputs for exports are not charged a tariff, but tariffs are high for the same products when imported for domestic use.

High tariffs on raw materials have a cascading adverse impact on the economy, but we are not in position to eliminate high tariffs on crude oil and many industrial raw materials.

In India, high tariffs worked well for many sectors. India became a small-car hub due to high import duties (70-125 per cent) on automobiles and lower duties (5-15 per cent) on auto components. Conversely, Australia saw the disappearance of all car makers when it gradually cut import tariffs from 45 per cent in the early 1990s to 5 per cent, 10 years later.

Any talk of lowering tariffs hits a roadblock of possible disruption in



EXTERNAL PUSH. Indian exporters have to navigate through a host of tariff and non-tariff issues /ISTOCKPHOTO

schemes like the Production Linked Incentive, which work on tariff arbitrage. For instance, smartphones have a 20 per cent tariff, while most components have 7.5-10 per cent.

Today, about 85 per cent of customs duty collections come from less than 10 per cent of tariff lines, while the bottom 60 per cent of tariff lines contribute less than 3 per cent of revenue. With some work, we can reduce the average import tariff from the current 18.1 per cent to less than 10 per cent without affecting important products. An inter-ministerial exercise may be carried out to simplify tariff structure and also avoid adverse global glare. Remember, Donald Trump called India tariff king.

**EU’S CARBON TAX** CNA said the EU CBAM is not intended to hinder trade and urged domestic industries to adapt to these changes to remain competitive. Let us see the counterpoint.

CBAM, when fully implemented, will result in a 20-35 per cent import tax on Indian firms. A firm has to share all plant and production details with the EU. Also, firms may need to run two production lines to be effective. Expensive yet greener products for

To deal with EU’s CBAM, Indian firms will have to run two production lines, one for European exports and the other for the rest of the world

exports to EU countries and standard products for rest of the world. CBAM is one of at least five EU measures hitting trade. Indian firms must comply with EU requirements. But government must hit imports from the EU in equal measure.

**LABOUR, ENVIRONMENT** CNA said that labour, environment, and similar issues are integral to society, and if societal conditions impose standards in these areas, the Indian industry must adapt to remain competitive.

Higher environmental standards of the US or EU are designed for domestic application in countries with a per capita income of \$50,000. The problem lies in forcing countries with a per capita income of \$2,000 to adopt these, which will halt most economic activities.

Developed countries often use these standards to restrict trade. For instance, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) prescribes that an auto component must be made by workers earning at least \$16 per hour. This disqualifies all such production in Mexico, where the minimum wage is \$8 per hour.

India cannot afford to implement the same stringent labour and environmental standards as advanced countries. It must evaluate whether it is ready to make binding commitments in new domestic policy areas such as the environment, labour, gender, digital trade, data governance, and more.

**GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS** CNA underscored the need to reduce tariffs and streamline procedures to

integrate into GVCs. We notice that despite offering zero-tariff access to most industrial product imports from ASEAN, Japan, and South Korea for a decade, India has not become a significant part of GVCs. An important reason is long port clearance times and a low ease of doing business.

**FREE TRADE PACTS** CNA advocated the need for India to sign more FTAs with key trade partners. The Secretary of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) also stressed this point. India has 14 FTAs with 22 countries and is now negotiating new FTAs with 49 more countries.

Before moving ahead, we must know if our past FTAs have benefited us and if there are lessons from these in new FTAs.

Trade economists suggest that to boost growth, a country should lower import tariffs, create more free trade agreements (FTAs), and integrate into global value chains (GVCs).

However, these strategies will only be effective if the country first reduces costs and improves its business environment.

Currently, high tariffs prevent India from joining GVCs, but simply lowering tariffs without improving business conditions could result in more imports replacing local manufacturing. Serious efforts are needed to enhance the business environment to benefit from these trade strategies.

The writer is the founder, Global Trade Research Initiative

Fashioning an ethical, sustainable garment industry

The fast fashion industry can shed its wasteful practices and use sustainable material to produce eco-friendly garments

Pooja Misra

The fast fashion market is projected to reach \$184.96 billion by 2027 from \$122.98 billion in 2023, a CAGR of 10.7 per cent.

This multi-faceted industry focuses on production of low quality, inexpensive, affordable clothing and is well-suited for a price conscious consumer with a taste for trendy apparel. However, one cannot turn a blind eye to fast fashion’s innumerable ethical and environmental concerns.

This industry has been often criticised for excessive consumption, high obsolescence, cumulative resource loss, and unsustainable and unethical business practices. Well over 11 years have passed since the unfortunate incident in late April 2013 at the Rana Plaza garment manufacturing factory which resulted in a death of 1,134 people. The incident shed light on the precarious working conditions of workers.

Known for overproduction, fast fashion companies are often stuck with a mountain of unsold inventory often leading to apparel being sold at a 40 per cent markdown or ending up in landfills.

The sad part being an alarming 92 million tonnes of textile waste, equivalent to a truck full ends up in landfills every second (UNEP, 2018).

This industry has been called out for 8-10 per cent of global carbon emissions (UNEP, 2018) and if not curtailed it could increase to 26 per cent by 2030 (Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation, 2017).

However, not everything is bleak. The fast fashion industry has been pushed to producing clothing with more environmentally friendly material and adopt sustainable practices such as implementing a recycling programme, launching a “conscious” collection wherein the apparel is produced with at least “50 per cent sustainable materials” and embracing company policies that respect labour and labour rights.

These brands should also create advertising campaigns that encourage ethical and conscientious consumption patterns.

**CIRCULAR STRATEGY** A circular business strategy can effectively complete the manufacturing cycle by prioritising lifespan and minimising waste. Recycling, reusing, swapping garments, giving, thrifting, and buying second-hand are all integral



FAST FASHION. Towards ethical practice SGETTY IMAGES

components of the circular economic model.

With consumers changing their mindset, although at an alarmingly slow rate, the sustainable and ethical fashion market and slow fashion industry is once again gaining limelight. Slow fashion, a road towards a more environmentally friendly future, is about buying ethically produced sustainable garments and is a mind-set change away from following fads and valuing practicality, quality, timeless beauty, and ethical manufacturing. More importantly, governments

around the world are rapidly recognising the importance of taking a more proactive role in tackling the fashion industry’s detrimental impact. The EU in December 2023 announced new rules based on the 2022 EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles. The EU’s Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programme focuses on encouraging manufacturers to embrace sustainable and circular concepts.

Last but not the least, it is imperative that we ensure that fast fashion brands employ sustainable and ethical production practices which extend beyond financial concerns and contribute to the well-being of society, workers and the environment.

Providing better wages and prioritizing the employees well-being, utilizing eco-friendly raw materials and sustainable packaging options, building a transparent supply chain, minimizing waste and focusing on animal welfare will help construct a conscientious and responsible fashion industry. This would help build consumer trust and loyalty toward an ethical fashion brand.

The writer is a Professor in Economics and Area Chair at the Birla Institute of Management Technology, Greater Noida

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

**Solar push** The Editorial on tapping solar power (May 28) is welcome. More progress could have been made if substantial subsidy been extended to every residence and firms to arrange solar panels. Instead loans are provided to corporate firms who are targeting lakhs of hectares of fertile lands making it solely a commercial project. Every company should be mandated to source at least 70 per cent of its power requirements from captive source. AG Rajmohan Anantapur.

The Editorial has pointed out to the disturbing trend of concentration of solar installations in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Renewable energy projects can be set up on degraded lands, which is about 27 per cent of 3.29 million sq. km of our landmass. Moreover, using satellite imagery and involving farm scientists and extension professionals of state Agricultural universities and Krishi Vigyan kendras of the state will also assist in identification and documentation of waste land parcels. T Raj Pravin Pechiparai (Tamil Nadu)

**Dairy atmanirbhartha** This is with reference to “Dairy industry ‘mooring’ to Aatmanirbhartha with indigenous bovine sex-sorting tech”, (May 28). The indigenous technological intervention to enhance productivity of milch animals will be soon rolled out in the country making it affordable and accessible for India’s dairy farmers. T NDDDB Dairy Services has successfully conducted field trials of sex-sorted semen usage. Currently, the sorting technology for bovine semen is sourced through international players such as the US-based Sexing Technologies (ST USA), through its Indian arm ST Genetics India. It is a welcome technology. P Sundara Pandian Virudhunagar.

**More female calves** Apropos “Dairy industry .... Sex sorting tech” (May 28), this experiment may no doubt enhance milk production, which warrants heightened veterinary care for the increased population since it may give room for health issues that may go unattended due to shortage of veterinary professionals. However the present situation of abandoning the male calves by farmers needs to be handled with care since most of them end up at the slaughter house. The large number of male cattle found abandoned on city roads is the glaring example of how the situation is being handled without concern. Rajiv Magal Halekere Village (Karnataka)



# Rethink and reboot

Ambiguities in Digital Competition Bill

Vedika Mittal Kumar

A draft of a Digital Competition Bill was recently released by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs along with an explanatory report by the committee that recommended this Bill.

The report leans on the recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Finance that a Digital Competition Act is required to regulate large digital enterprises (Amazon, Google/Alphabet, Meta/Facebook/Whatsapp).

Presently, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) is empowered to assess any anti-competitive activity by digital enterprises ex-post - i.e. after the occurrence of the activity.

The main thrust of the new Bill is to empower the CCI to regulate conduct of large digital enterprises ex ante - i.e. before the occurrence of undesirable conduct. Simply put the CCI will become an umbrella regulator which will set the rules of the game for designated large digital enterprises in India. This approach is concurrent with global practice especially in the EU and UK which have formulated similar legislations.

## AI IMPACT

However, the recent proliferation of AI across sectors makes one wonder if the Digital Competition Bill is a bit early for India. For example, even though ChatGPT is not a substitute for Google, the fact that a product like it was built and data required for it was readily accessible, makes one rethink if the so-called gatekeepers of the digital economy really pose as formidable an entry barrier as we think.

Digital markets have unique attributes like network effects which result in foreclosing competition but the question is whether we need to let it play out for a bit before drawing the boundaries.

As for the Bill itself, it seems to follow a mix of the EU and UK approach wherein the CCI will designate certain large digital enterprises and lay down a list of dos and don'ts for some core services provided by them. For example, Amazon may be designated for the e-marketplace services it provides via Amazon.in or Meta may be designated for its social networking services provided via Instagram and



DIGITAL BILL.. Need for claritySTOCK.COM

Facebook. So far, India has adopted a unique approach to regulate e-marketplaces. The FDI Policy distinguishes between foreign and Indian e-marketplaces. Foreign marketplaces are not allowed to pursue a dual role - that of platform owner and seller. No such rule applies to domestic e-marketplaces. The draft Bill implies two policy reversals - firstly, there will be no difference in policy for foreign and domestic e-marketplaces and secondly, all e-marketplaces will be allowed to assume a dual role - i.e. to run the platform and be a seller on the platform - to put it simply, to be a referee as well as a player in the game.

Unlike the existing law (FDI Policy), the draft Bill does not prohibit an e-marketplace from assuming a dual role. The clause on self-preferencing in the draft Bill only states that a designated enterprise shall not favour its own products or services. Therefore, as per the draft Bill all e-marketplaces in India will now be able to run the platform as well as offer their own goods and services for sale on the platform.

The draft Bill itself highlights how enforcement of the FDI Policy is ambiguous and breeds uncertainty. Moreover, the draft Bill clearly states that if any of its provisions are inconsistent with an existing law then the draft Bill will take precedence.

Whether or not distinguishing between foreign and domestic e-marketplaces is desirable and whether or not e-marketplaces assuming a dual role is fair or not are larger questions. Their answers must be rooted in well thought out economic policy. If that exercise has been undertaken, it's not captured in the report accompanying the draft Bill and if it hasn't, then the proposed law must not be preceded by such conscious discussion. A rethink and reboot may be required.

The writer is an independent public policy researcher. Views are personal

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 29, 2004

#### Market mood hit by CMP blues Sensex plunges 223 points

The much-awaited common minimum programme (CMP) of the Congress-led UPA was given a thumb-down by the stock market as it failed to give any clear direction that the new Government would follow visà-vis the economy in general and business in particular. At close the BSE Sensex was down by 223.16 points.

#### ‘Don’t misuse of double taxation pact’

The Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, on Friday put domestic entities on the watchlist for scrutiny of possible misuse of Double Taxation Avoidance Agreements (DTAA). “DTAA treaties are well-established instruments. If a case of misuse arises, then it must be stopped. There is no reason to apprehend that the DTAAAs would go. The misuse is not by a foreign investor, but by some Indians,” Mr Chidambaram said at a press conference.

#### Work on infrastructure, says Immelt

Mr Jeffrey Immelt, Chairman and CEO of General Electric Company, has called for more public investment in infrastructure development in India. “Make infrastructure as good as your people,” he said while addressing a meeting of CII here on Friday.

Ganapathi Nagarajan  
Badri Narayanan Gopalakrishnan

Since 2006, the Ministry of Tourism is implementing a relatively less-known scheme called ‘Hunar se Rozgar’ meaning skill to employment. This is primarily aimed at catching the school dropouts and training them for employment or self-employment. The scheme runs on a small budget of around ₹30 crore.

It was conceived as a six to eight week free training programme for those in the 18-28 years age bracket, with expert institutes picked in this regard. Star hotels are expected to train a minimum number of persons. While every effort is being made to bring the unorganised sector into mainstream employment by giving necessary skilling, a large gap exists in employment of the youth. The scheme currently attracts people mainly in the northern States.

The government needs to take more measures to popularise the scheme so that more agencies come up to assist in implementing it in a holistic manner. Let us quickly go through a SWOT analysis of the scheme before arriving at conclusions:

**Strengths:** The strength of the scheme is its fancy nomenclature and the very essence and principle of this scheme. This name evinces lot of interest.

**Weakness:** The scheme suffers bureaucratic delays and procrastination tactics adopted by both the government as well as private institutions. This may need to be looked into by the stakeholders and to ensure that the processes are streamlined through an online portal.

Further, information, education and communication (IEC) activities in the form of due publicity and awareness programmes need to be scaled up. Indian language media needs to be used widely to boost the IEC mechanism.

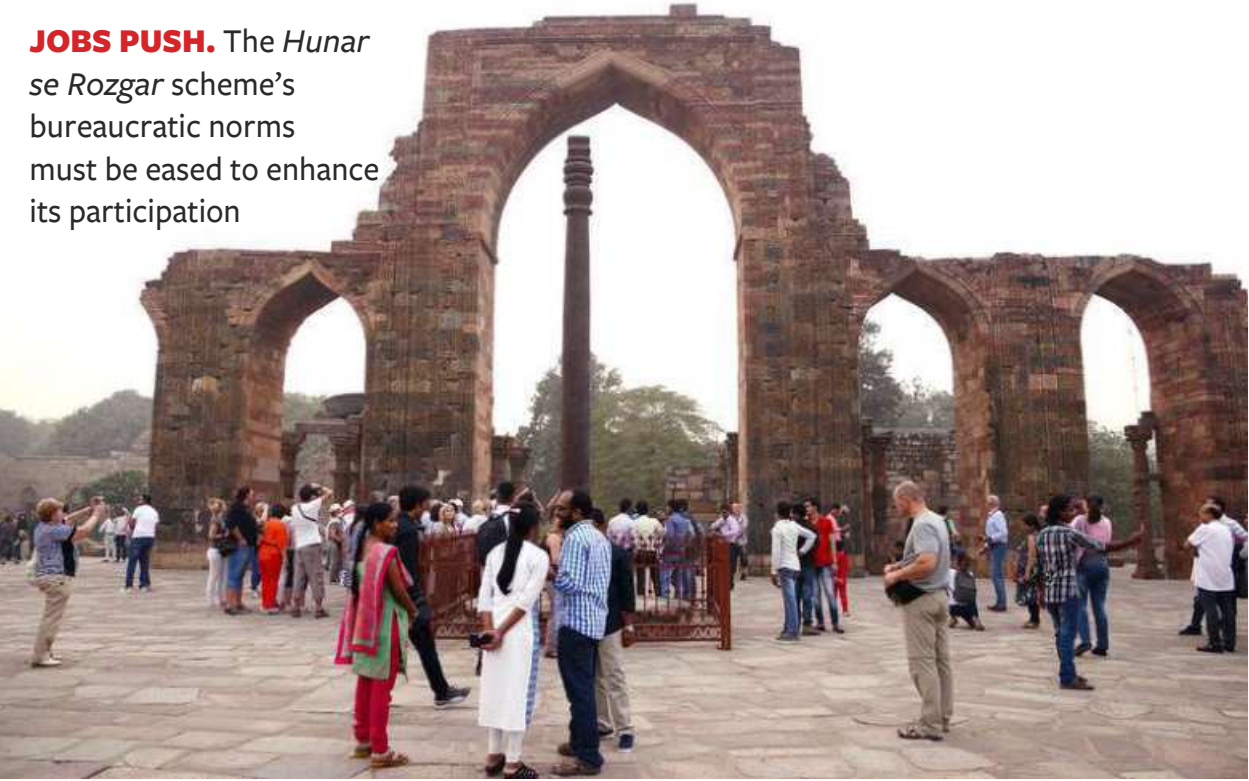
Given the various check points, many institutions do not show interest, as the guidelines are made in such a way that the scheme's implementation is possible only in government institutions such as Tourist Management Institutions, Hotel Management Institutions and other similar institutions.

Moreover, recently the scheme guidelines have been revised to allow payment only after implementation of training.

Further, the payment mechanism is in

# The skilling potential of tourism

**JOBS PUSH.** The *Hunar se Rozgar* scheme’s bureaucratic norms must be eased to enhance its participation



KRISHNAN VV

two stages i.e. 80 per cent upon completion of the training and distribution of completion certifications and the balance 20 per cent is being paid upon provision of employment/self-employment to the youth who have undergone capacity building training. This was not the case earlier where the payment mode was 40:40:20.

**Opportunities:** Hunar se Rozgar is a pathbreaking scheme. It enables the less educated youth to go for formal employment after a brief training. Given the utmost importance of tourism in the economy and forex reserves, apart from

**This scheme enables the less educated youth to go for formal employment after a brief training in the growing tourism sector**

the opportunity to promote the cultural heritage and Glory of Bharat, this sector is fertile for such schemes. This may also help the government raise higher tax revenue.

A mechanism should also be drawn up to motivate the stakeholders to make contributions to boost tourism.

Bids by India for Olympics 2036 and Youth Olympics 2029 may help us make necessary scale-up processes timely.

**Threats:** Tourism as a sector is prone to external shocks, There has been a dip in tourism during the pandemic. Similarly, Ukraine-Russia War and Israel-Palestine war have impacted the tourism sector in these areas.

Moreover, safety and security of the tourist destinations enhances the tourism activities.

Holistic development of tourist destinations is required.

The capital spends on transport connectivity are usually good in these

destinations, subject to non-occurrence of natural calamities like floods, Tsunami etc.

Absence of better living standards in the tourist destinations might distract people who may wish to move away from the hectic urban life to such destinations to have a better work-life balance.

**Way forward:** The overall expenditure on this scheme should increase. Tourism ecosystem must be improved with the help of State governments and other public/private institutions including enhanced infrastructure connectivity through Gati Shakti and introduction of Bullet trains and increased air connectivity. There should be a vision to make India as a top tourist destination in the world by 2047.

Nagarajan is a former Under Secretary; and Gopalakrishnan is a Fellow at NITI Aayog. Views expressed are personal

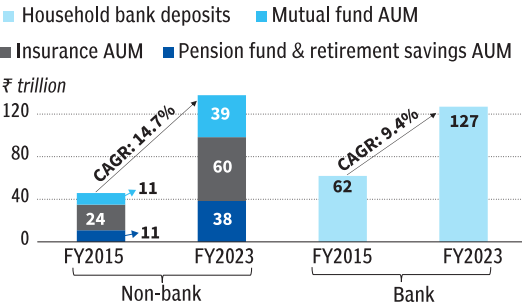
## STATISTALK.

Compiled Madhav Suresh | Graphic Visveswaran V

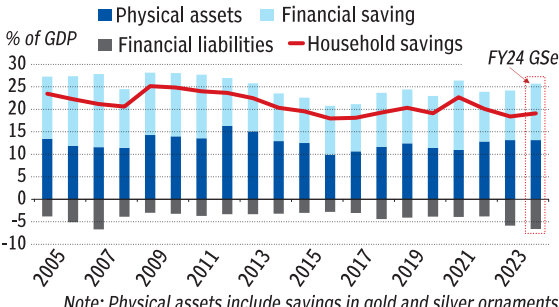
### Trends in Indian household savings

A recent report by Goldman Sachs provides insights on household savings patterns in India. The report highlights that while bank deposits continue to constitute the largest portion of household financial savings, it has been declining over the past two decades. Conversely, retirement saving, insurance, and mutual fund assets have experienced a more rapid growth owing to financial literacy, government initiatives aimed at digitalization, and the broader formalization of the economy. Despite these advancements, the allocation of Indian household savings to non-bank instruments remains lower compared to developed markets. Furthermore, Indian households have historically favoured physical assets, particularly real estate which have consistently surpassed those in financial assets.

#### Growth in pension, insurance, and mutual funds compared to bank deposits over the last decade

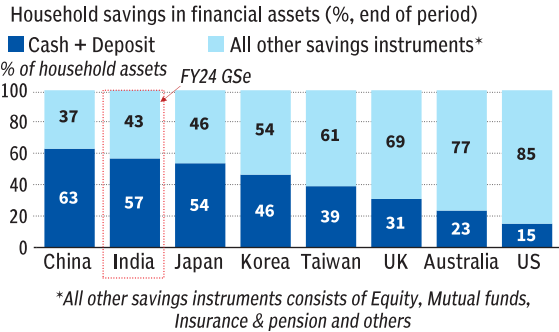


#### Indian households savings in physical assets

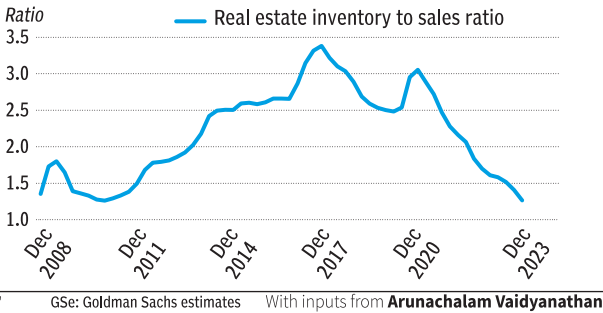


Source: Based on report by Goldman Sachs titled "Changing contours of Indian household savings"

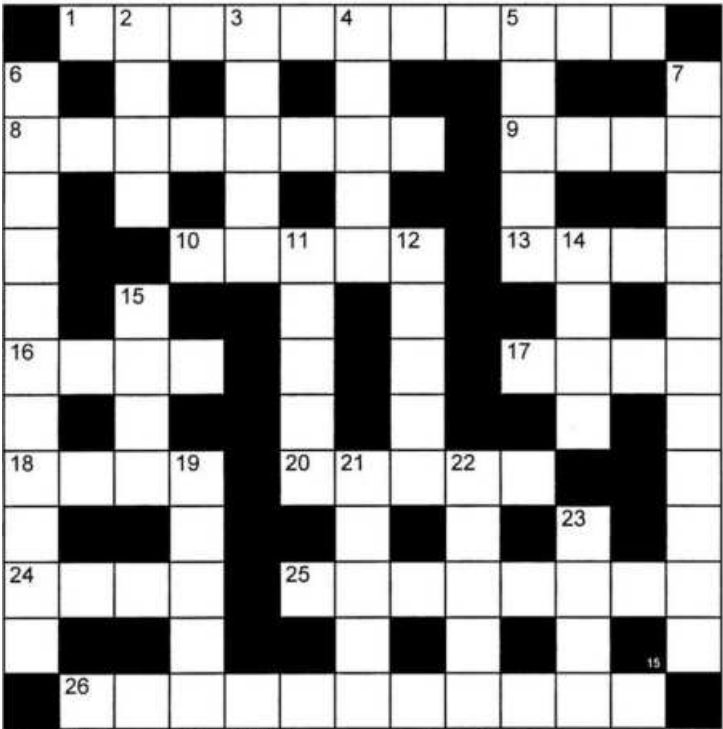
#### Indian households savings in non-bank instruments compared with other countries



#### Strong real estate demand resulting in inventory-to-sales ratio at all time low



## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2449



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Old firearm (11)
- Desire for food (8)
- Room skirting (4)
- Put things in the ground (5)
- Musician's mouthpiece (4)
- Prepare food (4)
- Omen (4)
- Italian currency unit (4)
- Cooking apparatus (5)
- Resolve knot (4)
- Grabbed hold of round the neck (8)
- To be rued (11)

#### DOWN

- Circuits of track (4)
- Concerning birth (5)
- Consumed (5)
- Cow's milk glands (5)
- Type of painting (5-6)
- Flower named after capital (6,5)
- Astray, wrongly (5)
- Argentine dance (5)
- Put out (4)
- Sound of lion (4)
- Surrounded by (5)
- Fish (5)
- Dwelling, originally Roman (5)
- By mouth (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- A social gaffe, an old-time kiss – with lethal potential! (11)
- Desire to copy small French entry (8)
- Add change to ring the skirting (4)
- Something growing to make one put one's foot down firmly (5)
- Water-grass for part of organ-pipe (4)
- Course-maker will be at the range (4)
- A gesture that means something, to give an autograph (4)
- April returns, having lost second spent in Rome (4)
- Broke up the fire-grate (5)
- Bring ruin on a French party (4)
- Got hold of a hundred dollar change around the East (8)
- The right bird is brought to table, but it's unfortunate (11)

#### DOWN

- Takes in milk like a cat and passes the tail-end (4)
- An upset to the interior of Italy in S Africa (5)
- Gone, of course (5)
- What imparts direction without first right of milk-supplier (5)
- What seascape painter might be expected to use (5-6)
- Flower for the lions at Regent's Park zoo? (6,5)
- Take it so, it not being a hit (5)
- Movement to music that got an altered form (5)
- Send the money right off the top to put it out (4)
- Loud utterance has an uncooked sound to it (4)
- With others around, Scotsman is in the silver (5)
- Fish quintet: rainbow, perhaps (5)
- House for the sick in Virginia (5)
- Poor alumnus needs no written exam (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2448

**ACROSS** 1. Diatribe 4. Scud 8. Two 9. Cello 10. Let 11. Refresh 12. Mopes 13. Premonition 17. Comma 18. Preview 20. Owl 21. Edict 22. Err 23. Tidy 24. Belittle

**DOWN** 1. Dotard 2. Aloof 3. Belch 5. Calypso 6. Detest 7. Commitment 9. Cream cakes 14. Rumbled 15. Accost 16. Swerve 18. Price 19. Inept



## Improved prospects

Post-harvest losses must be minimised

The India Meteorological Department has reiterated the country will get above-normal rain this year. Since the rainfed regions are also expected to get good rain, this factor will help boost agricultural production. Higher production will naturally help contain the food inflation rate. It is worth noting, while the core inflation rate, based on the consumer price index, is running below 4 per cent, higher food prices are keeping the headline rate above the central bank's target. The food inflation rate in April, for instance, was 8.7 per cent. In the context of inflation management, while improved food production should help contain prices and inflation expectations, India must also work on augmenting supply chains for perishable items, which tend to impart greater volatility to inflation outcomes. Until a few months ago, for example, vegetable prices pushed up the headline inflation rate.

This is despite India being the second-largest producer of fruit and vegetables globally, having produced 351.92 million tonnes of horticultural products in 2022-23, surpassing foodgrain production during the same year. But tonnes of it goes to waste. Around 15 per cent of fruit and vegetables are lost after harvesting. Climate change-induced extreme heat may worsen the situation in the coming years. As things stand, improving infrastructure can help reduce wastage. Cold-chain storage and refrigeration facilities remain inadequate in the country, resulting in spoilage across the supply chain. A temperature-controlled supply chain contributes significantly to preserving perishable goods and ensuring that food reaches consumers in optimal condition. Notably, a large proportion of India's current cold chain storage capacity — of around 39 million tonnes — remains unutilised. The available cold-storage units also have a skewed geographical distribution. For instance, most cold-storage facilities are concentrated in states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Punjab, and Andhra Pradesh, while Bihar and Madhya Pradesh have insufficient numbers of them. Further, most cold-storage facilities are designed to store a single commodity at a time. This calls for boosting multi-storage cold chain capacity in the country.

Since most farmers in India are poor with small and fragmented land-holdings and earn little profits from cultivation, investing in storage infrastructure at the decentralised level is not feasible. While over 92 per cent of cold-storage units are owned and operated by the private sector, there is scope for government intervention in addressing shortfalls in storage infrastructure. Although a subsidy of 35-50 per cent is provided to set up storage facilities, including pack-houses, the costs are still high. Other problems including the distance between farms and wholesale markets or mandis, and poor road infrastructure add to the bottlenecks in the supply chain, leading to spoilage during transit. Almost 30 per cent of India's road network is still unpaved, adding to the distance and time taken for the agricultural produce to reach the mandis, which pulls down the farmgate prices.

Much of the food wastage can be reduced through the use of technology. Increasing agricultural mechanisation, adopting precision farming practices, and developing a climate-resilient agri-food system are the key to mitigating the losses from spoilage in the country. However, improved capacity in areas like storage and road network infrastructure, and reducing distance between farms and mandis must remain a policy priority. Improving supply chains will help address price volatility, benefitting both producers and consumers.

## Pakistan abandoned

Hard economic decisions will help its future

A recent visit to Pakistan by a mission from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) left without staff-level agreement on a new package for the troubled economy. Prior briefing from the multilateral agency had stressed the downside risks to the local economy. The IMF staff said that discussion would continue virtually to finalise the financial support considered necessary. Yet there is no question that the deadline that the government in Islamabad had set for additional financing — early July — is approaching without any apparent consensus. The IMF, it appears, is playing hardball with Pakistan. The sums involved are substantial: Pakistan may request as much as \$6 billion, alongside additional financing from the IMF-administered Resilience and Sustainability Trust.

The stumbling block for Pakistan is clearly a general disbelief that the government will be able to achieve the political consensus necessary for deep reform. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has been quite clearly apprised of the urgency of such change. In some recent statements he has gone as far as to directly compare Pakistan to Bangladesh's success, noting that he felt "ashamed" when he considered the comparison. Yet Mr Sharif's authority is circumscribed. Any civilian leader of Pakistan must of course contend with the fact that the military has the final say on most policy issues. But this government was only just returned to office after an election of less than complete credibility. The supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who remains in jail, are likely to protest any changes meant to put the economy on a firmer footing. General discontent with inflation and stagnant living standards is visible — there have been violent protests in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir recently that left one policeman dead. Inflation has slowed somewhat but remained above 17 per cent in April 2024.

The fact that, even faced with these problems, Pakistan has struggled to get multilateral assistance is a signifier of the degree to which the West has lost interest in the country after the United States' ill-advised withdrawal from Afghanistan early in President Joe Biden's term of office. Pakistan has been forced to turn to its traditional patrons in the Gulf and China for assistance — though the latter has also failed to open its purse strings. Whether this is wise on the part of the West is open to question. An unstable Pakistan is, as decades of experience have shown, a breeding ground for destabilising forces. Once India's own general elections are over, New Delhi will have to re-evaluate its approach to Pakistan, and consider whether the resumption of trade is in the national interest. But Pakistan's fiscal stability is the most urgent requirement, and that will require buy-in from the West and the IMF. Given the extraordinary measures that the Fund has approved in the past for European countries like Greece and Ukraine, its failure to do so in Pakistan's case will only underline the criticism of the Bretton Woods institutions that they serve broader Western geopolitical aims. This criticism can only be answered by a more cooperative approach from the IMF. However, the government in Islamabad will have to push structural reform. Pakistan must realise that it has lost the strategic advantage in geopolitics and its future depends on hard economic decisions.

## Ideas of India



### BOOK REVIEW

HILAL AHMED

This book makes a serious attempt to trace the nature of political-economic changes that have been introduced by the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party-National Democratic (BJP-NDA) alliance in the last 10 years. The author identifies the "idea of India" as a vantage point to offer a methodically organised, factually substantiated and deeply engaging narrative. Divided in 12 chapters, the book makes three persuasive sets of findings.

First, the post-2014 regime has converted the "rule of law" into what the author calls "rule by law". This crucial transformation is explored analytically

to discuss the institutional failure of the legislature and the judiciary. The author stridently argues that the autonomy of institutions is intentionally disregarded to establish and consolidate political dominance.

The second set of claims revolves around the idea of governance. The book underlines a crucial difference between the stated principles of public policy and their actual political manifestations. That has been the reason much-publicised policy statements — "*Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas*", "Minimum Government-Maximum Governance", and "Cooperative Federalism" — turn out to be politically meaningless. The book argues that these claims function merely as populist media-friendly slogans to represent an inclusive, democratic image of the regime.

The third set of findings make this book very valuable. The author devotes three long chapters to understand the changing structural dynamics of the contemporary Indian economy. These chapters show how the recent economic changes have affected the lives of the most poor and marginalised

communities in the last 10 years. These data-driven chapters offer us an insightful explanation to make sense of the emerging class-based economic fault lines.

This multifaceted factual assessment leads us to the main argument the book makes. The author asserts that the present regime has failed to uphold the political values that have been nurtured in the past seven decades. At the same time, the standard procedures of governance have been completely destabilised for evolving a highly centralised form of politics. In the final chapter of the book, a set of "ready-to-use solutions" are proposed to make the arguments more constructive and practically usable.

The author claims that policy-making should not follow the usual top-down arbitrary model. Instead, the formation of policy must include all stakeholders, especially professionals and experts. This proposal is expanded to make a few achievable recommendations such as encouraging respect for dissent and criticism, wider decentralisation of polity and administration, reassessment of a few controversial economic policies, collection of relevant data and its wider public dissemination for informed national discussions, introduction of a formal

employment policy, investment in human capital, democratic accountability of the bureaucracy, proactive judiciary and media, and an empowered citizenry.

This serious study encourages us to ask a few critical questions. First, is it appropriate to describe the Modi regime simply as a marked departure from the accepted norms of politics? Or is it an outcome of an ever-evolving crisis? Second, how to make sense of the successful blending of two interrelated political trajectories — neo-liberalism and radical Hindutva? Finally, what have been the reasons for the popularity and acceptability of the regime? What has made Hindutva the dominant narrative of politics in the past 10 years?

The book gives us the impression that the Modi regime deviates significantly from constitutional norms and the given imaginations of India as a nation. This impression is not entirely incorrect. It is true that the post-2014 Indian state has questioned the Nehruvian consensus in a

significant way. However, this claim needs to be further historicised.

The Nehruvian consensus has two inseparable elements — state intervention in the economic sphere for achieving what Nehru himself called the socialist pattern of society and an active politics of secularism and inclusion for the protection of minorities and other deprived sections of society. It is worth noting that the Congress-led Indian political class began to separate these two elements from each other in the early 1990s. Two significant events — the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the liberalisation of the Indian economy — helped the political class redefine the Nehruvian consensus in a

restricted manner. Nehru's all-inclusive economic vision was abandoned and he was eventually reduced to the value of secularism. The Congress regime under Narasimha Rao introduced a new sectoral approach to welfareism to address the needs of deprived sections while facilitating a market-driven economy at the same time.

The Modi regime, in a way, is an outcome of this process. It wants to get rid of the Nehruvian consensus without deviating from the post-1991 political consensus in favour of unrestricted liberalisation. This has not been a difficult task for the BJP. The entire political class, including the Congress, does not find the Nehruvian consensus electorally viable. This has helped the BJP establish its dominance. Although the author remains critical of the non-BJP parties, he does not envisage any direct political-intellectual connection between the Modi regime and its immediate predecessor. This analytical limitation also affects the flow of the main argument. The book does recognise the fact that welfare schemes have emerged as a powerful tool to garner popular support for the present regime, which openly adheres to neo-liberalism and Hindutva. Yet, there is no explanation of this specific form of state model.

These inconsistencies, however, should not be overstretched to underestimate the serious contribution of this thought-provoking exploration of the contemporary moment of our political life.

The reviewer is associate professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi

## FTA benefits elude India

The high import and low export trend is likely to continue with free-trade agreements under negotiation



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

A free-trade agreement (FTA) is a pact between countries to make trade easier by reducing tariffs and other barriers on imports from each other. Globally, over 350 FTAs are currently in force.

Over the past four years, India has signed FTAs with Mauritius, the UAE, Australia, and the European Free Trade Association, or EFTA, countries (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein). Agreements with the UK and Oman are nearly finalised.

India has a total of 14 trade agreements with 25 countries and is negotiating new deals with over 50 countries, including the European Union (EU) and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Additionally, India has six smaller trade agreements with 26 other countries. Soon, India will have FTAs with all major economies except China. However, India and China do have limited tariff concessions on about 25 per cent of tariff lines under the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement.

From financial year (FY) 2019 to FY2024, India's exports to its 21 FTA partners grew by 14.48 per cent, from \$107.20 billion to \$122.72 billion. Imports increased by 37.97 per cent, from \$136.20 billion to \$187.92 billion. These FTA partners include six South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) countries (including Sri Lanka), 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) countries, and Japan, South Korea, the UAE, Mauritius, and Australia.

To understand how FTAs have performed and whether they benefit India, we analysed the performance of India's FTAs with Asean, South Korea, and Japan. Signed in 2010-11, these agreements are considered the most critical by Indian industry. We did not study FTAs with Mauritius, the UAE, Australia, and EFTA as these agreements are less than five years old and the tariff reduction process for most products is ongoing. In the absence of specific preferential trade data, we included all trade from an FTA partner, even though some of it may not have used FTA concessions.

Our analysis of India's FTAs with Asean, South Korea, and Japan reveals two trends. First, India's

merchandise trade deficit with these partners increased significantly more than its global trade deficit. Specifically, trade deficits grew by 302.9 per cent with Asean, 164.1 per cent with South Korea, and 138.2 per cent with Japan, compared to an 81.2 per cent increase in the global deficit. This comparison is based on pre-FTA (2007-09) data and recent trade data (2020-22). The trend continued in 2023.

Second, India's exports to these FTA partners have increased at a lower rate than its imports. For instance, with Asean, exports grew by 123.9 per cent and imports by 175.7 per cent; with Japan, exports grew by 56.4 per cent and imports by 98.5 per cent; and with South Korea, exports increased by 89.1 per cent and imports by 127.3 per cent.

India's high tariffs (most-favoured nation or MFN tariffs) and the low tariffs in partner countries are key reasons for its low exports and high imports with these partners. MFN tariffs are the regular tariffs a country charges on imports, often eliminated for partner countries under FTAs.

Many Indian firms avoid using FTAs because the compliance costs outweigh the benefits as partner countries already have low or zero MFN tariffs. The average MFN tariffs on Indian products in partner countries are very low: Singapore (0 per cent), Japan (2.4 per cent), Malaysia (3.5 per cent), Mauritius (1.1 per cent), the UAE (3.5 per cent), and Australia (2.6 per cent). This limits the benefits of FTAs for Indian exporters. In contrast, India's average MFN tariff is high at 18.1 per cent, so eliminating these tariffs under an FTA gives partner country exporters a significant price advantage.

This pattern continues with India's new FTA partners. Also, a substantial share of imports into these countries is already at zero MFN duties: Canada (70.8 per cent), Switzerland (61 per cent), USA (58.7 per cent), UK (52 per cent), and EU (51.8 per cent). In contrast, only 6.1 per cent of India's global imports are at zero MFN duty. Given these factors, India may not see a significant export increase, while partner coun-



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

## BharatCompute for AI ascendancy

Artificial Intelligence (AI) capability rests on four key pillars: Algorithms, data, talent, and AI compute, with AI compute often considered the most crucial. Graphical processing units (GPUs) have become the standard measure of AI compute, spurring a global race to build massive GPU capacities.

In this context, the government's March decision to deploy over 10,000 GPUs as part of the India AI Mission is a significant step forward. This initiative, to be achieved through public-private partnership (PPP), reflects India's willingness to leverage the strengths of the private sector, a departure from past practices of confining such capital-intensive national capacities to the public sector.

India's AI compute capacities are modest compared to leaders like the US and China. The global GPU market was valued at \$23 billion in 2022, with an estimated 1 to 2 billion GPUs worldwide, predominantly in the US and China. Both countries have aggressively acquired GPUs over the past decade and have bigger plans to advance their AI compute capabilities. The US launched the National AI Research Resource programme in January, while China aims to increase its aggregate compute power by over 50 per cent, including 10 exascale systems, by 2025. India cannot and does not need to mimic their strategy. Instead, it should adopt a smart fast-follower's approach, which I term BharatCompute.

Why is AI compute so important? In AI, "compute" refers to the computational power needed to perform complex operations, like training and running AI models. It is crucial for optimising deep learning models, which often have millions or billions of parameters involving large datasets requiring extensive computation. Additionally, compute power is needed for real-time inference, enabling predictions from new data.

The global demand for AI compute surged over the past decade, driven by the computational needs of the large language models (LLMs). However, as LLMs become widely available, this demand is sta-

bilising, shifting focus to models for image processing, gaming, multi-modal AI and such other models, which require less computational power. BharatCompute could prioritise developing foundational models in economic, social and strategic domains while leveraging existing open-source LLMs already developed. This approach promises significant dividends even with lower compute resources.

BharatCompute should also aim to leverage India's existing CPU or central processing unit-based compute capacities for AI advancements, with India's robust information technology (IT) industry and large user base providing substantial CPU-based compute power, compensating for its lack of GPUs. Despite CPUs being slower for AI tasks, leveraging this resource can enhance accessibility and reduce costs.

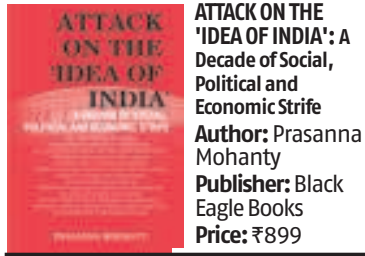
The BharatCompute initiative advocates for government-established AI compute infrastructure to be accessible to those unable to afford market rates. Currently, AI compute costs range from \$1 to \$4 per GPU hour, alongside additional expenses for memory and IT infrastructure. Government subsidies could encourage more startups to enter the AI field with the growth of AI startups serving as a metric for the initiative's success. The government could also prioritise developing foundational models in domains like agriculture, education, healthcare, and water, among others, tailored to Indian requirements.

BharatCompute should support India's sovereign AI needs, especially in strategic and security domains. Currently, the AI compute market relies heavily on cloud infrastructure, controlled by US and Chinese hyperscalers. A study shows that US-based Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud command about 70 per cent of the global public cloud market, while Chinese tech giants Alibaba, Huawei, and Tencent control much of the rest. Public clouds pose privacy and security concerns. To ensure security and sovereignty, BharatCompute should require that the compute infrastructure be physically located



### OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR



**ATTACK ON THE 'IDEA OF INDIA': A Decade of Social, Political and Economic Strife**  
**Author:** Prasanna Mohanty  
**Publisher:** Black Eagle Books  
**Price:** ₹899

restricted manner. Nehru's all-inclusive economic vision was abandoned and he was eventually reduced to the value of secularism. The Congress regime under Narasimha Rao introduced a new sectoral approach to welfareism to address the needs of deprived sections while facilitating a market-driven economy at the same time.





OPINION

The  
Hindustan Times  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

A crowded party scene in Punjab

Multi-cornered contests reflect the unsettled nature of politics in this border state

The electoral battle in Punjab, which heads to polling booths on Saturday, is distinct from contests elsewhere for multiple reasons. Though it has only 13 seats, the contest here has turned four-cornered from being a bipolar battle since the formation of the present Punjab state in 1966. The outcomes will have a bearing on the future course of the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Since the arrival of the AAP on the scene, the SAD has lost its pole position in the Sikh-majority state. The second oldest party in the country after the Congress, the SAD, founded as a *panthic* party, seems to have lost its links to the grassroots and is battling for relevance. The Congress, having lost the assembly elections badly in 2022 and then a large chunk of its senior leadership to the BJP, is seeking to regain lost ground: Punjab gave the Congress the largest number of MPs (8) after Kerala in the 2019 general elections.

The party’s chief rival is its Delhi ally, the AAP, which holds office in Chandigarh. The AAP won a landslide victory in the assembly polls in 2022 but is battling anti-incumbency. The party has yet to build sufficient organisational muscle and may be lacking a convincing narrative to push its case for Parliament. The BJP has credible leaders in the state but the embers of the 2020-21 farmer protests continue to glow, complicating the party’s pursuit to expand its base beyond its traditional Hindu vote. The general elections are likely to deepen the political churn in the state and lead to a reconfiguration of power relations.

The unsettled nature of the Punjab polity is a reflection of the failure of its political leaders to reconcile the contradictions in the political economy. The Congress and SAD are wedded to the paradigm of the 1960s and ’70s, which saw the state grow rich on the back of the Green Revolution. Gains from agriculture have plateaued while the social and economic crises that engulfed the state following the rise of terrorism continue to cripple the state’s political economy. Large-scale migration from the state is evidence of the political stasis. The presence of radical elements in the fray — the trust in the ballot is welcome, though — suggests that some old grievances continue to persist even though Khalistani separatism is mostly an obsession of the diaspora.

The campaign in Punjab, unfortunately, has only revealed the limitations of the political mainstream in addressing the multiple crises confronting the state. June 4 is unlikely to be a closure for the state’s restive politics.

Israel’s challenge to rules-based order

The Israeli airstrike that killed 45 people at a tent camp in a designated safe zone at Rafah in southern Gaza is yet another example of how little Tel Aviv cares for the global rules-based order and bodies such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC). The action will only sharpen divisions between Israel and European States that have either called for an end to the targeting of civilians in the Gaza Strip or have acted to formally recognise a Palestinian State. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may well describe the deadly assault on displaced Palestinians as a “tragic mishap” but such excuses mean very little, given the impunity with which the Israeli military has targeted hospitals, UN staff, and international aid workers in its relentless campaign in Gaza. Israeli offers to investigate such incidents through its own authorities mean those responsible will receive little more than a slap on the wrist.

The attack came just two days after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) directed Israel to end its offensive in Rafah. That the strike was carried out in a region where 85% of the population of Gaza has taken shelter illustrates how little the Israeli leadership cares for Palestinian lives. Tel Aviv’s dismissal of global criticism of its actions as “anti-Semitism” will no longer wash, and neither will Netanyahu’s assertions about continuing his war, especially when Israeli citizens are calling for a truce. Israel’s actions that undermine bodies such as the ICC and ICJ could lead to greater radicalisation across West Asia at a time when it is already grappling with severe security challenges. The time has come for Netanyahu to end this unjust and unjustifiable war.

What June 4 will tell us about India

The verdict will reveal what voters think of Narendra Modi, the depth of a Hindu political identity, and the nature of economic sentiment

On June 4, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) may win over 303 seats. It may win between 272 and 303 seats. Or it may dip below the majority mark. No one knows. But examine any of those outcomes with an eye on what Indian voters are telling us about leadership, identity and economy.

Here is an obvious first hypothesis about the past decade. Narendra Modi has redefined politics. Every election is a balance of the local and national, but Modi’s popularity was enough to offset the disadvantages that BJP candidates confronted in India’s most populous parts in 2014 and 2019. Since then, Modi has continued to connect the national and local through last-mile delivery of welfare schemes and deepened the sense of an “imagined community” through the relentless projection of a national message. Voters too have prioritised who runs the Union government in Delhi, the executive function, over who represents their particular constituency in Delhi, the legislative function.

The 2024 verdict will answer the following questions. Does Modi still attract more voters to the BJP’s core base, both in areas where the party is dominant and in newer geographies,

or has his appeal peaked or even shrunk? Is Modi’s image adequate to offset local weaknesses that stem from either the nature of the BJP candidate or caste configuration or economic anxiety? Do voters want a single strong leader at the helm of the Indian State or do they wish to return to a more fragmented 1989-2014 type arrangement with stronger checks?

The second hypothesis is about an increasing sense of a Hindu religious-political identity. The BJP has consciously nurtured this. There is State support for the political assertion of Hindu religious identity. There is a conscious othering of Muslims through the aggregation and articulation of real, perceived and fabricated grievances. There is the construction of an inclusive Hindu identity by giving a sense of cultural and political representation to backward and Dalit sub-groups. There is the “correction” of perceived historical injustices, be it in Ayodhya or Kashmir or at Partition. And there is an electoral model to show Hindus that, if united, they can effectively make the Muslim vote irrelevant and Muslim representation negligible.

To challenge this politico-religious identity, the Congress — stung by the social depth of Hindutva across castes, the absence of resonance of the idea and politics of “secularism”, and crippled by the absence of support among Other Backward Classes (OBCs) — has promised a caste census, more reservations and proportionate representation of all caste groups in all spheres. This is a historic break. Jawaharlal

Nehru’s Congress conceived the nation not as a sum of caste groups, religions and ethnicities but as a bigger whole comprising individual citizens with rights. It also believed in gradualist change that balanced social interests rather than radical identity-based policy breaks. In both these respects, Rahul Gandhi has reoriented Nehru’s party towards the socialist stream of Indian politics — and fused it with a strong anti-capital strain borrowed from the Communist stream.

This explains why the 2024 campaign was fought on the basis of two industrial scale overstatements. To break the Hindu umbrella coalition, the Opposition framed the elections as an 85% versus 15% battle where the 15% were the “other” — upper castes represented by the BJP. It then falsely claimed that the BJP intended to scrap reservations for Dalits, OBCs and tribals. To sustain its own Hindu social coalition, the BJP framed the elections as an 85% versus 15% battle where the 15% were the “other” — Muslims represented by the INDIA bloc. It then resorted to the worst stereotypes and falsely alleged that the Congress intended to scrap reservations for marginalised Hindus and give it to Muslims and redistribute wealth to Muslims.

This verdict will answer a related set of questions. Has the idea of a unified Hindu political identity sustained and expanded geographically (including in the south) and deepened socially (among Dalits, tribals and backwards) and fused with a sense of national



Prashant Jha



To break the Hindu umbrella coalition, the Opposition framed the elections as an 85% versus 15% battle

Indian identity? Is the BJP able to still balance its older dominant caste base with newer backward and Dalit entrants, leverage contradictions among backwards, and place it all within a unified religious umbrella and frame it as opposed to Muslims? Or has the caste fault line within the Hindu identity returned as the fundamental marker of political choice, have identities disaggregated in political decision-making, and is the old “secular” politics of marrying some Hindu caste groups with Muslims into an electoral alliance working? Is the main political divide on the Hindu-Muslim axis or the upper caste-backward/Dalit axis or neither? To what extent will the verdict pressure parties into expanding the reservation architecture even further?

The third hypothesis is about political economy. Modi’s model relies on increasing manufacturing and investing in infrastructure; using digital public infrastructure to push private entrepreneurship; deepening financial markets; easing credit; formalising the economy; leveraging India’s strength in services; and creating a welfare net that includes cash, homes, water, food, electricity, cooking gas for the hundreds of millions left behind. Welfare has both created a class of beneficiaries and helped him win the support of

women voters across identities and regions, but it is clear that there is growing anger and distress over the lack of formal jobs. The Opposition has promised more welfare, including major cash transfers, public sector employment, a one-year apprenticeship plan, and critiqued the (alleged) crony capitalism and (real) increase in inequality in recent times.

This election will thus answer the following questions. Is the Modi economic-welfare model enough to satisfy enough Indians that the current regime has done its best and can be trusted to improve incomes and get them jobs in the future? Has welfare energised voters, particularly women, to stick to the status quo or are the political benefits of it saturated? Is there public anger against politics-capital networks? Has the post pandemic K-shaped recovery, the acute but unmet desire for organised sector employment of millions of young people, inflation, and the distress that the promise of more free ration represents, led to a desire for change?

Next week, voters will declare how they want to be led, how they want to be defined, and who they trust with their economic future. That’s the real story of 2024.

The views expressed are personal

Perils of promoting an anti-vaccination scare

Two recent controversies featuring Covid-19 vaccines extensively employed in India have lessons for scientific research and media reporting. The virus vector vaccine manufactured and marketed by AstraZeneca used the spike protein antigen of SARS CoV-2 virus to stimulate immune response and a chimpanzee adenovirus as the carrier to transport that antigen to human cells. After approval for human vaccination in 2020, the vaccine was extensively used in several countries, including India.

In 2021, reports emerged of some vaccine recipients in Europe experiencing severe clotting disorders in their blood vessels. This had a peculiar feature. In affected individuals, clotting occurred despite a drop in platelet counts (cells that clump together to trigger blood clots). It was initially labelled as Vaccine-induced Immune Thrombotic Thrombocytopenia (VITT). As other countries too started reporting similar complications in some recipients of this vaccine, the adverse event was renamed Thrombosis with Thrombocytopenia Syndrome (TTS). The complication was only noted with two virus vector vaccines (AstraZeneca; Johnson and Johnson) and not with other types of vaccines. The name was thus changed to avoid provoking public concern about all vaccines.

In 2021, this complication was widely discussed in scientific literature and global media. Questions about how much AstraZeneca knew about this from its own animal and human research, and to what extent concerns were shared with the general public, are now under judicial review in a court in the United Kingdom (UK) that is examining compensation claims. Recently, AstraZeneca admitted that evidence exists of this complication. While all who actually suffered such complications must be compensated, there is no cause for public anxiety among vaccine recipients who received their doses several months ago and did not experience such a complication soon after.

The mRNA vaccines too have had their share of “scare”, with myocarditis and pericarditis (inflammation of heart muscle and its covering layer) reported among some persons who received the vaccines. Young males were identified as a high-risk group. Both the virus vector vaccines and mRNA vaccines were specifically directed at the spike protein of the SARS CoV-2 virus.



K Srinath Reddy

Inactivated virus vaccines have been around much longer and widely used. Vaccines against influenza and Hepatitis A are among the classic examples. They have been generally well tolerated, with no serious complications. Indigenously developed Covaxin too is an inactivated virus vaccine. Here, the inactivated SRS CoV-2 virus was combined with a United States (US) supplied adjuvant Alhydroxyquim-II that stimulates cellular immunity. Because Covaxin presents an array of antigens from the whole virus, it can provide broadband immunity, even against variants that emerged with changed spike protein configurations as the pandemic advanced.

A recent study reported a long list of adverse events of special interest (AESIs), in 635 adolescents and 291 adults one year after vaccination with Covaxin. This created a media stir in India, coming close on the heels of AstraZeneca’s admission. The report on Covaxin raised further concerns, stoking anti-vaccine sentiments that

were hitherto at a low level in India.

The report on Covaxin is enfeebled by its weak scientific methodology. Information on a long list of possible adverse effects was obtained only through a telephonic survey. Based on those responses even diagnoses that required clinical or laboratory evidence were documented as present or absent. Such questioning is subject to recall bias (leading to inaccurate responses) and ascertainment bias (mode of questioning generating preferred responses). No corroborative clinical or laboratory evidence was presented, rendering diagnoses questionable.

More importantly, there was no control group of unvaccinated individuals for comparison. When respiratory infections are reported in the vaccinated group, we should also know about the concurrent prevalence of such infections among age and location-matched persons who were not vaccinated. When hypothyroidism is reported among vaccinated individuals, we need information on the prevalence of that disorder in a similar demographic group in the general population. Was hypothyroidism present in those who reported it even prior to their vaccination? When typhoid infections

reported by telephonically interviewed persons are linked to the Covid-19 vaccine, it strains credibility. Did researchers check the incidence of typhoid among unvaccinated persons in that area? The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has rightly drawn attention to such serious design and analytical flaws.

Post-marketing studies of vaccine-related adverse effects are important because clinical trials designed to assess efficacy do not provide large enough sample sizes of vaccine recipients to identify an array of potential adverse effects. Late complications are especially likely to be missed in short-term efficacy trials. Discovery of the link between virus vector vaccines and TTS attests to the value of such studies. However, methodologically weak studies can derail scientific research and harm public health. A spurious link between the measles vaccine and autism, suggested by a publication in *The Lancet*, created a worldwide anti-vaccine movement. The link was found to be non-existent and the flawed study was later retracted but the damage continues with measles outbreaks among families who refuse to vaccinate their children.

Four groups have a duty to report accurately and responsibly on issues of public health importance involving vaccines: Researchers who must design methodologically strong studies, conduct them with scrupulous adherence to protocols and report them with integrity; manufacturers who must truthfully disclose all findings of clinical trial research plus provide alerts from continuing post-marketing surveillance; the government’s science agencies which must provide vigilant oversight of research and public accountability; media which must gain sufficient familiarity with research methodology to distinguish between scientifically strong and frail studies. Unless all of them play their roles with conviction and commitment, a confused public will be sceptical of science and suspicious of public health interventions.

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The views expressed are personal

{ PEDRO SÁNCHEZ } SPANISH PRIME MINISTER

Recognition of the State of Palestine is not only a matter of historic justice, it is also an essential requirement if we are all to achieve peace.

After Spain and Norway formally recognised a Palestinian State

Elections with Dalits as the rallying point

The 2024 polls have centred on reservations and the rhetorical replacement of the Constitution. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress have clashed over the issues of constitutionality and representation in rallies, press conferences and meetings. The INDIA bloc is on a warpath with the BJP on the question of a constitutional safety net for the historically marginalised.

This is unique. Dalits have rarely been a rallying point of mainstream electoral discussion through the anti-caste lens and constitutional framework of representation as is happening now. They are often taken for granted as a community under either the broader Hindu religious category or within the Bahujan identity. Dalits are a strong aspirational community that holds constitutional promises very dearly for two reasons. First, the Constitution was drafted by BR Ambedkar as an egalitarian social document. Second, the Constitution protects and safeguards the interests of Dalits. So, they are deploying constitutional provisions to interrogate the unfinished tasks of political parties of the Left, Right and centrist streams.



Subhajit Naskar

The consternation on the issue of guaranteeing reservations has some serious connotations. For Dalits, it’s very important to note the identity of the person assuring them of constitutional promises. Invariably, most political parties have no strong assertive Dalit face to assure them, and therefore, political slugfests transform into mere rhetoric.

One of the important Dalit faces in independent India was Babu Jagjivan Ram for the Congress from 1937 to 1977. It took another 40 years for Mallikarjun Kharge to lead the party. The BJP credits itself with nominating Ram Nath Kovind as President. But it currently has no pan-Indian Dalit face.

The Telugu Desam Party has not nurtured anyone after GMC Balayogi, who was elevated as speaker of the Lok Sabha. Communist parties and prominent regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress (TMC), YSR Congress Party, Aam Aadmi Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Biju Janata Dal or the Janata Dal factions, also don’t have prominent Dalit figures leading them. Parties of the backward classes such as the Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal have never nurtured Dalits in leadership. As a result, when these parties talk about issues such as reservations, they lack credibility. The most glaring example of this is in West Bengal, dominated first by the Congress and Communists and now, the

TMC and BJP.

The politics of the state is overtly casteless but is organised around the socially dominant upper castes. The Communists, in their three decades of rule, never nurtured a major Dalit face. This is despite the presence of numerically large Dalit communities such as Rajbanshis, Namashudras, Poundras, Bagdi and Bauris. The TMC, too, merely fields Dalits from reserved constituencies as symbolic tokenism but doesn’t have a prominent pan-state leader from the community. The BJP’s rise in the political landscape of Bengal is also marked by Brahmin and upper caste faces, while addressing Dalits only as a broader Hindu vote bank.

On the other hand, independent Dalit political parties such as BR Ambedkar’s Republican Party of India, Kanshi Ram’s Bahujan Samaj Party, Ram Vilas Paswan’s Lok Janshakti Party and Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) exist in some tension with the mainstream. With the exception of the BSP, and to an extent the LJP, their foray into the political mainstream has been halting. But their political assertion has constantly been in support of constitutional remedies such as reservation, strengthening protection from caste-based atrocities and opposing tampering of the Constitution.

The lack of prominent Dalit leadership in mainstream political parties shows that Ambedkar’s warnings about the dangers of democracy remaining a top dressing are relevant. The spaces of national and state politics remain hostile and indifferent toward creating a Dalit leadership. Powerful party organisational ranks and cabinet portfolios in governments have historically been assigned to upper caste political leaders, and Dalit representation has remained tokenism. This is not only true of the central cabinet formations — where the social justice ministry is typically the home of the Dalit minister — but also of many state governments, irrespective of the party in power.

In 2024, the prominence that reservation and Constitution have acquired in the elections due to the years of Ambedkarite assertions will, hopefully, augur well not only for Dalits and organic Dalit leadership in mainstream political parties but also for the completion of the egalitarian project the country began when it adopted the Constitution.

Subhajit Naskar is assistant professor at the department of international relations, Jadavpur University. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



# Climate: Clean energy needs a carbon market

*A buyers' market is emerging in India for clean-energy assets. As private incentives to drive a transition away from fossil fuels remain weak, we should go well beyond green subsidies*

India is seeing a buyers' market emerge for clean-energy assets, as *Mint* reported, with a rise in businesses vying to attract investors for stakes big and small in renewable power projects. Among others, Siemens Energy is looking to sell the wind-turbines unit of its local subsidiary, Shell is scouting for investors in Sprng Energy and Renew is in talks to hawk some of its solar assets. An oversupply of climate-friendly generators of electricity suggests that deals will be struck at weaker valuations than sellers would like, with saleability likely to hinge on project viability, market conditions and the risk-return profile. Meanwhile, project tenders issued in 2023-24 indicate that greenfield investor interest in clean gigs ran at 69 gigawatts (GW) of capacity, well above the rate of 50GW per year needed for India to meet its 2030 goal of 500GW from renewables. Some companies are in the business of setting up and selling off generators to re-invest in new ones. Unless secondary demand for these assets picks up, however, we risk the financial equivalent of a power cut.

For all the buzz of action in our power sector, it still presents a dismal picture overall. The power ministry's website says that India has 418GW of installed capacity. About 237GW of it is housed in thermal plants that burn fossil fuels (mainly coal) to create steam and drive turbines, almost 47GW is from watermills in dams, and nearly 110GW of the total is attributed to wind-mills and solar panels. Yet, as seen in recent years, the Centre begins to huff and puff over coal supplies to prevent power cuts as soon as peak demand reaches the level of our thermal capacity. Last summer, demand peaked at an estimated 221GW. This year, it may exceed 240GW. Coal wagons doing extra runs bear the

air of a seasonal routine. In spite of a big policy push for emission-free power and related gains in renewable capacity, the power we use today broadly remains the same. Our decarbonized facilities are either off-grid or unable to plug supply gaps to meet overall demand for other reasons. What keeps supply and demand apart in this key infra sector needs an updated study, but state-run distributors that don't charge users enough to profitably pay power suppliers are part of a statist legacy. Reform attempts so far have failed to empower price signals, power handouts retain their role as political freebies, and we're stuck with a creaky grid-work that can hardly pay for itself, let alone respond to an online cry for electricity free of snap-offs. Since reliable supply is what users need, solar and wind sources have a particular drawback. The sun and wind do not shine and blow at anyone's command. So, barring captive use, the energy they generate needs to be stored for this supply to be effective. Storage is very costly, and while batteries can get cheaper, renewable generators can't beat carbon-heavy plants on affordability.

As an emerging economy with rising low-end demand, India doesn't yet plan to quit coal-fired power. Relative costs explain why. This is also why private players need the lure of subsidy support—and state purchase mandates, etc—to invest in clean energy. Clearly, to meet climate goals, the state has no option but to play a big role. While subsidies can be stepped up to fund a clean-up, the Centre may also need to play the prime mover (as a direct investor). For market forces to help, though, we'll also need a parallel carbon market to incentivize an overall tilt away from emissions. Carbon pricing could close the cost gap, draw private money into clean power and give our climate plan the boost it needs.

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

# The rise of quick commerce has left us with a bagful of questions

*We should study the impact of its success on the retail sector's evolution as well as broader economy*



**VIVEK KAUL**  
is the author of 'Bad Money'.

The stock price of Zomato has rallied big time in the last one year. As of Friday, 24 May, it had gone up 184% since 24 May 2023, though it must be said that the closing price as of Friday was more than 9% lower than its all-time high of ₹201.4 on 10 May. The recent fall notwithstanding, a major reason for the rise lies in the very fast growth of the company's quick commerce business, which delivers vegetables, groceries and other products—from lipsticks and pen drives to floral bouquets and branded *kurtas*—in a matter of minutes.

In 2023-24, the adjusted revenue of the company's quick commerce business grew by 186% to ₹2,302 crore. In comparison, the adjusted revenue of the company's mainstay food-delivery business grew by a significantly lower 27% to ₹7,792 crore.

Swiggy and Zepto are the other major players in the field of quick commerce. Swiggy recently filed for an initial public offering. Experts and analysts believe that the company's success as a listed entity will depend on how well its quick commerce business does. Further, a *Mint* Long Story published on 22 May points out that the e-commerce major Flipkart "after failing in 2015 and 2020... is attempting a quick commerce venture yet again".

This rise of quick commerce raises a few interesting points. First, economics

is all about second-order effects. So, will the rise of quick commerce lead to expansion of India's economic output, or will it simply take away business from traditional players that were servicing this demand? Or will it be a bit of both? How will it impact street-corner *kirana* stores and supermarkets?

This point isn't just important in the context of quick commerce companies, but applies to e-commerce as a whole too. In their book, *Breaking the Mould: Reimagining India's Economic Future*, Raghuram G. Rajan and Rohit Lamba, mention that Lenskart, which is in the spectacles business, sells 50,000 frames a day. How is this impacting India's 50,000 eyewear shops. Is Lenskart taking away business from traditional eyewear shops?

Another interesting example here is that of India's increasing ghost malls. A recent *Reuters* report points out that smaller malls are increasingly turning into ghost malls as customers gravitate towards bigger malls and shop online. Hence, as quick commerce companies grow bigger, whether they will end up expanding India's broader economic output is an important question in need of more thought and research.

Typically, a technological innovation leads to the destruction of existing economic activities and jobs as well as the creation of new ones, although those who get hurt by it do not necessarily benefit from the new opportunities thrown up. As Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson write in *Power and Progress*: "Technology doesn't have a preordained direction, and nothing about it is inevitable."

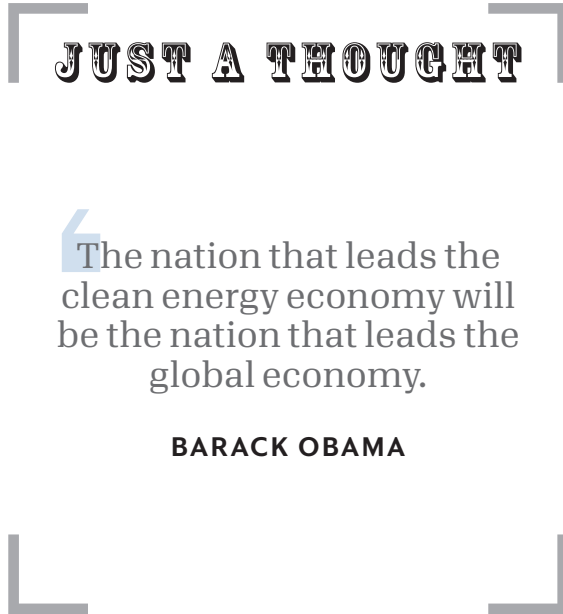
Second, will quick commerce businesses reach a point where they start resembling large e-commerce firms like Amazon and Flipkart? As the letter accompanying Zomato's financial results for the period January to March pointed out: "We will be adding more use cases," meaning the platform will sell a greater variety of products. Quick commerce companies are already deliv-

ering non-grocery products like electronic gadgets, lipsticks, toys and even gold and silver coins. Of course, this expansion will need continued innovation at the supply-chain level to manage the higher inventory that selling more products necessitates. On the flip side, nothing stops larger general e-commerce companies from making bigger bets on quick commerce, as Flipkart plans, making success tougher for everyone.

Third, will quick commerce turn out to be a pan-India phenomenon, or will it be limited to our bigger cities as it currently is? As the Zomato letter referred to earlier pointed out: "While we have a presence in 26 cities, the focus from an expansion standpoint is the top eight cities in India." This is where the money is, and hence, in a way, it's low-hanging fruit for quick commerce companies. Nonetheless, as the country's digital penetration keeps increasing, there is enough reason to believe that these companies will focus on non-metros as well and that will mean more pressure on traditional *kirana* stores.

Fourth, it will be interesting to see how the relationship of quick commerce companies evolves with other companies, like those in the fast moving consumer goods sector or even those selling electronic products. Will the quick commerce businesses launch their own private labels, like large general e-commerce companies have? And will that then lead to quick commerce companies limiting the presence of products made by other companies on their platforms?

Of course, we are getting into the realm of speculation here, but it is worth remembering something that Kaushik Basu writes in *Reason To Be Happy*: "In traditional economics, buyers and sellers were brought together by the invisible hand of the market... With the arrival of the digital platform, the [invisible hand] is no longer imaginary but an actual corporation, with an eye on little other than its own profit."



GUEST VIEW

# Digital tools must be used as shields and not weapons

ARVIND GUPTA & AAKASH GUGLANI



are, respectively, head and policy manager, Digital India Foundation.

As India's democracy nears the end of the world's largest electoral exercise, it is evident that digital technologies have changed the whole landscape of Indian policymaking, reshaping governance, citizen engagement, political campaigning and elections. This transformation has not only streamlined bureaucratic processes, but also brought services closer to the people, fostering financial inclusion and digital empowerment. Ministries and government departments have embraced digital tools to raise transparency, efficiency and accountability. Performance dashboards, social media handles and grievance redressal mechanisms like Twitter Seva have become standard features of governance, allowing citizens to interact directly with the government and monitor its performance.

The success of tech-led governance is visible in various innovative schemes and digital platforms. Jan Dhan Yojana accounts have enabled financial inclusion by giving over 500 million unbanked citizens access to

banking services through electronic KYC. Digilocker has simplified document management for citizens and reduced reliance on physical copies. UPI has transformed digital payments, making transactions easier and faster. Fastag has eased congestion at toll plazas and improved traffic flows. The GSTN has modernized India's taxation system. The DBT system ensures the targeted delivery of subsidies and benefits directly into the bank accounts of beneficiaries, minimizing leakages and corruption. Jeevan Pramaan, a biometric-enabled digital life certificate, has simplified pension disbursement for retired government employees.

MyGov has emerged as a key platform for the government to reach out to citizens far and wide with information. It has facilitated direct interaction between citizens and policymakers, allowing feedback, suggestions and participation in policy and law formulation. Leveraging AI tools and even memes, such platforms have engaged citizens in the policymaking process, making governance more responsive to people's needs.

India's election machinery has also been upgraded. Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machines to go with Electronic Voting Machines marked a significant development for free-and-fair elections in India.

The rise of social media has had its own impact. During the 2014 elections, India had over 243 million internet users. In 2019, we had over 450 million, a large portion of whom were active on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, making these political battlegrounds. Over the past decade, social media has come to be dominated by memes, AI-generated content and synthetic videos. While earlier elections saw mostly text-based content, hashtags and image-based campaigns, today's 839 million internet users in India are confronted with memes, deepfakes and AI-generated content.

Memes have become a particularly powerful tool for political communication, conveying complex messages in an easily digestible format. AI-generated content, including deepfake videos, has further blurred the line between reality and fiction. These technologies are being leveraged to create campaign narratives and influence voter perceptions. Even the Election Commission of India (EC) has

used memes to reach out to young voters.

While technology has empowered political campaigns, it has also amplified the spread of misinformation and deepfakes. In previous elections, misinformation was seen to spread rapidly through WhatsApp and other messaging platforms. However, in 2024, the use of AI has combined with social media algorithms to make misinformation more challenging to combat.

Deepfake videos, in particular, pose a significant threat to election integrity. AI-generated videos can manipulate speeches, alter facial expressions and create entirely fabricated scenarios, making it difficult for viewers to discern truth from falsehood. Political parties and malicious actors exploit deepfakes to discredit opponents and manipulate public opinion. Other than politicians, sportspersons and film actors have also become victims of deepfakes made with *mala fide* intent.

Recently, in Tamil Nadu, political parties used deepfake videos of deceased leaders to

solicit votes from voters. On the other hand, some candidates have willingly circulated deepfake videos with special voice-overs to reach multi-lingual constituents and thus optimize their use of limited resources for campaigning.

Both the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) and the EC have taken proactive measures to mitigate these risks and secure India's elections. MeitY issued guidelines under its IT Rules to social media intermediaries that are aimed at preventing users from posting harmful or prohibited content. The EC has leveraged technology to combat the same threats. To uphold the integrity of Indian elections, the poll panel deployed educational campaigns, AI algorithms and partnerships with social media platforms.

Clearly, digital technologies have become an integral part of Indian policymaking in a variety of ways, and this digital adoption is shaping governance, citizen engagement and electoral processes. While various initiatives have delivered numerous benefits to people, including efficiency, empowerment and inclusivity, we also face steep digital challenges. As we move ahead, we must aim to ensure that digital tools work as shields rather than weapons.









The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

UP AND DOWN

In election season, stock market volatility has risen. Stretched valuations in certain segments touch off concerns

OVER THE PAST few weeks, the Indian stock markets have witnessed high volatility. The Nifty VIX, a fear gauge, has risen sharply since the end of April. On Tuesday, the VIX rose further, touching 24.2. Some have attributed the increase in volatility to the elections. Leaders of the ruling dispensation have sought to allay concerns. In a recent interview, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the stock market will hit new highs on June 4. Prior to that, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had reportedly attempted to assure investors.

The rise in volatility comes in the midst of a rally which has also fuelled concerns over valuation. On Monday, during trading, the benchmark stock indices surged to record highs, with the Sensex touching 76,009, and the Nifty climbing to 23,110. The combined market capitalisation of all NSE listed companies had recently hit the \$5 trillion mark. The country's market cap to GDP ratio has also inched upwards. Retail investors have continued to exude optimism. The number of individuals investing both directly and indirectly, as seen in the number of new demat accounts and mutual fund folios, has continued to rise. The contribution through the systematic investment plan route is also growing. But, alongside, there are worries over stretched valuations, especially in the small and mid cap segment — some stocks are trading at a price to earnings ratio that is difficult to justify. There are also concerns over the heightened retail participation in the futures and options segment. And while domestic investors continue to be exuberant, foreign investors have been more circumspect. In March, just before voting for the national elections commenced, net investments by foreign portfolio investors stood at \$4.24 billion. But, thereafter, the trend changed — in April, net investments by FPIs were -\$1,036 billion, while in May (upto the 28th) they were -\$2,667 billion.

In the near term there are several possible triggers for the markets. At the end of this week, the National Statistical Office will release the GDP data for the fourth quarter, which will provide a better understanding of the economy's growth momentum. A few days after that, the results of the national elections will be declared, which will point to the policy tilt of the next government at the Centre. Later in that week, the RBI's monetary policy committee will meet to decide on whether or not to maintain the status quo on interest rates, followed by the tabling of the Union budget in Parliament that will outline the next government's policy agenda. Going ahead, these will determine the market's trajectory.

THE HEAT STRESS

City-specific management plans should prioritise green spaces and water bodies and target all heat generators

EVER AS LARGE parts of the country swelter in a brutally hot summer, with prolonged heat waves, a recently published report shows that rising temperatures is not the sole contributing factor to the heat stress being experienced in urban India. According to a report by the Centre for Science and Environment, the extreme discomfort of the summer months in Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Hyderabad over the last two decades is caused by a combination of air temperature, land surface temperature and relative humidity, as well as a rapid increase in built-up areas and concretisation. It poses a grave risk to lives, especially among vulnerable groups like the elderly, babies, pregnant women, those who live in slums and work outdoors.

This is the third straight year of severe heat waves in India, which have been far longer — over 10 days-long — this time than the usual four to eight days. Thanks to climate change, temperatures have shot up, as has humidity. But, as the CSE report points out, the effect of this — the moisture in the air keeps sweat from evaporating fast enough, making it seem even hotter than it actually is — is compounded by other factors, including changes in land use and the growing urban sprawl. This has resulted in the "urban heat island effect": The trapping of heat due to a dense concentration of buildings, paved roads and other surfaces made of materials like concrete, glass and steel, results in higher temperatures in city centres than in the outlying areas. One alarming consequence of this is that summer nights now offer little respite from the searing heat of the day, with cities across climatic zones not cooling down at the rate they once did. This is a serious cause for concern as the heat stress continues to build, increasing the risk of heat-related illnesses and even death.

All these factors would need to be taken into consideration for relief measures to be effective. While more than 20 states have worked with the NDMA to create heat action plans (HAP), most remain on paper. They are hampered by a lack of funding, granularity and a sustainable vision for transformation. There is a growing consensus among experts that city-specific management plans, which take into account local factors, are a far more effective response to heat waves. Such plans should prioritise green spaces and water bodies and target all heat generators, including vehicles, industries and concrete surfaces — an example is Ahmedabad's Cool Roofs programme, which offers an affordable solution for the urban heat island effect. Along with emergency steps to be implemented during a heat event, long-term planning can keep cities from heating up excessively and save lives.

LOG OUT, BREATHE IN

In a world obsessed with being busy, a competition in South Korea shows why it is important to do nothing

IT IS SAID that the early bird snags the worm. But what if the bird wants to take its time over it? Go about its business at leisure, rather than rush into it? Woopsyang, a South Korean artist, came up with the idea of a "space-out competition" in which participants (or performance artistes, if you will), have one simple task: Sit or lie around. Do nothing. Don't fall asleep. The contestant with the most stable heart rate wins. Conducted in the centre of bustling cities, the idea is to prioritise leisure as the world rushes and races on.

By all accounts, stillness or doing-nothing is a scarce resource today. Yet, the productivity hustle is a modern enterprise. According to a *Financial Times* report, for over 95 per cent of a 3,00,000-year existence, human beings led more leisurely lives than they do today. The acceleration of automation, some hoped, would bring back the lost art of doing little. In 2023, for instance, Bill Gates had said that if done right, manual labour could be minimised and leisure could play a bigger role in lives. Yet, in a world ruled more and more by gig economies, wars that disrupt and technology that complicates lives even as it eases them, there seems to be little respite from the stranglehold of busy-ness.

Apart from the evident linkages between adequate leisure and better mental health, the idea of spacing out in a world obsessed with productivity can become a statement, a revolution even. After all, there must be more to it than a relentless pursuit of targets to achieve, sales figures to better and markets to conquer. Why not lay down the tools and exit the workshop. And watch the birds trill.



TANUSHREE GOYAL

"YEH DARWAZE TAK *seemti hain, aur main kitchen tak jaati hun*" ("He stops at the door, I can go up to the kitchen"), remarked a BJP Mahila Morcha *adhyaksh*, as we sat down to discuss her constituency's booth management and door-to-door strategy back in 2013. This sentiment, highlighting the unique advantage women party workers have in reaching women voters, is one I have heard countless times in conversations with women workers from various political parties. Since 2012, I have engaged with thousands of party workers and observed numerous elections and campaigns nationwide.

Unlike most election observers and political scientists, who mostly talk to men, I have spoken with both men and women party workers. Each election cycle has revealed an impressive pattern: Women party workers are building stronger, more granularly developed party organisations that often extend from the district level down to the level of the booth. This trend is evident not just in the BJP, but across various parties, especially those successful in winning panchayat and municipal elections. What has captured my imagination is not merely the increasing turnout of women voters or the proliferation of pro-women welfare schemes. It is the rise of ordinary party women, the unsung backstage actors, who play a crucial role in shaping the political landscape. Their contributions, often overlooked, are integral to the success and dynamism of India's participatory democracy.

Indian democracy has witnessed a remarkable phenomenon: Women's electoral turnout has not only matched but surpassed that of men. Despite a slight dip in turnout in this election, the overarching trend remains strong. This surge in electoral participation coincides with the endlessly growing list of distributive promises, including the recent passing of the women's reservation bill in Parliament. Why are parties courting women? The rise of grassroots women party workers, or "party women" is driving this new era of women voter-party linkages.

Academic research and political pundits have largely ignored or, worse, caricatured these women as a token presence. However, the significant participation of women at polling booths and as campaign workers, coupled with gains in welfare schemes and gen-

Their participation at polling booths and as campaign workers is forcing a larger reckoning

Over the last three decades, since the 73rd amendment, women have not only run in but also won panchayat and municipal elections. To stay electorally competitive and upwardly mobile, these ambitious women have strengthened local party organisations. This has ended the era when women's party wings were led exclusively by elites. A glance at any party's Mahila Morcha banners reveals this transformation. Today's women's wings include district heads, ward 'adhyakshas', booth-level managers, and 'panna pramukhs' — with significant variation within and between parties, time, and space. Women who contest elections rely on these loyal party workers, often more so than their male counterparts, as it is typically easier for women to claim credit for mobilising fellow women.

der reservation, has forced a reckoning. Traditional notions that Indian women voters lack agency or autonomy from family structures have been discredited. After all, why would parties promise welfare schemes to women if it were enough to speak to their husbands? Or why are women turning out in greater numbers and increasingly supporting the BJP? Turnout precedes electoral promises, indicating that women are not turning out because of these promises; rather, the promises are a response to their increased turnout and political engagement.

What does my research suggest? Over the last three decades, since the 73rd amendment, women have not only run in but also won panchayat and municipal elections. To stay electorally competitive and upwardly mobile, these ambitious women have strengthened local party organisations. This has ended the era when women's party wings were led exclusively by elites.

A glance at any party's Mahila Morcha banners reveals this transformation. Today's women's wings include district heads, ward *adhyakshas*, booth-level managers, and *panna pramukhs* — with significant variation within and between parties, time, and space. Women who contest elections rely on these loyal party workers, often more so than their male counterparts, as it is typically easier for women to claim credit for mobilising fellow women. Motorbike rallies organised by women party workers — one of the few women party events that make media headlines — exemplify how women claim credit and secure party tickets in the run-up to elections.

How does grassroots organising by ordinary women party workers explain the gender shift in India's politics? Consider voter turnout: India boasts some of the most robust door-to-door campaigns, with nearly 60 per cent of voters contacted by party workers each national election as measured in post-election surveys. Until 2009, men dominated campaign mobilisation, primarily reaching male voters. Since then, thanks to two decades of quota elections and effective grassroots organising, women campaign workers have increasingly taken on voter mobilisation roles. By entering households, they have reached both men and women more equally.

These efforts have revealed the untapped

potential of the women's vote, prompting parties to make targeted electoral offers to woo women voters. These distributive offers are a direct result of the labour of women's party workers. Beyond elections, women party workers organise countless events, ranging from planting drives to *dhamas* and *seva abhiyans*, mobilising women from a range of social groups such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Anganwadi workers for party activities, and keeping them engaged in politics between election cycles. Availability of administrative data on turnout offers clearer insights into election participation, however women's participation also transcends the polling booths. We are witnessing women's unprecedented involvement in protests, with the recent farmers' protests being a prime example.

What explains the rising BJP advantage among women voters? The BJP has benefited the most from increasingly vocal women voters, partly because its women's wing is the strongest, most granular, and active. BJP party women have played a major role in mobilising women as an electorate because the party offers them more opportunities to rise in the ranks and build careers, especially if they lack dynastic or wealth power. Other parties' inability to offer opportunities has hindered their ability to attract and select women candidates who can develop strong grassroots organisations. Tragically, no party offers real opportunities to women, but the BJP has fared relatively well. Additionally, the BJP offers a mix of religious ideology and patriotic narrative that helps Hindu women overcome social and family barriers to join the party.

In addition to counting heads and welfare, the act of gendered credit claiming will play an increasingly central role in shaping party-voter linkages in India, a trend that will deepen with the implementation of gender reservation in Parliament. Is the growing participation of women a force that strengthens India's democracy, or does it exacerbate its democratic decline? What is evident is that women's political agency is indispensable to India's democratic future.

*The writer is Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs at the Department of Politics and the School for Public and International Affairs at Princeton University*



P RAMAN

THIS WRITER COVERED Lok Sabha elections when they moved in "swings" and "waves". From the Indira wave to the Janata wave and back to "Indira *lao*" and Rajiv's "400 *par*". Election coverage in those days was not so complex. You talked to a few party leaders and informed persons in the constituency and you could rightly capture the mood. "Janata has upper hand in..." or "Odds even in..." — those were the cliché headlines. We did not bother about noisy news channels, social media, fake news and deep fakes. There were no paid "influencers". AI was confined to fiction.

The 18th Lok Sabha election is a game changer. Over 50 per cent of Maharashtra candidates and one-fourth in Punjab are turncoats. *The Indian Express* found that two dozen of the sixth list of BJP candidates were "lateral entrants". Clearly, the current elections have obliterated the defection stigma.

Sample the new style political diatribe from recent headlines — blunt, below-the-belt and rude: "Under them, even listening to Hanuman Chalisa will be a crime": PM; Modi is "like a poisonous snake": Kharge.

Election time is a great leveller. "Yaddya-charti shrestha..." (II.21). Bhagwad Gita says that people follow what great men do. Narendra Modi was the one who made roadshows a major campaign tool. They are less expensive and don't need much preparation. Now all others, including Rahul and Priyanka,

ELECTIONS THEN AND NOW

In the current Lok Sabha campaign, things not seen or heard before

have made roadshows an essential part of their itinerary. Way back in 2015, the BJP introduced an elaborate booth management system. Now most other parties follow it.

"Guarantee" is an entirely novel instrument crafted by Modi. It transcends government programmes and manifestos. Sensing its success, Congress and others have borrowed it and launched their own "guarantee cards", which the Election Commission has frowned upon. Kejriwal too has come up with his own 10 guarantees.

Four decades ago, Indira Gandhi's famed *rudraksh* and her hushed visits to Anandamayi Ma were topics of the capital's drawing room gossip. Now, religiosity is the hallmark of political discourse. Forget the PM acting as chief priest at the Ram temple inauguration or Kejriwal launching his poll campaign after a ceremonial *darshan* at Hanuman Mandir, even Rahul and Priyanka had to visit temples under the glare of publicity. These are signs of a great political compromise or sheer competitive communalism, unthinkable in our time.

Look at the PM's crusade against dynasty politics even though every regional party has "shehzadas" and "shahenshahs", and so does the Union government (think ministers Piyush Goyal and Anurag Thakur). In all BJP allies, past and present, there are *shahenshahs* and *shehzadas*. While in jail, Kejriwal nominated his wife as party coordinator over es-

tablished leaders. Over the years, this has become the accepted norm. When the PM derides Rahul Gandhi or Abhishek Banerjee, his allies in states squirm. Hence, the shehzada jibe is fast losing its barb.

The *Yaddya-charti* syndrome has other blowbacks. If you use ED and CBI against our leaders, our police can drag your Annamalai or Suwendu Adhikari to court. That is becoming the new norm.

The our-police-your-ED equation has often been taken to the courts. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court issued notice to Tamil Nadu police on an ED request. There are similar clashes in many states. In West Bengal, the police claims to have evidence against the governor in a case of alleged molestation while the Union government maintains a stoic silence. Similarly, the partisan use of bureaucracy and watchdog bodies has touched dangerous levels.

The deep division has percolated to all walks of life. If the retired bureaucrats or judges issue a statement criticising the Centre, rival pro-government groups counter it. A few weeks back, a group of advocates wrote to CJ to cleanse the system of "bench fixing". Soon, another group of 600 advocates countered it, to which even the PM lent support.

And it goes on.

*Raman is a journalist and author of Tryst With Strong Leader Populism*

MAY 29, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

TAX SHARING RULES

DESPITE INITIAL DIFFERENCES, state chief ministers reached an agreement on the rate and sharing of proceeds of the proposed tax on consignment of goods moved in the course of interstate trade. The rate of the consignment tax will be kept at the same level as the central sales tax and half of its proceeds will be retained by the collecting state and the balance will be distributed among all states on the formula applicable to excise duties.

MONOPOLY OVER AIR

THE TELUGU DESAM Party demanded that

the Union government should take responsibility for the execution of all major irrigation projects or it should assist the states financially and technically to execute the projects. A resolution to this effect pointed out that the agricultural development depended on the execution of irrigation projects. Another resolution demanded that the central Government's monopoly over All India Radio and Doordarshan should go.

NEHRU AWARD

THE JAWAHARLAL NEHRU Award for International Understanding for 1982 has been conferred on Dr Leopold Sedar Senghor

of Senegal and for 1983 it has been conferred on Dr Bruno Kreisky of Austria. The two awards, each carrying Rs 2.5 lakh in cash and a citation, would be presented in November.

A TENSE PUNJAB

TWO PERSONS WERE killed, an abortive attempt was made to blow up the Kalka Mail and a post office was set on fire in the last 24 hours in Punjab. The state government has sanctioned an additional post of deputy inspector-general of police and eight posts of superintendents of police for one year in view of the increasing terrorist activity. Officers from the BSF and the CRPF will be appointed.





# THE IDEAS PAGE

## An outdated nuclear debate

Global nuclear scenario, both civil and defence, has changed.  
The next government in Delhi must review India's policy



RAJA MANDALA  
BY C RAJA MOHAN

THE DEBATE ON Pakistan and nuclear weapons in the Indian elections might have generated much heat but it has shed little light on Delhi's emerging nuclear challenges. Nuclear factors have returned to the top of the agenda in the competitive calculus among major powers as well as in key regional theatres like Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Nuclear energy is also back on the civilian radar as the challenges of managing climate change become acute each year. Meanwhile, tech companies are showing unprecedented interest in nuclear power to feed their electricity-guzzling data centres.

There was intense debate in Delhi during the 1990s on the formal acquisition of a nuclear arsenal. It was followed by an all-consuming focus on the terms of reconciliation with the global nonproliferation order under the historic civil nuclear initiative with the US during the 2000s. Since then, there has been little public and political interest in matters nuclear. At the global level, the UN warned a few weeks ago that the world is drifting back to potential nuclear war amid the mounting tensions between the US and Europe on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other.

The Ukraine war in Europe and the Russian rattling of the nuclear sabre are compelling the West to rethink the deterrence dynamic. Strengthening NATO's nuclear and conventional forces in Europe, greater collaboration between France and Britain (the two European nuclear powers), and building an independent Eurodeterrent under French leadership are some of the ideas that are being explored.

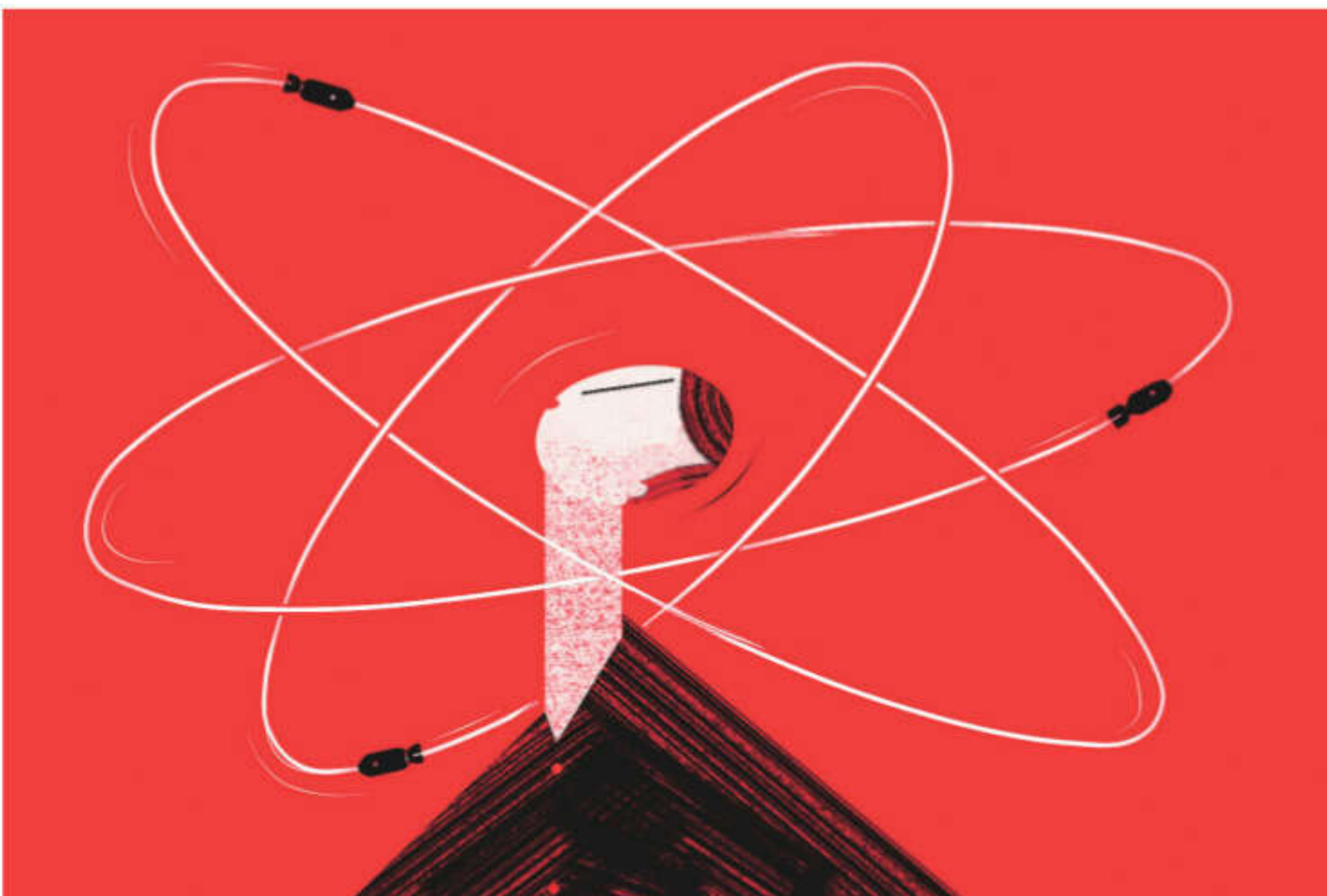
China's assertiveness and the fear of American isolationism under a potential second term for Donald Trump are nudging Beijing's Asian neighbours to reconsider their atomic abstinence. For now, Japan and South Korea are negotiating steps to strengthen the American nuclear umbrella; but if Trump wins in November, the debate on national nuclear arsenals is likely to become more serious in North East Asia.

In the Middle East, regional fears about Iran's emergence as a nuclear weapon power are intensifying the Arab quest for expanded atomic capabilities of their own. Civil nuclear technological cooperation is reported to be an important part of the security pact being negotiated between Saudi Arabia and the US.

Meanwhile, the rise of AI and robotic weapons is generating questions about the dangers of automating nuclear decision-making and its consequences for strategic stability between the major powers. Earlier this month, Washington urged China and Russia to match declarations by the US that only humans, and not algorithms, would be allowed to make decisions on deployment and use of nuclear weapons.

There are growing concerns in the US that Russia plans to deploy anti-satellite nuclear weapons to undermine Washington's dominance in outer space. Last month, Russia vetoed a US-Japan resolution calling for the prevention of an arms race in space; China abstained.

The current Indian political argument



CR Sasikumar

over "who is afraid of Pakistan's atomic weapons" appears self-indulgent amidst sweeping changes in global nuclear politics and emerging challenges to the traditional ideas of nuclear deterrence.

The question of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and their impact on India's security is a serious one. Since Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons in the late 1980s, Delhi has struggled to deter Rawalpindi from pursuing cross-border terrorism under the shadow of the atomic gun.

During the last decade, the Modi government sought to limit Pakistan's atomic impunity and expand India's options to enhance deterrence. To be sure, there has been some success, but few would claim that the problem of deterring Pakistan's terrorism has been fixed for good.

Equally unwise is the temptation to dismiss Pakistan's nuclear capabilities. As Pakistan's comprehensive national power declines in relation to India's, Delhi must expect that Rawalpindi will double down on its nuclear weapon programme as the final insurance against the much-feared "Indian hegemony" in the region. Delhi's current rhetoric on taking back Pakistan-occupied Kashmir might well reinforce Rawalpindi's determination to strengthen its nuclear arsenal.

Rawalpindi has long had a focused nuclear weapons programme and a definite edge over India in terms of the size and sophistication of its arsenal. Pakistan's continuing strategic partnership with China suggests room for sustaining that edge against India.

It has become commonplace to hear in Delhi that India is no longer bothered about Pakistan and is concentrating its energies on China. While Pakistan's nuclear challenge continues to simmer, China's atomic challenge continues to mount. After decades of keeping its nuclear arsenal to a modest size, Beijing is now in the middle of expanding it. According to some Western estimates, China is on track to have an arsenal of 1,000 nuclear weapons by 2030 and 1,500 by 2035.

A leading Chinese scholar on nuclear issues, Tsinghua University's Tong Zhao, argues that Xi Jinping sees the expanded nu-



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clear arsenal as more than a deterrent against the US. For the Chinese leader, a more powerful arsenal is about ensuring an effective balance of power against the US and underwriting Beijing's geopolitical leverage. According to Tong Zhao, Xi has appreciated Russian President Vladimir Putin's "decision to prioritise the development of its nuclear capabilities even as the country's economy was in decline." Russia's threat to use nuclear weapons, arguably, has imposed a significant constraint on the scale and extent of Western support for Ukraine. Beijing will bet that its growing nuclear arsenal will counter Washington's balancing strategies in Asia.

If China remains India's principal security challenge, building deterrent capability against Beijing's expanding nuclear arsenal should be a national priority. This would involve a more purposeful programme to build nuclear and missile capabilities and not just "technology demonstrators" and "symbolic capabilities" that have dominated India's deterrence. Renewed geopolitical rivalry between major powers is bringing nuclear weapons back to the centre stage of global security politics. Rapid technological developments and new ways of fighting wars demand the modification of traditional ideas of nuclear deterrence.

The next government in Delhi must order a comprehensive review, keeping in mind the changing global nuclear dynamic and regional challenges. It must find ways to modernise India's atomic arsenal and doctrine. The review must also explore ways to accelerate India's civilian nuclear energy programme. Although India was the first Asian country to build an atomic power plant back in 1969, it has fallen way behind China and South Korea. To catch up, India will need an overhaul of the legal and institutional frameworks governing India's atomic energy development.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express and visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Bolder policies can capture voters' imaginations, if they are clearly communicated and chime with public's priorities... However, Mr Sunak will find it hard to appeal to voters' sense of prudence when their experience of Conservative government has been rising costs, falling living standards & failing public services." — **THE GUARDIAN**

## Is RBI dependent on food or Fed?

India's monetary policy should be determined by domestic environment, particularly growth inflation dynamics, not international policy cycle



ISHAN BAKSHI

IN MAY 2022, the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee had held an unscheduled meeting. In it, the committee voted unanimously to raise interest rates by 40 basis points — this marked the beginning of the rate hike cycle in India. However, the unscheduled nature of the meeting and the policy action had raised several questions.

The May meeting was held less than a month after the MPC's scheduled meeting in April. Even at the time of the April meeting, there were concerns over inflation pressures on the economy. Retail inflation had touched 6.07 per cent in February, with both food and core inflation inching upwards. Wholesale inflation had averaged 13.8 per cent in the preceding five months, and commodity prices were rising due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It was evident even then that the MPC had fallen behind the curve ('Falling behind the curve', *IE*, April 27, 2022). That it had failed to anticipate the price pressures on the economy and the possibility that inflation could exceed the upper threshold of the central bank's inflation targeting framework for three consecutive quarters — fears that were subsequently realised.

So why did the MPC choose not to raise rates in April or act in its next meeting in June? Why did it raise rates in the off-cycle meeting in May when, in fact, it did not even provide an updated inflation forecast to justify the need for policy action? Did other considerations dominate the committee's decision?

During this period, considering the surge in inflation, expectations that the US Federal Reserve was going to tighten rates, embarking on possibly the sharpest rate hike cycles in recent times, had gained traction. The Fed's scheduled May meeting, when it hiked interest rates by 50 basis points — the first time in over two decades it had raised rates by this magnitude — also "happened" to be on the same day as the outcome of the unscheduled MPC meeting was announced.

This had then raised the question: Was the decision of the RBI/MPC to raise rates guided by the desire to maintain the interest rate differential, keep the exchange rate stable and prevent the rupee's depreciation ('Question of timing', *IE*, May 9, 2022)? Or to put it differently: Was the objective of the policy action to curb inflation or defend the currency?

Now, fast forward two years. Inflation in India has been trending low — the consumer price index stood at 4.83 per cent in April. Core inflation, which is a better measure of underlying price pressures in the economy, is at a multi-year low of 3.2 per cent, suggesting weakness in demand. What has kept headline inflation elevated is food inflation — the consumer food price index was at 8.7 per cent in April. Prices are elevated across

several food groups. High food inflation presents a challenge for monetary policy. As a recent study by economists at the RBI also emphasised, "high food and fuel inflation can get generalised in the system through inflation expectations".

Admittedly, there is uncertainty over the trajectory of food prices. While there are expectations of an above-normal monsoon, which will have a moderating influence on food prices, greater clarity will only emerge in the coming months. However, what matters for monetary policy is inflation down the line. And as per RBI's own forecast, inflation is expected to average 4.5 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2024-25. So the question is: If India experiences an above-normal, evenly distributed monsoon, and there is greater confidence that food prices, and as a consequence headline inflation, will mirror the trajectory projected by the central bank, then will the MPC cut rates over the course of its next few meetings? Will the other committee members share external member Jayanth Varma's view that a lower real rate — considering that the RBI expects inflation to average 4.5 per cent in 2024-25, a repo rate of 6.5 per cent implies a real rate of 2 per cent — can ensure that inflation aligns to the target? Or will other considerations dominate decision making?

At the beginning of this year, there were expectations that the US Fed would cut interest rates three times this year, with many pencilling in the first cut in June. However, recent inflation data and commentary from the Fed have led to the market reassessing the timing and the number of rate cuts. The minutes of the Fed's meeting in May released a few days ago indicate a desire to hold rates higher for longer. Many are now expecting only one rate cut this year.

The situation, however, appears to be different across the Atlantic. Commentary from the European Central Bank and the Bank of England suggests that both are likely to cut rates this summer. Of course, both central banks would be well aware of the possible implications of such a policy action on their currencies. In fact, on the question of the Fed's outsized influence on even the European Central Bank (ECB), Christine Lagarde, president of the bank, has pushed back, saying that the bank is data-dependent, not Fed-dependent. An independent monetary policy means that domestic interest rates are not influenced by international rates, they are determined independently. So while some may well believe that there are "practical limits on how far they (other central banks) can diverge from the Fed", as a recent study by the economists at the RBI put it, the paths of both the ECB and the Bank of England as of now seem to be diverging as domestic growth and inflation dynamics are given greater weightage. Though to what extent remains an open question.

So what about the RBI? Will monetary policy be determined by the domestic environment, responding to the country's growth-inflation dynamics, or the international policy cycle?

Borrowing from Lagarde: Will the RBI be Fed or food-dependent?

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SUANSHU KHURANA

## Sing a political song

Hindi film songs have often asked piercing questions, spoken truth to power

"TAKHT NA HOGA, *taj na hoga/ Kal tha lekin aaj na hoga/ Jisme sab adhikaar na paayen/ Wo saachha Swaraj na hoga*".

("There won't be a throne, there won't be a crown/ Where everyone does not have rights/ That won't be true independence").

These fiery lines by Sahir Ludhianvi in Vasant Joglekar's *Aaj Aur Kal* (1963) — the story of an oppressive erstwhile king who fights the local election against a young social activist wanting to rid his country of crony capitalism and feudalism — have stood the test of time. They are not only a rallying cry in the film but also a reminder of a time when cinema gave a voice to the masses and showed an unflinching mirror to the powerful. The campaign song in the film goes: "Mehnat par majdoor ka haq hai/ Jeene par pabandi kyun ho/ Jeena har insaan ka haq hai (A labourer has the right to his labour. Why should there be any restriction on living? Living is the right of every human being)".

As the seventh and final phase of India's Lok Sabha elections comes up on June 1, having been accompanied by raucous and auto-tuned campaign songs by different political parties, one can't help but look back at Ludhianvi's song. It is a reminder of a time when the Hindi film song attempted to uphold principles of democracy by speaking

about injustice; when writers created socially-conscious songs — ones that revolved around constitutional rights, elections, political awareness and justice.

The political themes of the 1950s and early '60s cinema started as an extension of post-Independence Nehruvian ideology. It included ideas of socialism, secularism and industrialisation. Films like *Naya Daur* (1957) and a song like 'Saathi Haath Badhana' examined the costs of development.

Around the same time, Kaifi Azmi also asked a piercing question in *Pyaasa* (1957): "Jinhe naaz hai Hind par woh kahan hain" ("Those who are proud of the nation, where are they?") scoffing at the pride of those in power. The '60s saw two wars, the deaths of two PMs (Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri), the rise of Indira Gandhi and the coming up of other parties and a reduced majority for Congress in the 1967 elections, leading to a split in the party. All these were fodder for interesting poetry and lyrics on elections.

The turbulent '70s would see a resurgence of the "election" song in films. *Mere Apne* (1971), Gulzar's directorial debut, explored themes such as student politics, unemployment and corrupt politicians. The song 'Haal Chal Theek Thak Hai' had the lines, "Aab-o-hawa desh ki bohot saaf hai... Aadmi

ko khoon voon sab maaf hai/ Aap ki dua se baaki sab theek-thaak hai" ("The air in the country is clean... Even murder is forgiven/ With your blessing, all is well"). There was "Kaun sachha hai, kaun jhootha hai, pehle ye jaan lo, phir apna vote do" ("First find out who's truthful and who's a liar, then cast your vote") from Tapan Sinha's *Zindagi Zindagi* (1972). Kishore Kumar sang Anand Bakshi and RD Burman's crisp 'Woh jhootha hai vote na usko dena' ('He is a liar, don't vote for him') in *Namak Haram* (1973). These songs, besides energising voters and being non-partisan, offered a glimpse into the politics of lyricists and sometimes, filmmakers.

Film music was affected directly by labour unrest in the days after the Emergency in 1975. Take "salaam keejiye, aali janaab aaye hain, ye paanch saalo ka dene hisaab aaye hain", penned by Gulzar in *Aandhi* (1975). In the film, politician Aarti Devi (modelled after Indira Gandhi) is walking the streets during a campaign. The scathing satire-laden qawwali came with hard-hitting lines such as "Hamare vote kha-reedenge humko ann dekar/ Ye nange jism chhupa dete hain qafan dekar" ("They'll buy our votes in return for food/ They shroud naked bodies by giving them palls").

While the political song declined more

and more in the later years, it mostly came in bursts and spurts and often from Gulzar. In *Hu Tu Tu* (1999), his last outing as a director, there was 'Ghapla Hai' about government malfeasance and 'Bandobast hai' about farmers vulnerabilities and their fight for their rights.

From here on, the space for the irreverent and socially conscious political song has shrunk in films, especially at a time when dissent has come to be equated with sedition. One of the last such songs that comes to mind is from Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (2019). Rapper DIVINE knocks out a banger: "Desh kaise hoga saaf/ Inki neeyat mein hai daag/ Vote milne par ye khaas, phir gayab pure saaf" ("How will the country get cleaned when their motives are smeared/ When voted, they become special and then they vanish for the whole year?").

In recent years, Hindi cinema has found itself under attack in a polarised nation, where criticism of the government gets misconstrued as "disloyalty". In this climate, how can one still create "Chin-aar Arab hamara/ Rehne ko ghar nahi, saara Hindustan hamara" — Ludhianvi's criticism of Nehruvian socialism, which was never censored or asked to be toned down?

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### MAKING HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Not playing safe' (*IE*, May 28). India's presence at the Cannes Film Festival marked a significant milestone for its independent filmmakers. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* securing the prestigious Grand Prix, the festival's second-highest honour, is a landmark achievement. Anasuya Sengupta becoming the first Indian actor to receive the Best Actress award in Un Certain Regard for *The Shameless* exemplifies growing appreciation of Indian talent. The accolades extended to the technical side, with cinematographer Santhosh Sivan receiving the Pierre Angénieux Excellens in Cinematography award — the first Asian to receive this honour. Sustained support and promotion of Indian films are essential to expand our presence on the world stage.

**Khokan Das, Kolkata**

### NO TO BLANKET BANS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Collective punishment: Mehbooba on Shah's no jobs for family of terror accused remark' (*IE*, May 28). Though Home Minister Amit Shah's policy denying government jobs to family members of terrorists in J&K is aimed at combating terrorism, these measures are unjust and counterproductive. Firstly, they amount to col-

lective punishment, which is fundamentally unfair and morally indefensible. Punishing individuals for the actions of their relatives violates principles of justice. Secondly, it risks alienating locals. Blanket bans could drive more towards radicalisation, hindering integration and trust-building efforts. Addressing root causes demands a nuanced approach, prioritising education, economic growth, and inclusive governance.

**Vishal Mayur, Bengaluru**

### AVOIDABLE TRAGEDIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Criminal abdication' (*IE*, May 27). We see man-made tragedies consuming ordinary lives regularly. This time it was due to an uncontrolled fire; at other times, it could be a bridge collapse, a boat drowning or a lack of oxygen in a hospital ward. There are two main causes underlying these tragedies. The first is uncontrollable greed, which we euphemistically term the "enterprising spirit" of our nation. In this quest for greed, rules and regulations are bypassed by both builders and administrators. The second is the famed Indian "jugaad", which is another way to dress up short-circuiting the system to our advantage. We must seriously address these shortcomings if we hope to make our societies safe.

**Rahul Gaur, Gurgaon**





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# Why an accused in jail can contest, but cannot vote in an election

**AJOY SINHA KARPURAM**  
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

AMONG THE candidates for the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat that goes to polls with the rest of Punjab on Saturday is Amritpal Singh, head of the pro-Khalistan outfit Waris Punjab De. Amritpal Singh is currently in jail in Dibrugarh, Assam, and his campaign is being led by members of his family.

Amritpal does not have a right to vote. How then can he have the right to be elected to Parliament? What laws apply to voters and candidates who are imprisoned?

## Statutory rights

In *Indira Gandhi v Raj Narain* (1975), the Supreme Court said that free and fair elections are part of the basic structure of the Constitution, placing it on the highest con-

stitutional pedestal. However, the SC has held that neither the right to elect nor the right to be elected enjoys the same status.

In *Kuldip Nayar v Union of India* (2006), a five-judge Constitution Bench held that the right to vote (or elect) is “pure and simple, a statutory right”. This means that voting is not a fundamental right, and can be denied. The same applied to the right to be elected, the Bench said.

Laws enacted by Parliament could regulate both these statutory rights, the court ruled.

## Must be convicted

Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA) provides for disqualification from contesting elections to Parliament or state Assemblies “on conviction for certain offences”. The disqualification applies from the date of conviction, and continues for six years after the end of the sentence.

However, the bar on contesting elections kicks in only after a person has been convicted, and not if they are only charged with criminal offences. This is what applies to Amritpal Singh.

Section 8 of the RPA has faced two major challenges in the SC in recent years.

■ In 2011, the nonprofit Public Interest Foundation filed a petition arguing that persons against whom criminal charges have been framed, or who have filed false affidavits regarding their criminal history, should also be disqualified. However, the SC held that only the legislature could alter the RPA.

■ In 2016, advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay filed a petition seeking permanent disqualification for convicted persons. This case is ongoing and, in November 2023, the SC, taking note of delays in criminal cases against MPs and MLAs, asked the Chief Justices of all High Courts to register a *suo*

*motu* case titled “In Re: Designated Courts for MPs/MLAs” for HCs and to issue directions for the “expeditious and effective” disposal of these cases.

A report submitted to the court in April 2024 showed 4,472 such cases were still pending.

## Exceptions to provision

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is empowered under Section 11 of the RPA to “remove” or “reduce” the period of disqualification. In 2019, the ECI used this power to reduce the period of disqualification faced by

Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang who was released following a one-year prison sentence in 2018 for misappropriating funds in the procurement of cows. The Sikkim Krantikari Morcha leader went on to win the byelection for the Poklok Kamrang Assembly seat.

Another situation where a disqualified MP or MLA can contest arises if their conviction is stayed on appeal to a higher court. In 2019 the Supreme Court held that once a conviction is stayed, “the disqualification which operates as a consequence of the conviction cannot take or remain in effect”.

Dhananjay Singh, a former BSP MP who had been convicted of kidnapping by a district court in 2020, approached the Allahabad HC for a stay on his seven-year sentence, which would allow him to contest the Lok Sabha election. Last month, the HC granted him bail, but refused to stay the conviction, saying “it is the need of the hour to have purity in politics”.

## No voting right for jailed

Sub-clause (5) of Section 62 of the RPA states: “No person shall vote at any election if he is confined in a prison, whether under a sentence of imprisonment or transportation or otherwise, or is in the lawful custody of

the police.”

With an exception provided for those in preventive detention, this provision effectively bars every individual who has criminal charges framed against them from casting their vote unless they have been released on bail or have been acquitted.

In 1997, the SC rejected a challenge to Section 62(5) in the case of *Anukul Chandra Pradhan v. Union of India*. The court re-affirmed that the right to vote was a statutory right and could be subject to statutory limitations. It also held that a person in prison because of their conduct “cannot claim equal freedom of movement, speech and expression”, and that restrictions on prisoners’ right to vote are reasonable as they are linked to keeping “persons with criminal background away from the election scene”.

This decision has been relied upon by both the SC (in 2023) and the Delhi HC (in 2020) to dismiss pleas seeking voting rights for prisoners.

## EVERYDAY AVIATION

# WHAT ARE EVACUATION SLIDES IN AIRCRAFT, WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

**ALIND CHAUHAN**  
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

SOON AFTER a Varanasi-bound Indigo flight received a bomb threat at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi on Tuesday, the 176 passengers on board the flight were quickly evacuated with the help of evacuation slides. A search of the plane found the threat to be a hoax.



Indigo flight after evacuation at IGI airport, Delhi. PTI

## What are evacuation slides?

An evacuation slide is an inflatable slide that allows passengers to safely exit the aircraft during an emergency, when no ladders can be put.

Slides are generally packed and installed within a door or into an external fuselage compartment. A lever on the interior door connects the slide to the door. At the start of every flight, the lever is in the “armed” position, and if the door is opened, the slide will be deployed. Notably, the door cannot be opened mid-flight due to the difference in air pressure inside the cabin and outside in the atmosphere.

There are four types of evacuation slides: inflatable slide, inflatable slide/raft, inflatable exit ramp, and inflatable exit ramp/ slide.

The inflatable slide helps passengers exit the aircraft to the ground. An inflatable slide/ raft does the same job, but it can also be used as a life raft, in case the aircraft has to land on water.

The inflatable exit ramp helps passengers descend from certain overwing exits on to the wing (in case the exit doors are unavailable) — not to the ground. The inflatable exit ramp/ slide is there to assist in descending from an overwing exit to the aeroplane wing and then to the ground. It is a combination ramp and wing-to-ground slide.

The evacuation slides are typically made from carbon fibre and a nylon ma-

terial coated with urethane for fire resistance. Strong fibres are used to build these slides so they don’t get torn as passengers use them.

They are inflated with the help of high-pressure carbon dioxide or nitrogen gas containers and ambient air through suction machines.

## What are the protocols for deploying the slides?

An evacuation slide must be deployed when the distance between the ground and the flight exit door is six feet or more. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency’s guidelines say that a slide should be automatically deployed once the door is opened. The slide must be inflated within 6-10 seconds, depending on its location.

It should be properly deployable in all weather conditions — as cold as minus 40 degree Celsius and as hot as 71 degree Celsius, according to the US Federal Aviation Administration’s guidelines.

The slide should be able to sustain rainfall of up to one inch an hour and winds up to the speed of 46 km/hr at 45 degree angles around the aircraft.



AMITABH SINHA

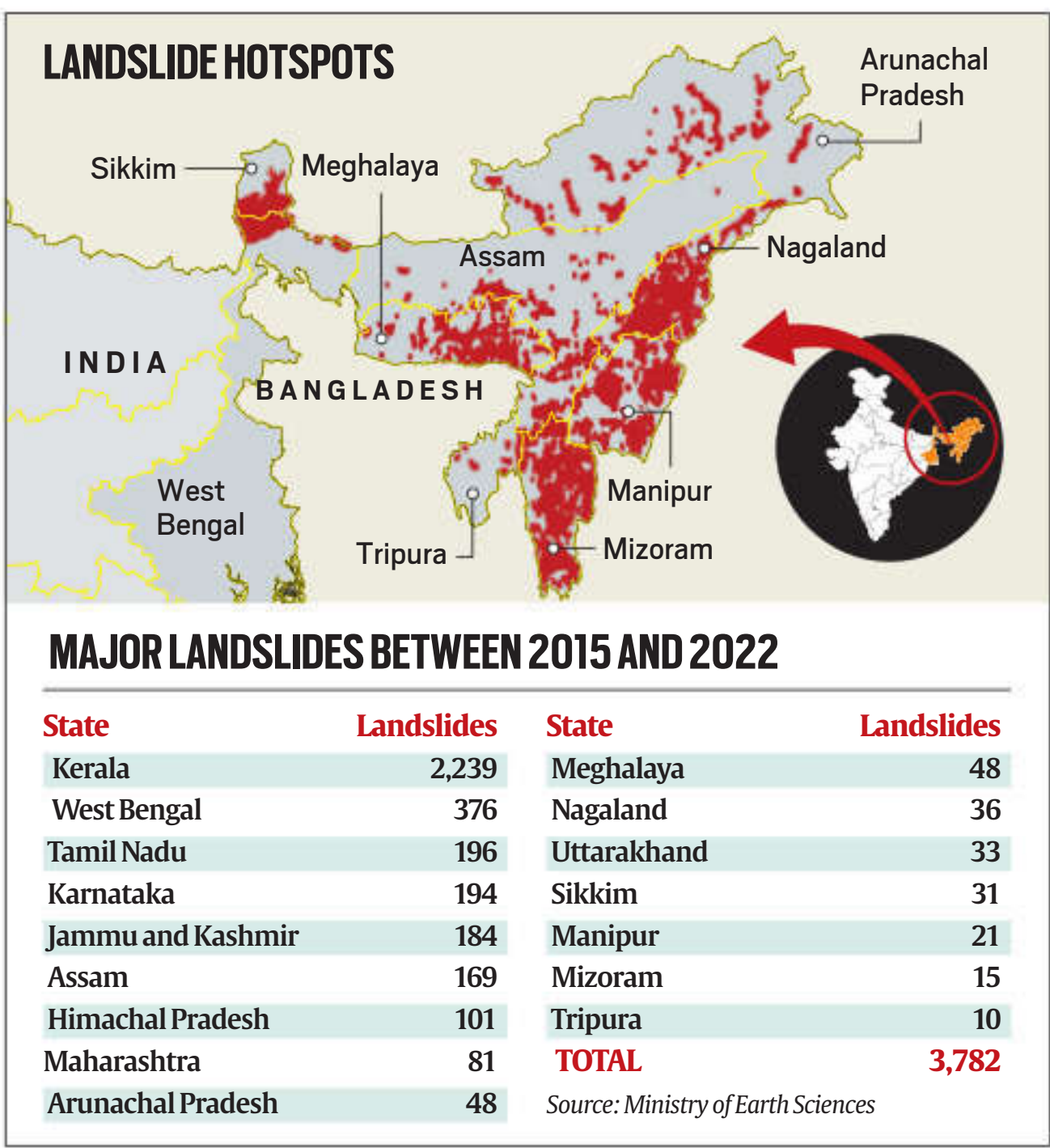
SIX PEOPLE were killed in West Bengal in incidents triggered by cyclone Remal that struck the coastline on Sunday night. At least 27,000 houses were damaged in the coastal districts. Though effective early warning systems and timely evacuations have greatly reduced human casualties from cyclones over the years, a few deaths of accidental nature, and destruction of thatched or weak structures in coastal areas are possible.

But Remal has led to largescale damage in the relatively faraway Northeast as well. Heavy rain caused by the cyclone triggered landslides in several places in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Assam, and Nagaland, which have resulted in the deaths of at least 30 people so far. The collapse of a stone quarry in Aizawl, Mizoram, alone has killed at least 14 people. The toll is expected to rise.

The heavy downpour in the Northeast was not unexpected. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) had warned of this in all its cyclone bulletins. Almost the entire region, including Sikkim and northern West Bengal, is landslide prone. Cyclone-triggered landslides have hit Northeastern states on earlier occasions as well. Cyclone Aila had caused landslide events in this region in May 2009.

The latest episode spotlights the need for building resilience to multi-hazard disasters. One event can trigger another, and can lead to multiple disasters simultaneously. Over the last few years, India has witnessed events in which heavy rainfall has resulted in a breach of glacial lakes, causing flash floods that have resulted in landslides and flooding. Massive power outages, transport and communication failures, disruption of health services, and difficulties in rescue and relief operations have followed.

Although India has done well to prepare and safeguard itself against certain natural events such as cyclones, landslides remain a weak point. An early warning system is still being tried out, and pressures from population, development, and infrastruc-



ture projects have increased vulnerability.

## Landslide vulnerability

About 0.42 million square km of India’s landmass, or about 13% of its area, spread over 15 states and four Union Territories, is prone to landslides, according to the Geological Survey of India (GSI).

This covers almost all the hilly regions in the country. About 0.18 million square km, or 42% of this vulnerable area is in the Northeastern region, where the terrain is mostly hilly.

This area is also prone to earthquakes, which too, are a major trigger for landslides.

Government data show that between 2015 and 2022, the eight states in this region, including Sikkim, recorded 378 major landslide events which resulted in loss of life or damage to property. These events constituted 10% of all major landslides in India during this period. In the country as a whole, Kerala saw the largest number of landslides — 2,239 —

most of which occurred after the disastrous 2018 floods in the state.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has been working with GSI and other agencies to mitigate and manage the risks from landslides. A National Landslide Risk Management Strategy was finalised in 2019, which talked about vulnerability mapping, identifying the most vulnerable locations, development of an early warning system, and preparation of mountain zone regulations. But most of the work still remains to be done.

## Early warning

Some early warning systems have been developed and deployed on a trial basis at a few locations. These warning systems are linked to rainfall forecasts from IMD. The rainfall prediction is combined with soil and terrain information to calculate whether it is likely to result in displacement of land.

“Most landslides in the hilly regions are

caused by heavy rainfall. Earthquakes can trigger landslides too, but we do not see that very often. In the Northeastern region, for example, no major landslide has been triggered by an earthquake in the last one or two decades,” Debi Prasanna Kanungo, a scientist at Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), Roorkee, said.

“In any case, since earthquakes themselves cannot be predicted, we cannot have a landslide early warning based on earthquakes. But rainfall-based early warning systems for landslides seem to work well,” Kanungo added.

Kanungo has been involved in setting up an early warning system in Nagaland to protect the state’s legislative Assembly. However, as of now, only a few of these location-specific early warning systems have been deployed.

CBRI and IIT Roorkee are in the process of installing these at two locations in Sikkim, another two in Uttarakhand, and one in Kerala. Other institutions like IIT Mandi are also working to develop and set up early warning systems.

Rainfall forecasts, on the other hand, come quite early. Reliable location-specific predictions are available at least a day in advance. Scientists create a rainfall threshold for land movement and soil displacement at each landslide-prone location. If the rainfall forecast is higher than the threshold, an early warning for landslides is issued.

“Usually, a single day’s rainfall does not trigger landslides, unless there is a cloudburst event. Sustained heavy rainfall over a week or 10 days is what becomes dangerous,” Kanungo said. A prolonged spell of heavy rain in Himachal Pradesh last year resulted in almost 500 landslide events.

## Human pressure

The risk from landslides has been exacerbated by the failure to remain mindful of the terrain’s ability to withstand the load. Many hilly areas do not have building regulations. Often, regulations are not implemented effectively. New constructions, infrastructure development, and even agricultural practices can increase the risk of landslides.

“Every mountainous area has a carrying capacity. Development is essential, and one cannot stop the creation of infrastructure or new facilities or economic activity for local populations. But these have to be regulated. Sustainability has to be factored in, so that the load does not exceed the carrying capacity. This is where zoning regulations come in. These have to be finalised and implemented strictly,” Kanungo said.

## Why Southeast Asia

I4C zeroed in on Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia after analysing data on its National Cybercrime Reporting Portal (NCRP), inputs received from states and Union Territories, and some open-source information.

“The cybercrime operations based in these countries employ a comprehensive array of deceptive strategies, including recruitment efforts by exploiting social media to lure Indians with fake employment opportunities,” Kumar said.

The I4C has found that many web applications used in the crime had Mandarin characters. “We cannot rule out some kind of Chinese connection,” Kumar said.

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# How criminals based in southeast Asia are trapping Indians online

**MAHENDER SINGH MANRAL**  
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

A LARGE number of Indians are falling prey to financial fraud carried out over the Internet, allegedly by criminals based in three contiguous southeast Asian countries: Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.

In its analysis of trends seen from January to April, the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C) found that 46% of such frauds reported in this period — in which the victims cumulatively lost an estimated Rs 1,776 crore — originated in these three countries.

The I4C works under the Union Home Ministry “to create an effective framework and ecosystem for the prevention, detection, investigation, and prosecution of cybercrime in the country”.

National Cybercrime Reporting Portal (NCRP) data show 7.4 lakh complaints were made between January 1 and April 30 this year, while 15.56 lakh complaints were received in all of 2023.

A total 9.66 lakh, 4.52 lakh, 2.57 lakh, and 26,049 complaints were received in 2022, 2021, 2020, and 2019 respectively.

## Types of cybercrime

The I4C has identified four broad categories of fraud originating from these three countries, following certain *modus operandi*.

**TRADING SCAM:** The alleged fraudsters issued ads on social media offering free trading tips, often using pictures of well known stock market experts and fake news articles. The victims were asked to join a WhatsApp group or Telegram channel, where they would receive “tips” on making money by investing in shares.

After a few days, the victims would be asked to install some specific trading applications and register themselves in order to receive further guidance on making “huge” profits. The victims would start “investing” on the apps, following recommendations made by the cybercriminals. None of these apps would be registered with the stock market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), but the victims typically neglected to check this.

The victims deposited money in particular bank accounts to “buy shares”, and were shown some fake profits in their dig-

ital wallets. But when they tried to withdraw this “money”, they were shown a message that they could do so only after they had accumulated a certain amount, say Rs 30-50 lakh, in their wallet. This meant the victim had to keep “investing” and, sometimes, had to also pay “taxes” on the “profits” they were purportedly earning.

“After analysing data from the first four months of this year, we found that Indians lost Rs 1420.48 crore in the trading scam,” I4C CEO Rajesh Kumar said.

**DIGITAL ARREST:** Potential victims would get a call in which the caller would tell them that the victims had sent or were the intended recipients of a parcel containing illegal goods, drugs, fake passports, or other contraband.

In some cases, relatives or friends of the target would be told that the target had been found to be involved in a crime.

Once they had the target — who would be chosen carefully — in their net, the criminals would contact them over Skype or another video calling platform. They would pose as law enforcement officials, often

wearing uniforms and calling from places resembling police stations or government offices, and demand money for a “compromise” and “closure of the case”.

In certain cases, the victims were “digitally arrested”, which meant they were forced to stay visible to the criminals until their demands had been met.

Indians lost a total Rs 120.30 crore in this type of scam in the January-April period, Kumar said.

**INVESTMENT SCAM (TASK-BASED):** Victims typically received a WhatsApp message from an overseas number, purportedly belonging to a representative of a company, with an offer to earn a large sum of money, say, Rs 30,000, while working from home.

Those who responded were told they would have to help boost the social media ratings of some entities by giving them a five-star rating. After the “task” was completed, victims received a “code”, which they were asked to share with their “admin” on Telegram. The “admin” would ask the victims where they wanted to receive their money and, after a few five-star rating “tasks” on YouTube or Google reviews etc. were completed, would deposit a small

sum, perhaps Rs 500.

At this point, the victim would be asked to participate in a “pre-paid” or “merchant” task, in which a higher return would be promised after a certain amount — which could be between Rs 1,500 and Rs 1 lakh — had been deposited. Victims who refused were blocked, but those who chose to participate were told the money and profit would come to them in a day.

However, the following day, the victims would be told that their “performance score” was not good enough, and they needed to improve it by participating in new tasks so they could get their money.

Indian victims lost a total Rs 222.58 crore in this “investment scam (task based)”, Kumar said.

**ROMANCE/DATING SCAM:** This was a somewhat more conventional trap, though laid online. The victims, who were male, were lured by people they thought were foreign women. These “women” would propose relationships or marriage, and then make plans to come and meet in person. However, the victim would typically get a call from the “woman” that she had been detained at the airport, and needed money



● TURBULENT GLOBAL ORDER

Union minister for external affairs S Jaishankar

“The world is in a tense situation and the ongoing conflicts would not end so quickly and that’s why India needs a stable government, a strong and powerful leader with networking, standing and respect

Election delays over FTA

Finalising the Indo-UK deal will have to await the incoming governments in both nations

WITH EARLY ELECTIONS announced in the UK, finalising the ambitious free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the UK — with negotiations over 14 rounds having already taken place since January 2022 — will have to await the incoming governments in both nations. Both India and the UK want an agreement that is balanced and comprehensive and mutually beneficial. Concluding such a deal is not easy. Setting deadlines like Diwali 2022 or coinciding with the Cricket World Cup hosted by India last year was perhaps unrealistic as trade deals are not a simple affair, entailing a complicated process of give and take for greater access to each other’s markets to expand bilateral trade worth £39 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q4 2023. India has a trade surplus of £7.4 billion. There are 26 chapters in the FTA, which include goods, services, investments and intellectual property rights (IPRs). According to commerce ministry officials, chapter-wise textual negotiations are nearly closed and schedules on goods and services are at an advanced stage of negotiation. An investment treaty is also being negotiated.

Among the unresolved issues are rules of origin, duty concessions on electric vehicles, Scotch whisky, investment treaty, social security agreement, carbon border tax, and liberalisation of financial services. A critical area of interest for India is free visa movement for its professionals, which the UK is resisting. In this regard, there were concerns over the UK’s moves to curb legal migration by raising the minimum salary thresholds for skilled worker visas and reviewing, if not scrapping, the graduate visa route which allows students to work for two years after graduation. Fortunately, better sense has now prevailed — due to a backlash in the cabinet and leading UK universities over the move — to allow the student graduate visa route to remain open. In end-March 2024, as many as 116,455 Indians were granted student visas. The UK, for its part, is frustrated with the lack of movement towards the opening up of the Indian market for professional services in law and accountancy. On IPRs, the UK wants India to go beyond the World Trade Organization’s Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement while India wants to protect its generics drug industry.

For such reasons, inking an India-UK FTA is far from easy with an additional complication that national elections in the UK will take place on July 4 and are ongoing in India. A ground for concern will be the stand of the incoming government in the UK, especially if it’s the Labour Party that is leading the Conservatives by 20 percentage points in the opinion polls. The good news is that the Labour Party, too, seeks a trade deal that is mutually beneficial. Jonathan Reynolds, Labour’s business and trade spokesperson, visited Delhi in February and had talks with India’s union commerce and industries minister, Piyush Goyal. The big challenge for both nations is to revive the economic component of the relationship that is somewhat underwhelming considering the long historical association. While the FTA negotiations will take their own course, both partners can still follow the road map 2030 on trade and step up investments in each other’s economies. In 2021, the outward stock of UK’s foreign direct investment was £19.1 billion while India’s FDI in the UK was £9.3 billion. If investments gather momentum, this is bound to result in greater two-way bilateral trade flows in the future.

Old empires could be the key to a new car future

HYDROGEN IS THE most abundant substance in the universe, and a crucial element in the creation of our most precious resource: water. Initiatives outlined by carmakers last week are breathing new life into plans to use the gas as fuel. They’re also a reminder that making the world run on hydrogen will need considerable support from diversified businesses such as North Asia’s storied conglomerates.

The most promising path to exploiting hydrogen is to store the gas in a tank, as you would gasoline, then feed it into a fuel cell where it combines with oxygen to create an electric current, with water as a byproduct. Put this in a car and you have a fuel-cell electric vehicle. Recently, industry has turned to green hydrogen, created by running an electric current through water with an electrolyte. The machines that do this are called electrolyser, and like battery EVs, they are only truly green if the original electricity source comes from renewables.

The ultimate solution, the one that industry ought to strive for, is on-site extraction, storage, and refuelling. Such facilities could be tacked onto existing gas stations, but needn’t be. Since electrolysis equipment only requires water and electricity, there’s more flexibility in placement. An alternative to electrolysis is to use organic waste by extracting hydrogen from rotting food or sewage.

Existing oil suppliers and gas-station operators don’t seem keen to push into the fuel-cell era, especially since there’s barely any hydrogen vehicles on the road now. Just 223 were sold in the US in the first quarter, out of 3.8 million vehicles in total. It’s also a stretch to expect traditional US car companies such as General Motors Co. or Ford Motor Co. to step out of their wheelhouse into the fuelling business. These firms are already struggling to manage their EV rollouts, with battery technology and supply proving major stumbling blocks.

Asian conglomerates may be the answer. Hyundai Motor Co., Honda Motor Co., and Toyota Motor Corp. each showed off hydrogen-power solutions at the Advanced Clean Transportation Expo in California last week. All three automakers are part of larger business empires — called chaebol in South Korea and keiretsu in Japan. Outside of their home countries, they are best known for making cars and motorbikes. But their tentacles extend deep into other areas. Toyota, for example, has at least 17 companies in its group with affiliates that include a steelmaker, a textiles supplier, and a machine tool developer.

South Korea’s Hyundai may be the most diversified. It encompasses companies that build and service ships, produce electric motors, and even supply robots. While splits and spin-offs over the years have diluted cross-shareholding and management have been diluted, the chaebol still benefits from a closer relationship among businesses in disparate industries than anything seen in Europe or North America. It also has a plan. Hyundai thinks it can leverage its conglomerate advantage to build out the entire fuel-cell supply chain “from hydrogen production and storage to logistics, transport and diverse applications”. Last year it put 30 of its heavy-duty XCIENT trucks on the road in California to haul freight from ports in Oakland and Richmond.

Building and driving the vehicle is the easy part. What companies like Hyundai are also attempting to do is create the infrastructure to extract, store, and transport hydrogen. In South Korea, for example, a pilot project turns food waste into the clean gas, which is then stored locally for on-site refuelling. By the end of 2024 Hyundai expects to have another plant convert sewage into hydrogen. With battery electric vehicles getting cheaper, and combustion engines still the preferred choice, hydrogen’s window of opportunity is relatively small and closing fast. If this alternative technology is to get a foothold, it’ll need fully integrated suppliers that stand to profit from every link in the supply chain. That puts the burden on Asia’s chaebol and keiretsu to bring all their resources to bear if hydrogen is to have a shot at becoming part of our green-energy future.

● MINING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

MARKET FOR CRITICAL MINERALS FACES GEOGRAPHIC CONCENTRATION, INFORMATION ASYMMETRY

A critical challenge

SOMIT DASGUPTA

Senior visiting fellow, ICRIER  
Views are personal



one cannot ignore the fact that China has always been a meticulous planner and had the foresight to see how important critical minerals will become in the years to come. In the early 1990s, the USA was happy to export its mined minerals to China since labour was cheaper there and also because processing critical minerals is energy-intensive and gives rise to carbon emissions. This is not to suggest that the US is conscious about its carbon footprint. Let’s not forget that cumulatively the US is the biggest emitter (25% of the world’s emissions) but when it comes to taking responsibility, its response is pathetic. How else can one explain the USA’s paltry contribution of \$17.5 million, out of a total global commitment of \$800 million, towards the Loss and Damage fund that was operationalised during COP28 in 2023. The dominance of China in the field of critical minerals has led to the formation of the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP), almost as a knee-jerk reaction. India too is a member of the MSP whose primary objective is to ensure a steady supply of critical minerals. Whether the MSP will be successful in its objective only time will tell considering the fact that many countries, which are rich in critical minerals, are not members of the partner-

ship. Examples are Chile, DRC, and Indonesia.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), in a report published this year, has said that there was a massive fall in prices of critical minerals in 2023 after a sharp rise in prices in the previous two years. The fall in prices is especially stark in the case of the minerals that are used in batteries, such as lithium, graphite, nickel, cobalt, and manganese. It’s not that the demand has been falling, in fact it has been constantly increasing. To give an example, the demand for lithium has grown by about 30% due to electric vehicles. The IEA estimates that mineral demand for clean energy technologies will double between now and 2030. The fall in prices are actually on account of

oversupply. The fall in prices of critical mineral is both good and bad. It is good because the price of end products like batteries has come down, but the downward spiral in prices may adversely affect investments in the sector if the trend continues. It is thus clear that the market for critical minerals not only faces problems of geographic concentration but also information asymmetry. The investors, it seems, had overestimated the demand and therefore it is crucial that relevant data on renewable

When it comes to India, the path for getting access to critical minerals seems quite arduous. We do not have reserves for these minerals

WITH THE ACCENT on decarbonisation, critical minerals and rare earths have taken centre stage.

In fact, without the availability of critical minerals, decarbonisation is surely going to come to a halt. Critical minerals are required in the manufacture of batteries, solar cells, wind turbines, fertilisers, consumer electronics, defence equipment and many more. There is no accepted definition of critical minerals and it is for each country to define as to what they consider to be critical. For instance, India has identified 30 minerals as critical, the USA has identified 50, Japan has identified 31, the UK has identified 18, and so on. In a way, criticality is dynamic. A mineral not considered critical today may turn critical tomorrow and vice-versa depending on the ease of its availability and importance. In contrast to critical minerals, rare earths are a defined lot and have a specific place in the periodic table.

Why is there so much of talk about critical minerals? It’s because these minerals are concentrated in a few countries. For example, Australia has 55% of the lithium reserves, China has 60% of the rare earths, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has 75% of cobalt, Indonesia has 55% of nickel, and Chile has 30% of copper reserves, etc. When it comes to processing, matters get worse since China processes 35% of the world’s nickel, 50% to 70% of the lithium and cobalt, and nearly 90% of the rare earths. Not just that, China has also monopolised the manufacture of finished products as it supplies 78% of the cathodes, 85% of the anodes, 70% of the battery cells, and 95% of the permanent magnets made from rare earths.

The world community may not relish the idea that China holds the key but

AMIT KAPOOR

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IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a flurry of activity on India’s free trade agreement (FTA) front. News has been abuzz with FTA developments — be it the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) in the same year, or the FTA with the UK still in the pipeline. The Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) between India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) comprising Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein — concluded earlier this year — is indeed a landmark agreement for multiple reasons. However, amidst the heady fervour around big numbers related to the EFTA TEPA, it is important to see this is an opportunity to discuss challenges plaguing India’s FTAs.

Despite entering into FTAs with some nations, widening trade deficits with partner countries has been cited as a growing concern, bringing into stark relief the lopsided gains in certain agreements. This challenge has been highlighted in the context of India’s FTA with Japan, for instance. India has called for a renegotiation of the CEPA, signed between the two nations in 2011, to make the partnership more “balanced and equitable”. India’s trade balance with Japan has gone from -\$7,910.94 million in 2018-19 to -\$11,033.99 million in 2022-23, indicating a widening deficit for India, with exports increasing at a slower rate as compared to the rise in imports. Among other reasons, issues relating to market access for India’s goods and services in Japan remain a

pressing concern. This goes to show that tariff reduction does not necessarily boost export growth for the partner country. Understanding reasons behind trade imbalances is crucial to assess the extent to which an agreement is benefiting partner countries in an equitable manner. While any assessment of India’s agreement with the EFTA should happen over time, it is pertinent to note India’s existing trade deficits with EFTA nations. India has a negative trade balance with EFTA nations, barring Iceland, with which India’s exports surpassed its imports in 2022-23 by \$5.46 million.

Why do trade deficits persist despite FTA provisions? How do we review FTAs against trade imbalances? These are crucial questions to be raised. Addressing these issues calls for a multi-pronged approach. An inverted duty structure has been identified as one of the major inhibitors of export growth. A recent Parliamentary Standing Committee report highlights this persisting challenge that Indian exporters are faced with. In simple terms, an inverted duty structure refers to a situation in which higher import duties are applicable on inputs more than those on finished products. It makes importing finished products more lucrative, thus stifling domestic manufacturing. The Committee report discusses an example that illustrates the adverse impact of

such a situation. On the one hand, the India-ASEAN FTA offers zero duty to copper tubes and pipes; and on the other, raw materials utilised in the production of copper tubes and pipes — copper cathode and copper scrap — attract import duties of 5% and 2.5% respectively. Policymakers need to address structural issues such as inverted duty structures to ensure a conducive environment for domestic manufacturing and export growth.

What can further add to the complexity of the situation are variations in tariff rates imposed by partner countries. Asymmetric tariff situations may create imbalances in trade flows, like in the case of India and the UK. Indian imports from the UK face a most favoured nation (MFN) weighted average tariff of 13.46% while exports from India to the UK see approximately 3.29% in tariffs levied, according to 2021 World Integrated Trade Solution data. This essentially means that Indian goods entering the UK confront lower average tariffs compared to UK goods entering India. Thus, tariff reduction through an FTA between the two nations may disproportionately benefit the UK. Switzerland’s recent development in its tariff policies further sheds light on international trade and tariff rates’ complexities. A report by the Global Trade Research Initiative highlights how Switzerland’s recent decision of

entering the UK confront lower average tariffs compared to UK goods entering India. Thus, tariff reduction through an FTA between the two nations may disproportionately benefit the UK. Switzerland’s recent development in its tariff policies further sheds light on international trade and tariff rates’ complexities. A report by the Global Trade Research Initiative highlights how Switzerland’s recent decision of

stories, and, hopefully get all the support they deserve. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Growing inequality

Facts do not bear out the claims of the finance minister that the budgets presented by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) drove equitable growth. The inequality index has grown significantly during the NDA’s reign. Income of the top 1% has increased from 22.6% to 40%. We

capacity growth is publicly available. The IEA has also said that there is going to be considerable shortage in the supply of copper (70%) and lithium (50%), whereas the situation is not so bad when it comes to nickel and cobalt. Graphite and rare earths may not have a problem in supply but will have problems of market concentration. In fact, it is feared that the geographic concentration is going to get worse. Concentration, however, does not seem so bad if it is viewed in terms of asset ownership, the reason being that US and European companies have been acquiring assets in other countries.

When it comes to India, the path for getting access to critical minerals seems quite arduous. First, India does not have reserves for critical minerals, barring a few. Though we have decided to auction 20 blocks allowing private sector mining, the response is not very encouraging. Some experts feel that the policy is flawed since critical minerals are available in small quantities and thus, stand-alone mining for critical minerals is not economically viable. It has to be bundled with some other mineral which is available in large quantities domestically. Besides, just mining the mineral is not enough, it has to be processed and we do not have the requisite technology. Sending the mineral to another country for processing does not ease our woes. We need to collaborate with some leading processors so that the technology is made available to us. It is said that the supply of critical minerals can be enhanced by about 10% through recycling. This again is a difficult job and requires the use of advanced technology apart from setting standards which need to be adhered to. The gist of the matter is that as things stand today, India’s position in securing a steady stream of critical minerals seems shaky.

To make an FTA truly successful, it is crucial to assess components that may be thwarting exporters from maximising their benefits from the agreement

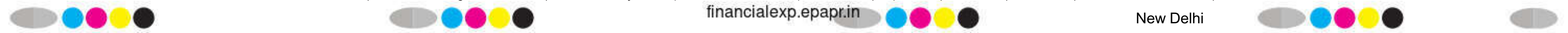
tariff-free entry for industrial goods may limit India’s gains from the EFTA TEPA. From India’s experience with FTAs signed in the past, the need for a comprehensive assessment of these agreements is felt strongly.

It is important to understand that signing an FTA is only a starting point. The India-EFTA TEPA is a big step forward. To make an FTA truly successful, it is crucial to assess components that may be thwarting exporters from maximising their benefits from the agreement. This essentially calls for multifaceted efforts. Setting up mechanisms to undertake continual assessments of signed agreements, monitoring them, and making modifications accordingly are an integral part of these efforts. More importantly, it is crucial to perceive FTAs as one instrument among many to catalyse trade. Complementing FTAs with supportive policies such as infrastructure development, streamlining operations, and capacity-building initiatives amplify FTAs’ impact on economic growth. Besides establishing new trade ties with nations, one should enquire how our customs procedures can be further streamlined, trade dispute mechanisms improved, and skills developed to ensure that our businesses are able to reap the benefits of India’s expanding relations. Furthermore, maintaining a constant and proactive dialogue or engagement with stakeholders is a prerequisite for a flourishing trade ecosystem.

With inputs from Shivani Kowadkar, development policy lead, Institute For Competitiveness

have seen the transparency of the government on many issues, including financial ones. Free rations to 80 crore Indians is a good indication of how this government has handled wealth inequality. Despite all the publicity surrounding the regime’s schemes, nothing has worked in the efforts of the government to create a more just and equitable India. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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# PARTIES TO BLAME FOR UPTICK IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN ODISHA

THE bitter fight between the main opponents in Odisha's twin polls has seen blood spilling on the streets. Last Saturday, two incumbent MLAs were booked for multiple violent incidents in the state's Khordha and Angul districts. One of them, a BJP nominee, was held for alleged vandalism as well as manhandling polling officials in a booth. The arrest of a major national party's candidate during an election is a first for Odisha. The other case was of a BJD candidate accused of assaulting a BJP worker. The first major incidence of violence at these elections was reported in Ganjam immediately after the first phase of polling in the state on May 13, when BJP's Berhampur Lok Sabha candidate came under attack hours after voting concluded. Two days later, a BJP worker was hacked to death allegedly by BJD workers during a poster campaign in the same district. The subsequent phases of polling have seen an uptick in violence, including arson, clashes and bomb attacks. There have been reports of voters bearing the brunt for refusing to abide by the diktats of candidates in parts of the state.

It is necessary to scratch the surface to understand the fundamental reason behind this spate of violence: the muscle power political parties use to win elections. An analysis of the state's assembly candidates' backgrounds by the Association of Democratic Reforms revealed that the share of major political parties' nominees who have criminal cases lodged against them ranged from 17 percent to 68 percent. At least 58 percent of BJP candidates have serious charges against them, compared to 22 percent for the BJD and 30 percent for the Congress. The accused in the Berhampur attack is an independent candidate for an assembly seat who has 46 cases pending against him. All major parties have fielded candidates with similar backgrounds.

The BJD has been pointing fingers at the saffron party for fielding candidates charged with serious crimes, while the BJP continues to allege that the ongoing violence has patronage of the ruling party and the police administration. The fact remains that as long as political parties have no qualms about welcoming candidates with criminal antecedents into their folds, violence as a weapon to influence polls will continue unabated.

# CHENNAI NEEDS MORE SHELTERS BEFORE RAINS

IT is mostly in conditions of extreme weather that members of the public and the state come to think of homeless persons. The bitter cold of Delhi winters has been the impetus for the Supreme Court to pull up state governments more than once for failing to provide adequate shelter to homeless populations. But winter is not the only dangerous month for the unhoused. A blistering heatwave has swept the country in recent months and yet, in ever-balmy Chennai, the shelter supports the city corporation should be equipped to offer have been undermined.

Chennai opened its first shelter in 1944. Although it falls short of the Supreme Court-mandated one shelter per one lakh population, it still has 50 shelters for a population of around 70 lakh—on paper at least. In reality, *TNIE* has reported that four shelters were closed in 2022 and this year the city corporation surrendered nearly ₹8 crore allocated for constructing new shelters, claiming non-availability of land. Meanwhile, newly built shelters were repurposed—*TNIE* found one functioning as a primary health centre—and NGOs running shelter programmes are struggling to make ends meet as the local body delays payments for months on end. The losers, amid this brutal heatwave, are the people the state's own revenue department categorised as 'high-risk' in such climatic conditions. The Greater Chennai Corporation has a storied history and is the richest and largest local body in Tamil Nadu. If it fails to fulfil its responsibilities to vulnerable populations, it will only set a trend for smaller local bodies to follow.

Homelessness is a complicated issue in India where destitute persons, employed but houseless persons, and entire families brave the elements in urban hubs without roofs over their heads. *In situ* housing near their workplaces has long been a demand that, if fulfilled, could resolve the problems and improve the prospects of a significant section of this population. For the destitute who are alone, unable to work or unwell, it is vital that the state ensures their protection, while respecting their agency, by making appropriate budgetary allocations as activists have been demanding. Meanwhile, the city corporation must revive closed shelters and reclaim newly constructed ones so that facilities are ready and available to serve this vulnerable population ahead of the monsoon.

## QUICK TAKE

### PREPARE BETTER FOR STORMS

YCLONE Remal is leaving a devastating trail across the northeast. At least 31 deaths have been reported in storm-related incidents in Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya. The biggest toll has been reported from Mizoram, where at least 17 people were killed when a stone quarry collapsed on migrants working at a rail bridge. A chunk of Tripura's power grid has been destroyed. We know by now that storms and flash floods are likely to increase in number and intensity. To leave populations so utterly vulnerable is criminally callous of all governments. We deserve more responsive warning and evacuation systems and better infrastructure to deal with nature's fury.

ABOUT a week, elections will determine the complexion of a new European parliament. They would show how the public evaluates policies of Europe's decision-makers on security, economic challenges, energy transition and migration. Polls project right and far-right parties may increase representation, perhaps even displacing the centre-left as the second largest grouping.

In April, France's President Emmanuel Macron laid out a characteristically frank analysis of Europe's challenges, declaring it would "die" if it did not wake up to current realities. Macron said Europe today encounters hostility from Russia, lack of interest from the US and competition from China. The US has only two priorities: America First and China. Europe is not a geopolitical priority. It has to find strategies to prevent marginalisation and relegation.

Macron's prescriptions include policies to accelerate self-reliance in raw materials, semiconductors, digital technologies and healthcare; and strategies to make Europe a world leader in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, space, biotechnologies and new energy by 2030. 'Food sovereignty' and energy transition policies with economic growth should be priorities.

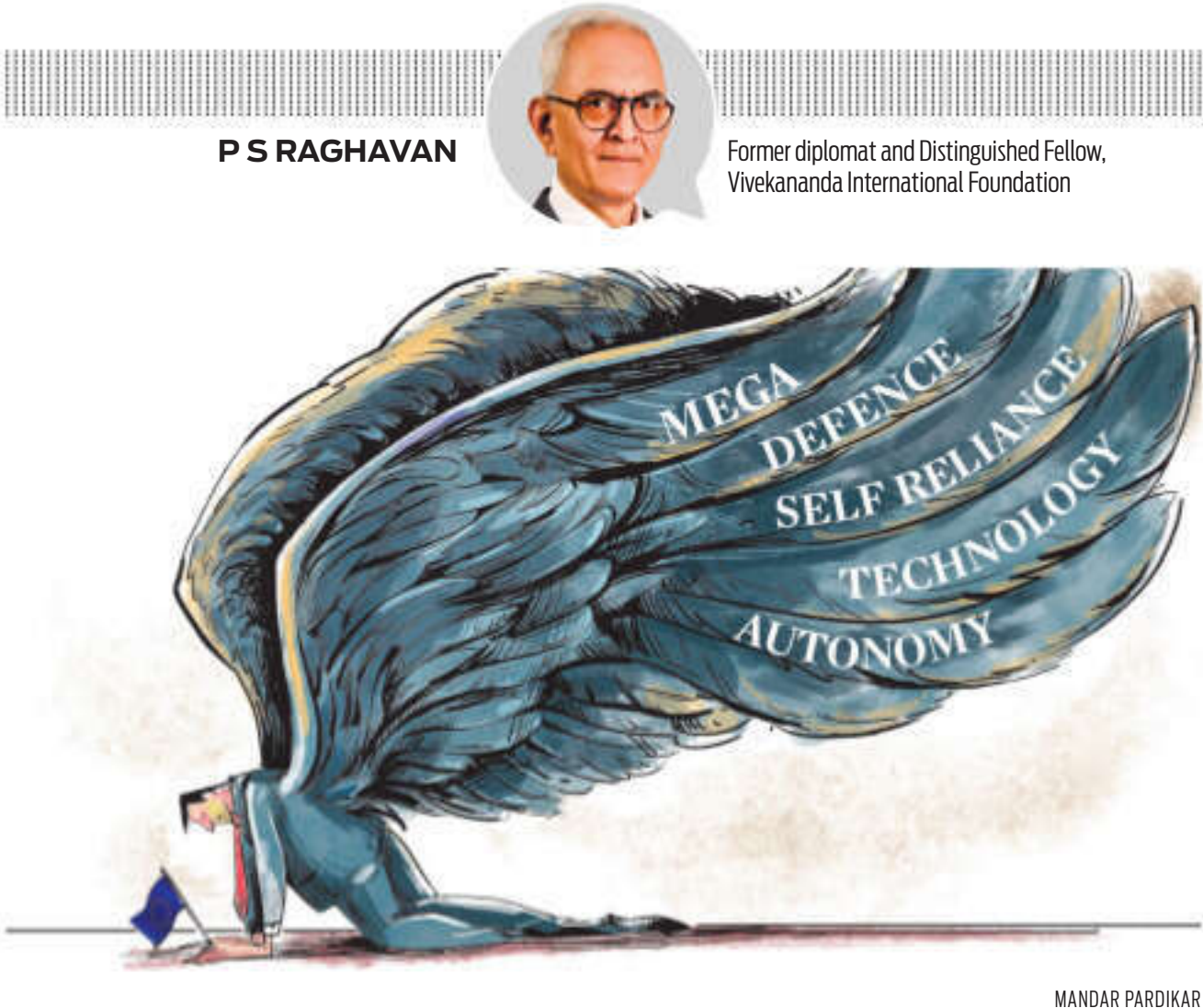
The centrepiece of Macron's recipe is a strong European defence capacity, with a full spectrum of military capabilities. This needs a Europe-wide defence industrial strategy, consolidating specialisations of major players, a "European preference" for military acquisitions and addressing the mismatch of specifications and standards (which was shown up in the assistance extended to Ukraine). It envisages strategic cohesion between European armies and a rapid reaction force, creating an autonomous European capacity to pursue its own defence strategies "in the Mediterranean, Africa, the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic".

Europe also needs a clear understanding of its geography, to protect against un-governed inflows of migrants and goods. It needs to protect its culture: "Europe's children are more and more exposed to American or Asian content." Achievement of these targets may need massive investment of a billion euros annually, but Macron says it is essential for Europe's resuscitation. It involves spurning Western economic orthodoxies of decades (on which they have been lecturing countries like India for decades). Macron's justification is Europe cannot afford to remain a nice guy, when the US and China are breaking all rules.

The objective is a Europe that is not a "vassal of the US", but a "power of balance" that can develop reciprocal partner-

Macron wants to Make Europe Great Again, borrowing from Trumpian MAGA ideas and protectionist Bidenomics. The Euro polls may influence this process

# A MEGA RESPONSE TO MAGA



P S RAGHAVAN

Former diplomat and Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation

ships with its own Arctic, Indo-Pacific, Latin America and Africa strategies, rejecting bipolar confrontation too many continents are accepting. It is a vision that can be described as Making Europe Great Again—borrowing from Trumpian MAGA ideas and protectionist Bidenomics. It has been dubbed grandiose, but it is consistent with his past warnings about Europe's lack of geopolitical vision. Seven years ago, he called for "greater unity, greater sovereignty, greater democracy" in Europe. Over the years, he has actively engaged in initiatives to strengthen European capacities.

There is a *deja vu* in this ambition for a strong Europe. Soon after the Cold War, Europe saw opportunities and a demographic dividend from its forthcoming expansion. In 2000, the EU launched the Lisbon agenda to transform it into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". Underpinning the agenda was a security and defence policy, envisaging military integration and a force to promote European interests beyond borders.

Concerned about a potential decoupling of Europe from America, the US acted to assert the primacy of NATO in EU's defence policy, including a right of first refusal for military actions. The eastward expansion of NATO had its own corrective impact. The Iraq war of 2003 created East-West fissures in the continent and the eurozone crisis accentuated its North-South divisions. The Lisbon agenda of 2000 gave way to a less ambitious programme.

In recent years, European institutions have reiterated the importance of strategic autonomy for Europe. However, the interpretation of strategic autonomy varies in

# CHALLENGE OF CREATING A SKILLED WORKFORCE

INDIA stands tall today as the world's fastest-growing large economy. This has been accompanied by the creation of high-quality employment opportunities, reflected in the latest Periodic Labour Survey, where positive trends can be observed across many indicators. The worker-population ratio (WPR) for people aged 15 and above increased by almost 10 percentage points from 46.8 percent in 2017-18 to 56 percent in 2022-23. Similarly, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) significantly increased over the same five-year period from 49.8 percent to 57.9 percent. This was supported by a concomitant decline in the unemployment rate from 6 percent to 3.2 percent.

This employment landscape has undergone transformative changes over the years, with the emergence of dynamic sectors and entrepreneurial ventures. A host of government initiatives directed towards fostering gainful employment has created a conducive ecosystem fostering innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial talent.

At the same time, a strong impetus has been placed on developing a future-ready, inclusive and employable workforce with relevant and up-to-date skills, supported by various skill development programmes and affirmative action policies that will continue to shape India's future of work.

The central government has undertaken a range of impactful measures to create a vibrant and conducive jobs ecosystem in the country. Notable initiatives including Digital India, Skill India, Startup India, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, and Production Linked Incentive Schemes across India's strategic sectors are supporting India's aspirational youth and budding entrepreneurs through skilling, enhancing employability and boosting enterprise development. For example, the PLI scheme has created over 8 lakh new jobs.

The sustained level of government capex spending for physical, social and digital infrastructure, as reflected in consecutive budgets, has also created large scale employment. With over 33 percent increase in public capex for three preceding years, infrastructure construction has helped connect rural and urban India to create new employment and business opportunities.

A strong education sector is a critical enabler of human capital. The National Education Policy was introduced in 2020 to improve the quality of education, promote skill development and provide universal ac-



CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE

Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry

cess to education. A host of digital education initiatives like DIKSHA, SWAYAM, PM e-vidya, etc., have been undertaken to facilitate multi-modal access to education.

The positive impacts of such initiatives are reflected in India's education-wise employment indicators that show several positive trends. As per PLFS data, WPR in the 15 and above cohort for secondary education and above has increased from around 43.2 percent in 2017-18 to 50.3 percent in 2022-23.

According to PLFS estimates, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate also witnessed a significant increase from 23.3 percent in 2017-18 to 37 percent in 2022-23 (for the 15 and above cohort). This represents a sharp rise in working women, which will contribute greatly to further development. Education, skilling and credit enhancement programmes are further helping close the gender gap, particularly with a surge in the proportion of women in higher education and STEM areas. For accelerating the pace of job creation, CII has suggested an Employment Linked Incentive Scheme in sectors such as tourism, logistics, retail, film, animation and gaming. Greater focus on promoting labour intensive sectors such as textiles, leather and jewellery can also yield more employment.

Special attention needs to be accorded to equipping workers with skills in high-growth sectors, particularly in manufacturing, logistics, finance, healthcare and life sciences. With greater automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), harnessing the potential of AI and related technologies with requisite skills must be top priorities.

India, with a young population with a median age of around 28 years, has immense potential to contribute significantly to global long term economic growth. It is being positioned as the largest provider of human resources in a world economy faced with the challenges of ageing populations. As India marches forward on the path of growth, propelled by innovation and its talented youth, the horizon of opportunity continues to expand, beckoning a bright and inclusive future for all.

(Views are personal)  
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23. The ratio for the categories of graduates, postgraduates and above also exhibited significant improvement, going up by 6.1 percent and 4.1 percent respectively over the six-year period. The LFPRs for all categories also displayed similar patterns, reinforcing the positive impact that strong education policies have had on employment.

As the employment landscape is witnessing a shift towards skill-based hiring, the importance of vocational training has great potential to boost employability by training workers in specific skill sets. Under the Skill India Mission, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship is implementing an array of schemes through its extensive network of centres, colleges and institutes. Both short-term and long-term training programmes are training

different nations. More importantly, among many in Europe—as among many strategic analysts in India—the term conjures up the spectre of anti-Americanism, which dictates caution in its use. A research paper of the European Council of Foreign Relations notes differing responses to US perspectives: UK, Sweden, Baltic and Central European countries consider US concerns an important determinant of the limits of strategic autonomy, while some western European countries believe that US concerns are driven by economic motives.

Two men have recently held up a mirror to Europe's strategic challenges—Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. The former by his posture on transatlantic defence and economic relations; the latter by his military operations in Ukraine, which have shown up Europe's vulnerabilities. Prospects of an impending Trump administration and a protracted war in Ukraine have energised consultations on measures to protect its security and economic interests.

Of the elements in Macron's blueprint, defence coordination and integration have made the most progress. A UK-France declaration in March 2023 held out the prospect of the UK joining a European defence initiative. It was suggested their nuclear deterrents could provide security guarantees for Europe. These are nascent ideas, requiring acceptance and validation. Creating the capacities and force structures for a robust European deterrent would be a lengthy, but worthwhile, process. For the US, which is overstretched in its efforts to contain Russia and China, outsourcing European security to Europeans may not be as unwelcome as it was two decades ago. British participation may be a confidence builder, both across the Atlantic and the continent.

Leaders recognise the geopolitical need for a strong, autonomous Europe. But translating declarations into viable action plans needs visionary leadership, drawing in disparate political strands and creating a common minimum programme that meets acceptance across the continent.

Alliances were a Cold War construct, with inbuilt inflexibilities. Alliance partners now have a new diversity of political and socioeconomic options and compulsions. This is the reality Europe is encountering. The transatlantic link will remain important; the challenge is to find a balance between a tight embrace and decoupling.

The outcome of the Euro elections may influence this process. A Europe rooting for multipolarity can make a valuable contribution to an emerging world order, whenever that happens.

(Views are personal)  
(raghavan.ps@gmail.com)

## MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

### Enhancing capabilities

Ref: *The misdirected debate on population changes* (May 28). The article makes a very good point about religious demography and development. The argument that population growth is linked to an enhancement of women's capabilities, especially their education and income, is quite convincing.  
**V Janakiraman, Tiruvuru**

### Mamata's commitment

Ref: *Mamata to skip INDIA bloc meet on June 1 in Delhi* (May 28). The TMC leader has said she was bogged down with remedial measures post the Remal cyclone. Her commitment to the state's welfare rather than taking part in the meeting is highly commendable.  
**Rajamani Chelladurai, Tirunelveli**

### Dedicated leader

Hats off to Mamata Benerjee for not attending the INDIA bloc meeting as her priority is relief work in the state. It is rare to find such dedicated chief ministers. Let her tribe increase in our country.  
**Kavitha Srikanth, Chennai**

### Illegal setup

Ref: *Lost faith in state machinery: Guj HC* (May 28). The Gujarat High Court pointed out correctly that the administrative machinery woke up only after lives were lost. This applies not only to Gujarat, but other states too. It is unfortunate that the gaming arena in Rajkot was functioning without any permission for almost three years. It is disgraceful that many government officials participated in the inauguration of that illegal structure.  
**M Haneef, Kottayam**

### Reinvigorating Nadal

Ref: *Nadal exits in first round, isn't sure of future French Opens* (May 28). The exit of Rafael Nadal is shocking. But he is a gutsy warrior and cannot be expected to resign meekly. He has been haunted by injuries that kept him away from playing for months. He is only 38, with a lot of play left in him. His faith about his own skill plus the fan support will reinvigorate him and make him play-fit soon.  
**Manoharan Muthuswamy, Ramanathapuram**

### Record performance

Catching them young is true for sports in general and weightlifting in particular. Fifteen-year-old Indian weightlifter Preetismita Bhoi shattered the youth clean jerk world record in the women's 40-kg category, securing a gold medal at the IWF World Youth Championships. The achievement is phenomenal. The teenager bettered the previous record by 1 kg.  
**Krishnan Ramani, Kozhikode**



# Ad Lib? Commercial Shift in Commercials

Growth of non-linear TV will determine shift

Television broadcasters expect advertising revenues to bounce back after a confluence of adverse developments last year. Amid a secular shift in advertising to digital platforms, revenue was affected by free cricket streaming online, sports cannibalising entertainment ad revenue during the festival season, and effects of a bigger base in the prior year. The expectation is these were transient forces, and revenue growth will be propped up by elections and a strong yet strategically spaced-out cricketing year. The bounce will be a welcome development for broadcasters who are yielding ad revenue market share as both sport and entertainment switch to streaming platforms.

But India can't indefinitely hold out against the global change in media consumption habits. Protection offered by lack of access to the internet has been neutralised through smartphone sales and rising data consumption.

A new pipeline of programming is emerging online aided by low carriage costs. Sports viewership is likewise migrating online, assisted by cost arbitrage with offline broadcast rights. Again, as ecommerce gains traction, advertisers will gravitate closer to point of sale. These are structural changes in consumer preferences that cyclical factors can at best delay, not reverse. Technology has disadvantaged linear TV in distribution and marketing. Pace of its decline in the country will be determined by the growth of non-linear TV.

But it may be too early to write obituaries. Digital privacy laws will make it more difficult to target audiences online. Broadcast TV is beginning to offer advertisers the same precision in targeting audiences. Broadcasting has also evolved to offer services like video on demand. Linear TV has its strongest defence in its reach, though, with population-wide coverage. This makes it the go-to medium for live events and sports. The market for scheduled programming is unlikely to be replaced entirely by time-shift viewing habits in all categories. This creates a moat around broadcast TV for mass event advertising.

# After Saving Lives, Now to Fortify Them

Thunderstorms and tornadoes left a trail of destruction and killed at least 23 people over the weekend — across Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Alabama in the US. The considerably much more populated and infrastructurally vulnerable areas pummeled by Cyclone Remal over the weekend across Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Mizoram, as well as Bangladesh, resulted in the deaths of less than 20 so far. This is not to lay out the results of 'some perverse 'disaster management' contest. But it does show how this part of the world, including India, has significantly improved its evacuation capabilities, at least when it comes to minimising loss of life during extreme weather events since the 1999 Paradip super cyclone and 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

And it's not just cyclones that are occurring with increasing frequency and intensity due to human intervention (read: reckless interference) in weather and geographical systems that includes climate change. India's disaster management and relief mechanisms have been up to the challenge of dealing with other natural disasters as well. National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), together with the sharp, reliable forecasting and early warning systems of Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), have ensured that India's coastal states can weather cyclonic storms with minimal loss of life.

Now comes the next part of the challenge. More than 85% of India's geographical area is prone to multiple hazards. While saving lives must always be priority, the focus must now expand to minimise loss of infrastructure and property, and improve people's resilience to withstand the intensity of the rising number of extreme weather events.

JUST IN JEST

Never mind whom you're having it with, it's India's mann-pasand khana

# Sare Jahan Se Achhi Biryani Hamari

Swiggy may not be Prashant Kishor, but if the online food-ordering and -delivery platform's sales data throws up one juicy fact to chew on, it's this: in 2023, India ordered 2.5 plates of biryani every second. Side plate note: for every 5.5 chicken biryanis ordered, there was one veg biryani. Mind you, this isn't just about the super spike during Ramzan — when during iftar (5.30-7 pm), around 6 mn plates of the good stuff were ordered from Mar 12 to Apr 8 this year alone. Like chow mein ain't just for Sinophiles, and cakes aren't only chomped during Christmas, biryani ain't just for non-vegetarians or 'non-non-Hindus'.

So, worry not about the distant possibility of terrorists being fed biryani at a future PM's house. The chances are equally slim and high that they could be fed pav bhaji or samosas. But whether you're sharing with a terrorist or with a pugilist, Swiggy's most-popular order for the eighth year in a row is as secularised as the roti, as diversely consumed as India itself. In fact, if one looks at this year's IPL final, it was pretty much a contest between Hyderabad biryani and its Kolkata-style cousin, the one with the aloo — the latter — winning with aplomb this time. After reading this, if you're tempted enough to order a plate or two or three via Swiggy, Zomato or your local biryani takeaway, our job is done.

**CURSOR** ➤ Overturn cultural practices and dogmas to spur our companies to spend on R&D

# Innovate, Not Copy-Paste



T K Arun

WhatsApp is a good place to feel great about ourselves as a nation, with prolific tales of ancient glory. A more prosaic view of where we stand as a nation is available from assorted global reports, for example, on hunger (111th out of 125 countries), press freedom (159th out of 180 countries), and UN's sustainable development ranking (112th among 166 countries). In comparison, India's rank of 40 on the World Intellectual Property Organisation's Global Innovation Index (GII) 2023 isn't so dismal. India ranks above all BRICS nations, except China.

Of the world's top 100 S&T clusters, identified by the combined total of patent applications and research publications from the cluster as a proportion of the total, India houses four: Bengaluru at 56th place, Delhi 64th, Chennai 83rd and Mumbai 84th. However, when the research output is measured in terms of per resident of these clusters, Bengaluru's rank drops to 96th, Chennai's to 97th, Delhi's to 99th, and Mumbai's to 100th.

China has 24 of these clusters among the top 100, the US has 21, Germany 9, Japan, Canada, South Korea and India have 4 each, and France, Britain and Australia have 3 each. India produces the second-largest number of graduates in science, technology engineering and mathematics, behind only China, every year. About 30% of Indian graduates tend to be in STEM, whereas that figure is 33% for Iran, 36% for Germany, 37% for Russia and 41% for China, according to Georgetown University's Centre for Security and Emerging Technology. When distributed over the STEM population, India's research output numbers look puny.

**Social hierarchy also inhibits critical thinking.** To question received wisdom is anathema. The teacher teaches, the student learns, without questioning



Burglar king

India has four notable S&T clusters, thanks to the more than 1,000 Global Capability Centres (GCCs) assorted MNCs have set up in India, either as direct subsidiaries or as outsourced work centres run by Indians for their global clients. There are hardly any Indian companies setting up their own capability centres in India. What makes Indian companies so shy of spending on R&D?

India's aggregate R&D spending is one of the lowest in the world for a country with serious ambitions for economic growth and strategic autonomy. India spends less than 0.7% of GDP on R&D. In contrast, the figure is greater than 5% for tiny Israel, almost 5% for South Korea, 2.43% for China, 3.3% for Japan, 3.14% for Germany and 3.46%

for the US. In a recent column, Ajay Chhibber points out that, of India's R&D expenditure, almost 60% is carried out by the public sector, the private sector accounting for R&D

spending totalling 0.26% of GDP.

The GII 2023 report observes that for 1,700 of the top 2,500 global companies that spend serious money on R&D, total R&D outlay crossed \$1 tn in 2021, and rose from 3.9% of turnover in 2018 to 4.5% in 2022. Leaders in software, hardware and pharma industries spend close to a fifth of their turnover on R&D. Rare is the Indian company that spends even 1% of turnover on R&D.

What makes Indian companies so chary of R&D?

There are no readymade answers, whatever we say here must be taken as speculation. The temptation of low-hanging fruit is probably the primary culprit.

**Unoriginal sin** There are so many ways to modify or adapt an existing business model or tech to Indian conditions and make good money that spending money on creating something altogether new seems like a delusion of grandeur. A more honest variant of this is licensing extant tech from the IP holder: **Capital problem** Access to capital

is a constraint. Even venture funds that invest in India wish to make a quick buck from business models and technologies that have been found to work profitably elsewhere in the world. Domestic capital to finance creation of groundbreaking innovation is scarce.

**'Innovation is decadent'** There are multiple cultural biases against innovation. Indian tradition holds that knowledge is finite and is contained in the Vedas, and their established commentaries. The original Sankaracharya was called 'Sarvangya', he who knew everything. To pursue new knowledge is to go against tradition.

Nor is this a mere matter of abstract epistemology. Authenticity and authority of the Vedas are enmeshed with traditional India's hierarchical social structure, the caste system, at whose apex stands the brahmin, 'lord of all creation', as the Manusmriti describes him, whose job it is to learn the Vedas. If the Vedas are no longer the embodiment of all knowledge and are, in fact, fallible, social hierarchy with the brahmin at the top is also at risk.

**'Do not question'** Social hierarchy also inhibits critical thinking. To question received wisdom is anathema. The teacher teaches, the student learns, without questioning.

**There are so many ways to adapt an existing business model or tech to Indian conditions that spending money on creating something new seems like a delusion of grandeur**

**Macaulay tax** Overlaid on top of this is English-medium education, which imbues in the recipient a sense of superiority vis-à-vis those who study in non-English Indian languages and, simultaneously, a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the White man. Those who study in the medium of English run the risk of being cut off from their own cultural roots and end up bereft of cultural confidence. Without validation by a White man, they would not have confidence in a new idea or business model they innovate on their own.

Overturning social hierarchy and generating a new culture of empowerment would seem to hold the key to unleashing the innovative potential of India's millions.



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Grief and Beyond

AMIT BAPNA

Losing a dear one is enlightening because it is a great reminder of how ephemeral life is and how important it is to savour it daily. One way to enjoy life is to spend time with our loved ones and with people who matter to us and to whom we matter.

Often, in our busy lives, we tend to put personal things like spending time with our parents and children for a later date. Until the inevitability of time shakes us out of our reverie. Grief helps find a solution and figure out a way to deal with the loss. It enables us to handle sorrow and go through the routine and the days that follow until the angst and melancholy become memories.

We tend to procrastinate, and when it comes to making time for our family, most of us keep it for another day; much like going to the gym. The busy schedules, incessant meetings and travel create a whirlpool of work pressure that sucks us in.

Till a tragic happening reminds us of time lost and the irreversibility of it. We can treat each day as precious and finish the tasks assigned for that day, professional and personal. While no 'carved in stone' playbook exists, 'now' is the best time to make the bucket list of our life goals and embark on that journey.

The best thing is that we can start on that journey right now without any delay. We can only hold on to our precious memories of the departed. One does not recover from grief but learns to find a place for it within.



# Inside the Head Of Serial Killers

Crime stories on streaming shows and movies are the rage. Podcasts aren't to be left behind. 'Paranormal podcaster' Jim Harold is a crime podcaster star who's the mic behind 'Crime Scene'. One particularly intriguing episode, **Answering Questions About Serial Killers**, features an interview with forensic psychologist Joni Johnston, author of *Serial Killers: 101 Questions True Crime Fans Ask*. It's absolutely gripping.

In this 46-min 2023 episode, Johnston makes surprising revelations. Perhaps the most brow-raising, if not hair-raising, one being that contrary to popular belief, most serial killers *do not* suffer from mental illnesses.

Instead, they often have personality disorders. She also debunks the stereotype that serial killers are predominantly White, unemployed males. There's a notable diversity in terms of race and gender; although men do dominate this dark field. Additionally, while many serial killers are depicted as being sexually motivated, this podcast tells us that financial gain is also a significant motivator.

A particularly thought-provoking bit in the interview is Johnston sharing her take with Harold on the death penalty. Although she doesn't support it, she believes the victims' families should have a say in the decision. Hmm.

# Chat Room

# More Reformative Union Budgets

Apropos the news report, 'More Transparency in Budget Making Over 10 Years: FM' (May 28), FM's remark on the Union Budget is undoubtedly true. However, it must be remembered that the budgets in the last 10 years have not reduced the inequalities of income and wealth in the country. That the top 1% of the population in India enjoys about 40% of national income generated, according to the latest data, is a case in point. Also, the fall in demand for mass-consumption goods is a reflection of glaring economic inequalities. In hindsight, budget-making in the last 10 years could have yielded even better results going by their potential.

**S RAMAKRISHNASAYEE**  
Chennai

# Raise a Glass to the Job Creators



S K Pathak

In a recent interview, Narendra Modi reiterated the need to encourage business and not demonise it. The PM's support is welcome. Post-Independence governments had a socialist mindset, leading to many perverse incentives and disincentives for India Inc. This narrative spread beyond political and bureaucratic circles to shapers of public opinion, mass media and popular culture.

Expectedly, businesses and livelihood creators responded to these disincentives by gaming the system. The licence raj was less about business excellence or competition, and more about how to manipulate licences and create monopolies. In that era, black marketing, hoarding and smuggling were common.

Low economic growth and insignificant job creation led to poor economic opportunities for the first post-1947

generation. They had to endure a 7-year wait for a scooter, and had to get permits for cement, steel and landline phones. The well-educated wanted their children and wards to get into top state jobs and the armed forces to escape this shortage economy.

Thankfully, liberalisation in the 1990s corrected that trajectory. However, real change happened when incentives were aligned with rapid growth of businesses and job creators. With more alignment of incentives, 'animal spirits' of enterprise and entrepreneurship grew. And, with it, large job creation and economic growth over the last three decades.

There's much more to be done to benefit people with low incomes. Indian businesses need to grow to become global champions. However, erstwhile large industry houses and business leaders may be shifting their capital, families or both outside India, to business-friendly locations abroad.

Covid taught us lessons. The least discussed among them is the drying up of tax inflows

to the state exchequer due to the lockdown. Had lockdowns continued, treasuries would have run out of funds, even to pay salaries of government employees. State government finance departments were quick to realise this. Despite the dangerous second wave of 2021, most states eased lockdowns.

Efficient tax-collection processes and transparent spending of public funds directly impact public welfare, which, in turn, impacts politics. Political scientist Harold Lasswell spelt out the definition of politics in his 1936 book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. GST collections going up from ₹1.4 lakh cr in Apr 2021 to ₹2.1 lakh cr in Apr 2024 means governments can spend much more.

God's primary revenue source is collecting taxes from people and enterprises. Printing new currency notes is a pernicious road to inflation, while international borrowing works only if the return on borrowed funds is higher than interest paid on such borrowings. In any case, such international borrowing is but a fraction of

tax collections.

Hence, dynamic leaders try to encourage economic activity in the private sector, especially MSMEs. This increases tax collections and consequent public spending — easily understood in a subnational context. For instance, Bihar or Jharkhand, with less economic activity and tax collections, can spend much less on social, physical or digital infrastructure compared to, say, richer Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu.

That's why virtuous competition among states is good. Businesses and labour gravitate to those states and regions that promote economic growth. States must provide good infra, the most critical being good law and order. Strong and objective enforcement is also necessary to penalise wrongdoers in private and government sectors so that bona fide businesses are not held back.

In today's era, the well-educated want their young to get into top schools and management institutes, enter the corporate sector, start startups and create jobs. One hopes this support for job creators is backed across party lines, especially at the city and state levels.

*The writer is secretary-general, Ficci*

# Don't Eat the Rich, It'll Hurt the Rest



Govind Bhattacharjee

On May 24, Thomas Piketty's World Inequality Lab released a follow-up note to its earlier published paper, 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj'. The note, 'Proposals for a Wealth Tax Package to Tackle Extreme Inequalities in India', advocates imposing a 2% tax on net wealth exceeding ₹10 cr, and a 33% inheritance tax to deal with the problem of rising inequality, and to generate extra resources to be spent on education, health and welfare programmes.

The study estimates that the measure would affect only 0.4% of the adult population, while generating additional resources worth 2.73% of GDP, or around ₹9 lakh cr. It also highlighted inter-caste disparities, pointing that HNIs in India mostly belong to upper castes, and the measure would, therefore, be aligned with social justice.

Many countries have attempted to tax the rich through these taxes without success. They fundamentally militate against simple economic logic — disproportionate amounts are spent

on their collection, and evasions are easy. Wealth is difficult to assess, and can be easily hidden in agricultural or real estates. The taxes also disincentivise enterprise and lead to flight of capital, affecting growth.

India had a wealth tax since 1957 till FY15 when it was replaced by a surcharge at rates that now range from 10% to 25% on the income-tax paid by HNIs if their taxable income exceeded ₹50 lakh under the new tax regime. The Wealth Tax Act 1957 levied 1% on individuals and corporates on their net wealth exceeding ₹30 lakh, which included land and houses, furniture, transport, jewellery and cash exceeding ₹50,000, besides assets transferred to spouse and children.

In FY15, wealth tax yielded only ₹1,086 cr of total tax revenue of ₹12 lakh cr, while cost of collection was ₹695 cr, including that on securities and transaction tax. The surcharge that replaced it generated ₹1,565 cr in FY16 with-

out any additional cost, and has since grown to ₹73,000 cr as estimated in the current budget. That is a much better way to handle inequality than the solution suggested by Piketty et al, which would inevitably drain domestic and foreign investments and stymie growth. The country will then wallow in 'equal poverty' for all.

Inequality is the cost of growth, but less of a problem when other measures are in place to mitigate the problems of vulnerable groups. There is now a strong social security net for that in the form of free or highly subsidised food grains through various schemes that ensure food security for 80 cr Indians, and Ayushman Bharat that covers 50 cr people.

Multidimensional poverty in India as estimated by NITI Aayog was only 11% in 2022-23, as compared to nearly 30% a decade back. Compare this with 22% ratio when poverty was estimated last by the Planning Commission in FY12, based on monthly per-capita consumption expenditure.

Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality on a scale of 0 (perfect equality) and 1 (highest inequality) was then 0.33. A recent SBI research paper states that this has risen to 0.40 as of FY23, but down from 0.47 in FY15. Inequality is not something to lose our sleep over: Rich OECD



Lifting all boats

*The writer is former director general, Comptroller and Auditor General of India*





# Sugar & Vice

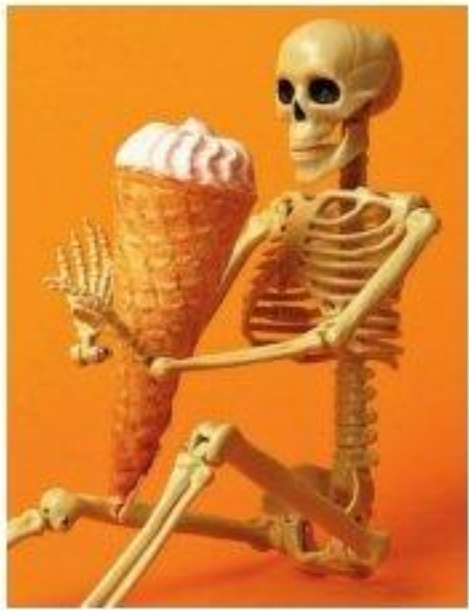
Better food labelling will be a better deterrent.  
Public health trumps industry interests

Historically, food industry bats for unhealthy status-quoism. Like, the 1960s US effort to boost cavity prevention didn't choose the obvious guidance – eat less sugar. Instead, industry interests managed to push alternatives such as, fight dental plaque. Today, in India, the NIN-ICMR recommendation to set thresholds for sugar in packaged food and beverages, is being called 'impractical' by company executives. The appropriate adjective is 'imperative'.

**Bitter formula** | It felt bitter to be told that Nestle does not add sugar to the infant milk it sells in Europe, but does so in India. Giant food & beverage MNCs do have different quality standards for different countries. But what is no less bitter is that the 2011 Dietary Guidelines for India actually advised feeding infants one teaspoon of sugar per 120-180 ml milk feed, 6-8 times a day. This year's update of the guidelines was most needed. It responds to a science that can no longer be silenced, which has countries from east to west beginning to treat sugar as on the same level of a health threat as tobacco.

**Rough drink** | Setting threshold limits for sugar is a very important first step towards easing Indians' very sour addiction to it. This has to be followed by the much harder work of educating the public about new labelling, and monitoring it for accuracy. The recent GOI advisory against the use of the 'health drink' label for some popular brands, is also important in this context. A better-educated consumer will read the labelling for nutrient details, instead of being swayed by 'health' claims. A better monitoring regime will investigate the veracity of such claims 24x7.

**Junk mithai** | But what about your neighbourhood mithai shop? Maybe there is more than one. Eitherways, the sugar bombs here are free to explode as they will. No label or threshold inhibits them. Clearly, a lot of the dangerous food habits that are perceived as traditional also need changing. Schools have to play a key role in this transformation. Starting off with good food habits is much easier than fixing bad ones.



# Elderly Gaps

Health insurers have mostly bypassed senior citizens.  
That's the market a new entrant must cover

India's insurance regulations may be tweaked to dismantle the wall between life and non-life insurers. If that happens, LIC, the market leader in life insurance, will consider getting into health insurance. It's well placed to do so, with an annual profit in excess of ₹40,000cr and its share price having almost doubled since Oct. The big question is, what will this mean for consumers.

**Dissatisfaction amidst plenty** | Health insurance is highly competitive. At end-2023, there were 29 insurers underwriting health policies, the largest segment of the non-life market. It's also fast growing. Health insurance premium in 2023 expanded 21%, which was seven percentage points faster than the overall growth in non-life segments.

The numbers are at odds with consumer experience. A survey by insurance broker Policybazaar showed that while 96% of the sample was aware of health insurance, only 43% owned a policy. Two of the three most important reasons for insubstantial ownership were a feeling that premiums are too high and that policies are complex in terms of ailments excluded from coverage etc.

**Lopsided market** | India's health coverage is dominated by govt sponsorship, but the premium is raised overwhelmingly from private policies. Insurance regulator Irdai's data showed that 550 million people have health cover. About 54 of every 100 covers are govt-sponsored. But ₹91 of every ₹100 collected as premium come from individual and group policies.

**Gaps galore** | Standalone health insurers have sidestepped govt-sponsored health coverage. This group of insurers concentrates on the private market and has a far lower claims payout ratio than PSUs and private general insurers. How does that really help when GOI data showed that a mere 6% of the population with an individual health cover are senior citizens even though Irdai encourages their coverage? The most vulnerable group is excluded mainly because the hike in premium is particularly steep for that demographic. A new entrant needs to figure out how to fill the large gap in India's health cover. Will LIC be that insurer?



# Dalal St dilemma

A voter's quandary deciding between politics and the profit motive

Jug Suraiya

The stockbroker had faced a most challenging quandary. Politically speaking, he was inclined to vote for Opposition, whose ideology he preferred to that of the govt in office. However, if the govt were to be ousted, the stock market, which was the broker's bread and butter, would take a nosedive.

So what should he choose: Opposition or govt? Politics or profit? But for him, oughtn't politics be about profit, his own and that of his investors, many of whom were retirees dependent on him for their income?

However, did this mean that he was putting his personal financial interests, and those of his clientele above his allegiance to the country? Was he putting pursuit of financial gain above patriotism? That was his dilemma.

The solution was simple: he simply wouldn't vote, for anyone. But the simple solution wasn't simple at all.

What do you mean you won't vote? said Mrs Broker in indignant ire. Don't you know how privileged we are to live in a democracy? And that with that privilege goes the civic responsibility of voting? What would happen if, like you, no one voted? Our democracy would be dead as a dodo, and we'd all be living in something like North Korea, or Myanmar, or the Ku Klux Klan, wherever that is, said Mrs Broker.

All his friends, relatives, and one Uncleji called EC, said much the same thing. But surely the right to vote must include its opposite, the right not to vote, the broker tried to argue. Don't talk rot, he was told, in a chorus led by Uncle EC.

How could one choose to choose not choosing? How could one vote without being forced to choose between personal gain and patriotism? Toss a coin? Heads, Opposition? Tails, govt? But that would involve choosing which was which.

So he did the only thing he could. He went to EVM, shut his eyes, hit a button at random and, eyes still shut, left without knowing his unchosen choice.

After all, he told himself, what's a secret ballot if it isn't also a secret from oneself.



## secondopinion

# 4 Ideas Have Won The Election

• Welfarism expanded to include official charity • Economic data-based quota politics  
• Wider acceptance of Muslims' negative portrayal • Universalisation of religion-based politics

**Hilal Ahmed**

The 2024 general election is going to be an important event for two reasons. First, the outcome of this electoral battle will decide the political destiny of two powerful coalitions – BJP-led NDA and Congress-dominated INDIA bloc. BJP has so far relied heavily on Modi. It will be interesting to observe how this Modi-centric campaign helps the party retain its electoral hegemony.

On the other hand, Opposition, especially Congress, has been successful so far in establishing itself as a serious challenger. This is certainly a new development. BJP's electoral success has played a significant role in the political marginalisation of Opposition in the last 10 years. This time, however, Opposition is much more active in pursuing an aggressive electoral campaign. This aggressive politics will certainly have an impact on the electoral outcome.

**Battle of ideas** | The 2024 election has another significance, which doesn't entirely depend on the Lok Sabha results. This election has led to an interesting battle of political ideas and imaginations. For the first time in three decades, fundamental questions of our political life are being debated and discussed. Issues such as citizenship, elections, democratic decentralisation, role of judiciary and other govt agencies – usually taken as settled matters of democratic polity – are being systematically redefined as contested entities.

Modi-led BJP posed a serious challenge to the *Nehruvian consensus*, especially in relation to the constitutional ideals of secularism and affirmative action. This attack mode of intellectual politics by BJP forced Opposition to take a rather defensive position. Rahul's two

Bharat Jodo Yatras were a turning point. These grassroots-oriented political interventions provided a new vocabulary to Opposition leaders. They began to talk about *nyay* as a new ideological template. This *nyay*-centric narrative is pitted against Hindutva-driven nationalism in an interesting manner. Broadly speaking, four key political ideas have started taking concrete shape.

**The charitable state** | *Democratisation of economic sphere* has become a political reference point. Congress manifesto emphasises the fact that BJP's economic policies have led to ever-growing economic

inequalities. BJP, especially PM, hasn't ignored this issue either. In an interview, Modi clarified his govt's welfare schemes have helped poor and marginalised communities to develop their economic capacity. This argument, in a way, justifies what can be called the Charitable State model – a state that offers welfarism as a kind of official charity, while remaining committed to open market economy. It's important to note here that Congress, and for that matter other parties in INDIA, are also committed to some form of populist schemes to mobilise electoral support. However, their position on economic disparity somehow pushes

them to rethink their version of Charitable State model.

**A new caste prism** | *Secularisation of affirmative action* is the second key idea. INDIA bloc has made it clear it will go for a countrywide caste census. This argument has two related implications.

First, it would unpack the existing logic of affirmative action across the country. This will help assess caste-wise benefits of reservation. Second, it will provide socio-economic

status of each caste group, including non-Hindu castes. This will help decide on further affirmative action. The debate on possible inclusion of Muslim and Christian Dalits in Scheduled Caste list, which is still restricted to Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh Dalits, might get a new lease of life. BJP hasn't yet taken any clear position on this issue. However, the party has evoked the Muslim reservation issue to reiterate its official position that the purpose of reservation

has always been to reform Hinduism; hence, Muslims and Christian Dalit communities should not be given SC status.

**That minority matter** | *Negative representation of Muslim presence* is the third key idea that evolved in this election. After the first phase of polling, BJP establishment decided to launch an aggressive political campaign to reach out to its traditional support base. Party brass systematically followed clear anti-Muslim rhetoric to justify the old BJP argument on Muslim appeasement.

Interestingly, Congress and other Opposition parties didn't respond to this active anti-Muslim politics. Their strategic silence underlines the fact that they haven't yet produced any convincing position against the negative portrayal of Muslim presence in public life.

**God's come home** | *Religionisation of politics* is the fourth central theme that's going to affect the future discourse of Indian politics. BJP establishment evoked the Ram temple and other religious symbols more directly to mobilise voters. Opposition parties, on the other hand, did not object to this active use of religion in politics. Instead, leadership of non-BJP parties did not hesitate to invoke Hindu religious symbols to show their Hindu credentials. This uncritical acceptance of religion in election process will have far-reaching political consequences.

It's too early to make any observation on this political-intellectual churning. BJP is keen to appropriate *nyay* in its framework of Hindutva, while Opposition is still hesitant to give up the Hindu-sentiments argument completely. This tussle, arguably, will produce a new narrative of politics in years to come.

The writer is Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

# 'BJP parliamentary board has only one woman...33% reservation may make more progress in states than Centre'

Rina Verma Williams is Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean for Social Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. Her book 'Marginalised, Mobilised, Incorporated: Women and Religious Nationalism in Indian Democracy' is a historical study of women's involvement in Hindu nationalist politics. She shares with Renuka Bisht her ideas about BJP's women workers and leaders:

● How has the 'incorporation' of women by BJP contributed to its success?

Studying the role of women in the Hindu Mahasabha in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we see they never managed to include women – women were largely marginalised in the organisation. Bharatiya Jana Sangh did better: Then from 1980 onwards, BJP began mobilising women in earnest, effectively bringing them to the streets in support of the party's causes and agendas. But only by 2014 did BJP find a way to incorporate women: this meant bringing women into positions of power within the party and giving them voice to speak for the party's causes and agendas. Overall, BJP's political success tracks with its increasing success in bringing women into the party.

● Why has this incorporation had a tense relationship with feminism?

The tense relationship was at its peak in the 1980s. From the Shah Bano case to Roop Kanwar's *sati* and Ayodhya, BJP leaders – men and women – in this earlier period challenged feminist claims to speak for (all) Indian women. They did so by co-opting gendered discourses and rallying women into the streets. This shows us that women's empowerment is not a 'yes-no' kind of concept. How different women experience empowerment, of what types, in different time periods is, of course, a much more complicated question.

● What is its relationship to traditional gender ideologies?

In Hindu Mahasabha, (male) party leaders argued openly that women belong in the home, not in politics. By the 1980s, BJP was mobilising women into politics, but many women, especially the most prominent party leaders, did not necessarily have active family responsibilities. Today, almost all the women BJP leaders I interviewed have active home lives and family responsibilities, so that is a big change. And every leader I interviewed argued that it is possible for them to balance party work with their personal home lives because there is family support for their political work. Without family support, most of them argued, their political work would tear apart the family. BJP's gender ideology today comes closest to what is called 'complementarity': this is the idea that men and women are equal, but just have different roles to play in society.

● How strong are BJP women leaders today?

They are far stronger and more important in the party than their predecessors in earlier eras. There could still be more improvement. To give one example, the parliamentary board – arguably one of the most powerful decision-making bodies of BJP – still has only one woman member out of 11. So, though women have made major strides in the party and they now occupy a significant place alongside men, it is not the exact same place.

● How will the 33% women's reservation play out?

This issue came up several times in all my interviews from 2013 and again from 2016. There was a palpable sense of disappointment that having formed govt at the Centre – with significant support from women – BJP had not done enough to advance women's reservation. My best guess is that the cause will continue to advance in the state assemblies, but still may not make progress at the Centre. I would be happy to be proven wrong on this, as I believe many women supporters of BJP would be too!

● How do you think 'women's issues' impact elections?

This can vary a great deal depending on historical and political context, timing, and even the particular election. For example, sexual harassment news from the political sphere generates a lot of headlines and even protest – rightly so – but might not become an 'election issue'. Even women's issues in political party manifestos do not provide a clear link to election outcomes. So, this is a very important question with a very unclear answer.

● What will be women voters' impact this time?

The 2019 election was a high mark for the party in terms of running women candidates and gaining the support of women voters. But we should note that the largest jump in women's participation came in 2014. There was another increase in 2019, but the magnitude wasn't as large. This leads me to anticipate only small shifts, no large movement in either direction.

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Shri Shri Anandamurti

Brahmn is the most expansive entity, the all-pervading existence. His subtlety is unfathomable. Due to subtlety, His identity cannot be perceived by the senses. It is not accessible to the extroversial mind. The cruder the object, the less its capacity for expansion and vice versa. Thus, the liquid's degree of expansion and subtlety is greater than the solid's. The aerial factor is even subtler than liquid. The ethereal factor is the most expansive and subtlest of all the five fundamental factors. That is why it is not perceptible to the indriyas. It is impossible to determine its size, fathom its subtlety, or make any measuring rod for that purpose. Although one of the five fundamental factors, this ethereal body is almost beyond the scope of human perception. It requires a highly developed human

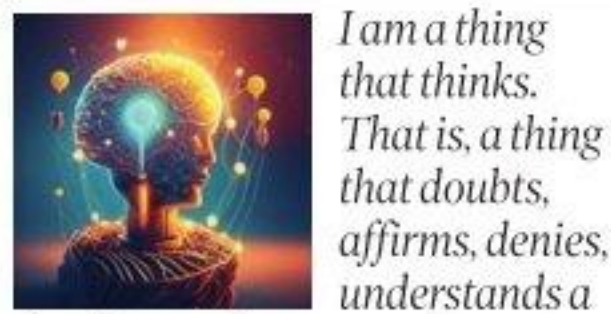
intellect and continuous scientific pursuit for its perception, so how can a common person grasp something even more subtle than that?

The subtler an object the less the capacity of the indriyas, faculty, to perceive it. As the greatness of expansion depends upon the degree of subtlety of an object, the more expansive an object, the more difficult it becomes for the indriyas to perceive it. To grasp such an object requires constant endeavour and a refined intellect. That is why human beings try to understand subtler objects with the help of their minds. What is beyond the perception of the physical organs, the eyes or the ears, can often be perceived with the help of the internal ears or internal eyes, or the introversial mind. Wherever the extroversial mind

might work in the internal mind or in the external world, it cannot go beyond the periphery of the ethereal factor and is thereafter forced to return to its own abode. We constantly come in contact with an entity beyond the periphery of the five fundamental factors. That entity is the human mind. Although the mind cannot be perceived by the indriyas, with a bit of introversion, its existence is substantiated without doubt in individual life. Another entity is subtler than the mind: the cognitive faculty Purushatattva or Brahmatva. Being subtler than the mind, it is beyond the mind's capacity to grasp it. But in the process of sadhana, when the mind becomes so subtle and expanded that it loses its individual existence, the Supreme cognitive factor can be recognised.



## Sacredspace



I am a thing that thinks. That is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions.

René Descartes

# The Subtle Expansion Of Microcosm

While discussing a subtle entity, one is reminded of the ethereal factor, the subtlest factor of this perceivable world. That is why people loosely describe Brahmn as being 'like ether' or 'beyond ether'. This Supreme entity, who is as subtler than ether, is called Akshara because He is not transmuted from the original stance. Conversely, the entity or entities which have been transmuted and are undergoing various transmutations are called kshara. Only the Supreme entity, Parama Purusha, is akshara. The various emanations of the Supreme Entity, subject to constant change, are known as devatas, mythological gods or deities. These devatas or divine emanations lie embedded in the Cosmic body: Brahma is the source of infinite energy. Whatever has been created or will be created is a vibrational flow from Him. The seed of all emanations lies embedded in Him.



# The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Bomb threats

No room for complacency despite false alarm

BOMB threats have become alarmingly frequent across the country in recent weeks, even though all have turned out to be hoaxes. Tissue paper with 'bomb@5.30' written on it was found in the lavatory of an IndiGo plane at the Delhi airport on Tuesday morning. The authorities promptly evacuated the crew and passengers and launched a search operation. No suspicious item was found, even as an investigation is in progress. The incident took place a day after the Mumbai traffic police received a message on their WhatsApp helpline number, claiming that bombs had been planted at the Mumbai airport and Hotel Taj Mahal. A thorough search drew a blank at both places.

In recent months, scores of schools in Delhi-NCR, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jaipur, Kolkata and other cities have been rocked by bomb threat emails. Probe agencies have their work cut out — they have to find out which individuals/gangs are involved in these nefarious activities, where they are based and whether a common thread runs through these threats, which must not be dismissed as mere mischief. The Delhi Police have traced the IP address of emails sent to 150-odd schools to Budapest, Hungary. A Cyprus-based mailing service company has been identified as the source of threatening emails sent to hospitals, the IGI Airport and Tihar Jail in Delhi earlier this month.

The ongoing probe into various cases indicates that gangs of cybercriminals residing in foreign countries are causing widespread disruptions in India with ease. They are apparently working in league with miscreants based in India. There is no room for complacency, especially amid the Lok Sabha elections. Every city needs to be adequately equipped with bomb detection and disposal squads. A comprehensive action plan should be formulated and implemented so that panic and chaos induced by the threats are minimised. All stakeholders must be well prepared for the worst-case scenario — after all, not every such email/call/message may prove to be a hoax.

## Snoopgate in BRS

Probe allegations of misuse of state machinery

RECENT confessions by former officials, exposing alleged extensive surveillance operations conducted during the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) rule in Telangana, have plunged the party leadership into a deepening controversy. Former Task Force OSD P Radha Kishan Rao and former additional SP N Bhujanga Rao have laid bare an acutely troubling misuse of power, where state machinery was allegedly deployed not just for political advantage but also to stifle dissent and control the Opposition. The confessions detail how key figures, including then Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) and his nephew, reportedly orchestrated phone-tapping and directed illegal surveillance of political rivals, journalists and critics.

The situation has escalated with accusations of a broader conspiracy. The ex-OSD has claimed that KCR's plan was to have Bandi Sanjay Kumar, a prominent BJP leader, arrested. The expectation was that this arrest would pressure the BJP into a compromise regarding the Enforcement Directorate case against KCR's daughter K Kavitha, who is an accused in the Delhi liquor policy scam. Another damning aspect of this case is the alleged misuse of state resources to facilitate the transportation of BRS money while seizing those of the Opposition, thus manipulating poll outcomes, beginning in 2018 and peaking in the 2023 Assembly elections, where surveillance and illegal activities were stepped up to ensure the BRS's dominance. The involvement of high-ranking officials, who reportedly engaged in extortion and blackmail, paints a grim picture of a deeply entrenched corruption network. The use of sophisticated technology to tap encrypted calls is a gross violation of privacy.

The revelations call for a thorough probe. Accountability must be fixed, right from the political masterminds to officers. Telangana's judiciary and civil society must address these grievous charges of violation and prevent such abuses from recurring.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

# The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MAY 29, 1924

## Communal representation

THOSE who have closely watched the effects of having adopted communal representation in the Councils and its subsequent extension to local bodies in certain places cannot but deplore the spirit of distrust and discussion that it has given rise to. The Mahomedans, who appear to appreciate separate electorates for their community, do not realise that what seems to give them some advantage over others is the representation that is given them in excess of their numerical strength, thus depriving non-Mahomedan communities of their proper share in the representation. If there are any other advantages derived by this community, they have failed to estimate at what price these have been purchased. But what is most singular is the extraordinary interest shown by the bureaucracy and its spokesmen in maintaining communal distinctions in India and in strongly opposing any suggestion that may be made for their abolition. In the course of a vigorous leading article in a recent issue, the *Statesman* wrote: "Private advice from England indicates that a determined attempt is being made to stampee public opinion and the Labour Government into hasty and ill-considered action with regard to the Indian reforms. Among other points on which these attacks are converging is the question of communal representation, to which Extremist politicians, and to some extent Hindus in general, are opposed because they consider that the earmarking of certain constituencies for certain communities is likely to prejudice their interests. The more ambitious see in it a barrier between themselves and a monopoly of place and power."

# OPINION

## The great Himalayan tragedy

If we don't heed warning bells in the mountains, the Char Dham temple bells may soon fall silent



SHYAM SARAN  
FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY

IN the many years of journeying through the Himalayas, I have never experienced a sense of impending doom as I do now. I have witnessed how in the name of development, there has been relentless spoliation of this sacred space, the scarring of its pristine landscapes, the dispossession of the rarest of the rare birds and animals which have dwelt in its embrace since ancient times and even of human communities which, in their ways of life, traditions and beliefs, have been its most faithful sentinels. The Himalayas are a "junction between worlds that touch and do not touch each other" (Axel Michaels in *Hinduism Past and Present*). The Sanskrit word 'tirtha' or pilgrimage has just precisely that notion of a crossing place, a transition. And that is why this entire mountain zone is sacred and a place of pilgrimage.

The memory of its dramatic beginnings runs in our veins. The sea is its mother, and it is for good reason that the people of Nepal call the Everest Sagarmatha or the brow of the ocean. But for human despoilers, the sacredness has become an asset to exploit for profit. The Everest has become a high-altitude rubbish heap and its crest one more tick on a bucket list of adventures. Our Char Dham are no longer hallowed places of pilgrimage but flourishing destinations for religious tourism. Gangotri is now a seedy urban sprawl. The main temple lies festooned with rainbow lights, while loudspeakers belt out raucous *bhajans* which theroar of the young river cannot



OMINOUS: The Char Dham Yatra is a pointer to what awaits us across the Himalayan range. PTI

drown out. It is only a matter of time before you may book a suite in a modern hotel in Gaumukh, promising breathtaking views of the famous glacier and the Bhagirathi peaks. Gaumukh means the mouth of the sacred cow and has, therefore, immense potential for mass-scale religious tourism.

The Char Dham Yatra, as it has been developed over the past couple of decades, is a pointer to what awaits us across the Himalayan range, for every patch of this space is associated with legends sacred to the many faiths of the sub-continent. Latest reports indicate that since the shrines opened around May 10-11, around 950,000 pilgrims had already descended on Gangotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath and Yamunotri. We still have over five months to go before the shrines close in early November. The Uttarakhand Government has instituted a registration system to regulate entry to the shrines. But the daily limits permitted 20,000 for Kedarnath, 18,000 for Badrinath, 11,000 for Gangotri and 9,000 for Yamunotri. These are staggering numbers for such fragile and sensitive mountain locations. The speed and scale of expan-

Long stretches of the Char Dham highway have been repeatedly hit by landslides, requiring expensive repairs.

sion of religious tourism is evident from the footfall of 5,600,000 recorded last year, which was 1,000,000 more than in 2022, though it includes Hemkunt Sahib, which has smaller numbers overall.

If one goes to travel websites, there are several two-, three- and four-star hotels listed in Badrinath and Kedarnath. There are daily helicopter services to each of these spots. One chopper nearly crashed near the Kedarnath shrine a few days ago. Over 50 people have lost their lives travelling to these rarefied heights in the past two weeks

and the police have arrested more than 50 youth at Kedarnath for drunk and disorderly behaviour. But lots of money is being made. The past two weeks have resulted in an estimated record turnover of over Rs 200 crore for hoteliers, restaurant owners, mule drivers and porters.

For such large numbers, immense quantities of food, bottled water, gas cylinders for cooking and diesel for power generators have to be carried. A government study, conducted a few years ago when the traffic was much less, found that 23,000 tonnes of solid waste was being generated annually along the track to one of the dhams, with no systematic disposal arrangement. One shudders to think what the volume may be now with much, much larger numbers.

The four- to six-lane Char Dham highway is bringing devotees and other tourists in droves to the entire Alaknanda river valley this summer. When the 127-km Rishikesh-to-Karnaprayag railway line along this valley is completed by the year-end, even larger hordes of people will crowd into these once-remote and pristine locations. A large

number of fancy hotels and guesthouses have come up to cater to the expanding number of visitors. Even in the protected sanctuary of Binsar, the sides of the road are piled high with solid waste, in particular plastic waste.

One cannot just make the mountain zone a no-go area nor can one argue that economic activity, which brings livelihoods and incomes, should be foresworn. But there should be more careful and detailed planning before large-scale infrastructure projects are undertaken in these sensitive locations. These are still unstable and shifting terrains, which can be easily disturbed, resulting in frequent landslides and avalanches. Long stretches of the Char Dham highway have been repeatedly affected by landslides, requiring expensive repairs. Several hydroelectric projects on the tributaries of the Ganga have been swept away in sudden storm surges and flash floods, resulting in the loss of lives and property. There is no debris control, with vast piles of earth from these projects simply dumped on the site despite laws requiring their removal. This results in natural drainage being blocked, with waterlogging in the upper reaches and drying up of water channels and natural springs in the lower reaches. One can see this across both Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Whatever be the immediate benefit, such mindless ravaging of nature will bring eventual retribution and greater deprivation to people. The poorest will suffer the most. And one is not even factoring in the adverse effects of global warming, which is already leading to the accelerated melting of the Himalayan glaciers. We are caught in a vicious cumulative dynamic in which climate change and environmental degradation are reinforcing each other. If we do not heed the warning bells ringing across these divine mountains, the temple bells of Char Dham may soon fall silent.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It is an act of worship just to sit and look at high mountains. — Sir Edmund Hillary

## Bangles, franchise and Nari Shakti

P LAL

DELHI voted in the Lok Sabha elections on May 25. Many of my batchmates from the IAS and the IPS and their spouses residing in the Capital posted images of their inked fingers in our WhatsApp group, proudly proclaiming the exercise of their right to vote. Ours is the 1969 batch — all members retired years ago and are now well past 75.

A vivacious and graceful lady, affectionately known in the group as Tita, who is married to a handsome and intelligent ex-IAS officer, posted a photograph of her left hand with bangles and the inked forefinger.

The post caught my attention, eliciting the comment: 'Bangles and the vote! Good material for a story.' Pat came the reply: 'Thank you... and a thumbs up for *Nari Shakti*!' I couldn't agree more with her. Yes, the exercise of franchise by women is a clear demonstration of their independence and *Nari Shakti*. But is that really so in India today?

A news report in *The Tribune* (May 25) was, however, depressing. Quoting data of the Election Commission relating to Haryana, it said the male-female ratio of voters in the age group of 18-19 years was 66:34. These were the young voters registered to cast the ballot for the first time. Such an imbalance runs counter to the concept of *Nari Shakti*.

There is, though, no doubt that women of today, at least in educated families, show an independence of mind not so common earlier. In the Lok Sabha elections of 1957 and 1962, I remember my mother toeing the line of my father, almost blindly, in voting for a particular party. However, as the voting day draws near in the city where I live with my family, I hear my wife singing paeans to a leading woman politician and her party. She will vote for this party's candidate, whereas my choice is different. My daughter will, probably, go with her mother.

The idea of *Nari Shakti* in India of yore is reflected in our *Shaktipeeths*, 51 of them, each representing a facet of female power. The recognition of women's intellectual prowess is evident from the fact that there were 30 women sages who along with men composed hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Verse 46, Chapter 23 of *Kaumarika Khanda* (*Maheshwar Khanda*) in *Skanda Purana* declares that the merit obtained by bringing up 10 sons is the same as that derived from bringing up one daughter.

Thank you, dear Tita, for reminding me of *Nari Shakti* during the elections.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### India shines at Cannes

With reference to the editorial 'Cannes acclaim'; it has been a glorious week for Indian cinema, with Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* securing the prestigious Grand Prix at the 77th edition of the festival. The global reception of the film shows that there is a market for innovative storytelling that is not inhibited by the goal of profit-making. The grand event reinforced cinema as a unifying global force. Indian filmmakers and artistes deserve kudos for scripting history at the festival. Sustained support for our films and the promotion of works of Indian artistes are essential to expanding India's presence on the global stage.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

#### PM must address burning issues

Refer to PM Narendra Modi's interview 'Current Punjab leadership mirrors ideology of urban Naxals...'; the Prime Minister has been giving one interview after another in print and electronic media amid the General Election. But there are certain burning issues that the PM has yet not been pressed on. His BJP has had a hand in the toppling of state governments led by rival parties. Besides, it has been observed that the crimes of all tainted Opposition leaders who cross over to the saffron party are forgiven. These are some of the many issues — including the electoral bond scheme and the Opposition's accusations of a quid pro quo between donors and recipients — that Modi should be confronted with in his interviews.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR

#### Criminalisation of politics

Apropos of the news report 'No govt job for kin of terrorists, stone-throwers in J&K: Shah'; this is a welcome proposal. But this should be implemented throughout the country, not just in the state-turned-UT. Besides, such conditions should also apply to politicians. A leader with a criminal background must not be allowed into the political arena. That is the most effective way to clean up the political ecosystem in the country. Corruption runs deep in the system, and it won't be uprooted until and unless every citizen shows zero tolerance to graft.

COL RS NARULA (RETD), PATIALA

#### Children need parents' support

With reference to the article 'Let's assure our children they are not commodities'; parents must stop imposing their decisions on their children. All students must have the freedom to pursue a career in a field of their choice. Now, more than ever before, youngsters are facing intense pressure to succeed. From doing well in board exams to landing a high-paying job, it is common for parents to have high expectations from their kids. But when a youngster fails to live up to the unreasonable demands of his family members, it causes them agony. Parents need to understand that our children need our support to grow in life.

HARKAWALJEET KAUR, MOHALI

#### Rein in dummy admissions

Apropos of 'Let's assure our children they are not commodities'; the author has rightly highlighted the challenges being faced by students these days. It is common for parents to compare their kids to other children in order to push them to do better. But it can cause them to develop mental health issues. Besides, the growing trend of dummy admissions needs to be checked. Students are being enrolled at schools where they don't need to attend most classes so that they can devote most of their time to preparing for competitive exams. The significance of regular classroom teaching for the overall learning and physical and mental wellbeing of children cannot be emphasised enough.

KRISHAN BHATIA, HANSI

#### Caught in the rat race

Refer to the article 'Let's assure our children they are not commodities'; in this age of cut-throat competition, well-meaning parents often push their children into the rat race, hoping that they would end up with well-paying jobs. But youngsters, who often fail to bear the burden of expectations, instead fall into a state of depression. Many of them, who can't find a way out, feel compelled to take the extreme step. It is high time that parents started valuing their children for who they are. Every individual is born with some sort of skill or talent. Parents, who are duty-bound to support their children, must understand this.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI



# What's driving the market surge in poll season



**SUCHETA DALAL**  
SENIOR JOURNALIST

ONE of the most ferocious bull markets in the last 30 years shows no signs of nervousness in a highly charged election season, which has historically been a period of volatility and uncertainty. The two bellwether indices, the Nifty 50 and the BSE Sensex, have soared to their all-time highs on the back of a relentless upward surge that began in the middle of a global pandemic and continued after a small pause following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The biggest gainers are small-cap stocks in manufacturing, infrastructure and energy sectors, which are now quoting at astronomical valuations.

What does this indicate? Is it confidence in the economy? Or that the BJP-led NDA, which is seen as pro-business, will get another term with a majority? Or does it signal a lack of awareness among the legion of new investors who have swarmed into the market and have never seen a bear market?

The bull run this time, like previous manic ones, is a complex mix. On one hand, the Indian stock market's

rise is a result of a combination of strong corporate earnings, substantial domestic and foreign investments and positive investor sentiment.

On the other hand, there is speculative froth whipped up by short-term traders using algorithms as well as rampant price manipulation in cahoots with promoters, who are allegedly inflating profits. Finally, companies are raising public funds at excessive valuations. Fund managers and genuine long-term investors are concerned that even a sentiment-driven crash could snowball into a crisis, as a vast population of clueless traders takes a big hit and panics. For the first time, what happens in India may have global implications, given that India's market capitalisation has crossed the \$5-trillion mark, placing it among the top five stock markets globally.

The best way to understand what is going on is to look at the changing investor profile. India's investor population, which had stagnated at two crore for decades before 2020, has trebled in the past four years alone. The National Stock Exchange had over nine crore unique investors at the end of February this year, with the last one crore having joined in just five months. In addition, assets under the management of mutual funds (MFs) rose to a massive Rs 57,25,898 crore at the end of April this year, according to the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI). This number has doubled in five years and



**GROWTH:** The National Stock Exchange had over nine crore unique investors at the end of February this year, with the last one crore having joined in just five months. PTI

increased six-fold over the past 10 years. Monthly contributions through systematic investment plans (SIPs) alone have been over Rs 13,000 crore from around Rs 1,52,620 crore, causing a strong rally. Let's examine the stock market surge from the perspective of business fundamentals as well as speculative excess.

What makes domestic investors, including institutional investors, bullish is possibly a broad consensus on economic policies among major political parties. The corporate earnings season has significantly contributed to market optimism. Leading Indian companies across

According to the market regulator, nearly 35 per cent of the people investing in futures & options trades are in the 20-30 age group.

have led to a severe market crash. This time, domestic institutional investors (including insurance companies) more than counter-balanced the FII sales by pumping in Rs 1,52,620 crore, causing a strong rally. Let's examine the stock market surge from the perspective of business fundamentals as well as speculative excess.

What makes domestic investors, including institutional investors, bullish is possibly a broad consensus on economic policies among major political parties. The corporate earnings season has significantly contributed to market optimism. Leading Indian companies across

pharma, commodities, banking, cement, energy and infrastructure have reported better-than-expected quarterly results, reinforcing confidence in the market's fundamental strength.

The biggest surprise has been the revival of manufacturing companies — most of them smaller firms and several large public sector companies — which are recording extraordinary profits. The massive government spending on infrastructure, defence and railways has contributed to this. The Reserve Bank of India's recent bumper dividend of more than Rs 2 lakh crore to the government has also influenced the market positively. It provides additional resources for public spending without increasing borrowing, enhancing the government's fiscal capacity and stimulating economic growth.

Yet, market manipulation is real enough to have provoked industrialist Harsh Goenka to post how all the malpractices of the Harshad Mehta/Ketan Parekh era are back primarily in Kolkata, with promoters inflating profits (through profit entry) in nexus with Gujarati-Marwari brokers.

According to the market regulator, nearly 35 per cent of people investing in futures and options (F&O) trades are in the 20-30 age group. As with the bull run of the 1990s that ended in the securities scam, these brash and supremely confident investors have high risk-

appetite and are attracted by the claimed success (usually false) of peers propagated through social media. Eased into the market through online trading platforms of brokerage firms, they are lured into speculative futures and options trades by unregulated 'influencers' (financial influencers) through quick online training and the promise of 'sure-fire' trading strategies using algorithms (algos). Both algo writers and influencers are usually compensated through tie-ups with dozens of stock brokers. These freshly minted investors have never seen a serious dip in the market, let alone a prolonged bear market.

In January 2023, the SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) released a study showing that 90 per cent of the active traders in derivatives like F&Os lost money in FY 21-22. This was up from 87 per cent in FY 18-19, highlighting how harmful derivatives can be. The study had no impact on the segment of investors being warned. The volume of such trading is so large that India now accounts for 84 per cent of all equity options contracts traded globally last year, according to the Futures Industry Association, having doubled since the bull run began in 2020.

Given the combination of factors, nobody really knows what will happen. As the legendary Warren Buffett once said, "Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked."

# Army Chief's one-month extension sends out wrong signal



**LT GEN HARWANT SINGH (RETD)**  
FORMER DEPUTY CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF

THE Chief of the Army Staff, Gen Manoj Pande, who was to retire on May 31, has been given one month's extension by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet under Army Rule 16A(4) of the Army Act, 1954. Gen Pande will now retire on June 30.

The last-minute announcement of the extension amid the Lok Sabha polls has stunned many defence officers and observers, especially over the question of seniority. Lt Gen Upendra Dwivedi, currently serving as the Vice Chief of the Army Staff, is the senior-most officer after Gen Pande, followed by Lt Gen Ajai Kumar Singh, the Southern Army Commander. Back in the 1970s, the Indira Gandhi-led government had extended the tenure of then Army Chief Gen GG Bewoor by one year.

In the present case, of the next two senior Army commanders, one would perhaps become the next Chief. Undoubtedly, it is the government's prerogative to select any person for a particular job. However, in the case of the defence services, the situation is somewhat different due to a number of factors.

In the military, seniority matters a lot and is highly revered. As one climbs up the promotion ladder, there are stringent and strict parameters against which performance is measured, assessed and evaluated. Those who reach the level of Army commanders have gone through such evaluation at each stage, from the rank of Major (or its equivalent rank in the Navy and the Air Force) onwards. Thus, every Army commander (or Air Vice Marshal or Vice Admiral), for all practical purposes and in every respect, is fit to step into the next rank — of the Chief of his respective service.

Seniority in the defence forces forms the bedrock of tradition and discipline. Earlier, when Lt Gen Praveen Bakshi, then the senior-most Army commander, was superseded (along with another com-



**DEBATABLE:** Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande will continue to serve on the post till June 30. PTI

mander) to promote Lt Gen Bipin Rawat, there was consternation and disappointment in the officer cadre. Lt Gen Bakshi, then in line for promotion to be the next Army Chief, had an enviable service record and was not only considered most competent but was also equally admired. Gen Rawat's elevation was linked by some observers to political considerations and undue pressure from certain quarters.

Arguments are being advanced that the present Army Chief, in the best interests of the military,

Apparent manipulation needs to be avoided in the best interests of the military and the country.

should have declined the extension. It is a choice that Gen Pande had to make for the sake of the Army, where he has spent the better part of his life and given his best.

Unfortunately, in the Indian setting, there is often a carrot that is kept hanging. It is common in the civil services to fall for this carrot, compromising it all, and now, most unfortunately for the country, in a few cases in the judiciary as well. The rot is epitomised by the political class, with switching loyalties and parties becoming a

common feature; this holds true for a section of the bureaucracy as well.

The service Chiefs are expected not only to do the right thing, but also to set things right. Generations of future officers look back at the actions of their Chiefs and strive to emulate them.

Fortunately, the Indian Army has stayed well away from politics and political influence, unlike the armies in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Myanmar. When then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tried to involve the Army in her move to impose the Emergency, the then Army Chief, Gen TN Raina, politely told her to keep the Army out of this venture. This one step by the Chief went a long way in keeping the Army apolitical.

The practice of superseding high-ranking officers for political considerations will have, in the long run, an adverse effect on the military's professional wellbeing and the quality of the top leadership. Military is one field which must be kept insulated from politics. Political jostling in appointments to higher ranks will do lasting damage to the military. Consequently, failure in war can lead to unimaginable disaster. No

country/region knows more than India about the fallout of military defeats spread over centuries.

The government has not done the right thing by giving Gen Pande a month's extension, thereby making a senior commander wither away awaiting promotion. It is a step that may prompt senior military commanders to seek political favours; this move may politicise the military in some form. In the national interest, the military should not be subjected to undesirable political interference for extending favours to some.

Gen Rawat superseding two officers to become the Army Chief presumably had political overtones. So too was the case with his subsequent appointment as the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The current CDS (Gen Anil Chauhan) had retired in the rank of Lt Gen and was working under the National Security Adviser. His elevation to the post of CDS was exceptional. The Army Chief's extension of service will perhaps open the door for another handpicked officer to step into this chair. Such apparent manipulation needs to be avoided in the best interests of the military and the country.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

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**ACROSS**

1 Make extensive search (4,5)  
8 Teeming crowd (5)  
9 Experienced fighter (7)  
10 Fifty-fifty chance (4-2)  
11 Natural element of character (6)  
12 Noteworthiness (8)  
15 Light narrow sledge (8)  
18 Capacity for activity (6)  
20 Clamour (6)  
21 Dealing with current affairs (7)  
22 South American country (5)  
23 Incisive (9)

**DOWN**

2 Modify (5)  
3 Source of danger (6)  
4 English poets; husband and wife (8)  
5 Sovereign power (6)  
6 Succeed (7)  
7 Hold off (4,2,3)  
11 Person easily imposed on (4,5)  
13 To moderate (4,4)  
14 Decline to vote (7)  
16 Attic room (6)  
17 Culmination point (6)  
19 Tiny hard particle (5)

**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

**Across:** 1 Stuck-up, 4 Appal, 7 Also, 8 All along, 10 Put an end to, 12 Paltry, 13 Pacify, 15 Ins and outs, 18 Anathema, 19 Gall, 20 Lurid, 21 Nursery.

**Down:** 1 Stamp, 2 Unsettle, 3 Poland, 4 Avant-garde, 5 Plod, 6 Lightly, 9 Entrenched, 11 Stimulate, 12 Pitfall, 14 Carmen, 16 Sully, 17 Pair.

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**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

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9	7	4	5	1	2	8	3	6
6	9	3	4	2	8	5	7	1
8	4	5	1	7	3	9	6	2
7	1	2	6	5	9	3	4	8
1	5	8	2	4	6	7	9	3
4	2	7	3	9	1	6	8	5
3	6	9	7	8	5	1	2	4

**CALENDAR**

**MAY 29TH 2024, WEDNESDAY**

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Jyeshtha Shaka 8
- Jyeshtha Parvishite 16
- Hijari 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 1.40 pm
- Indra Yoga up to 11.34 pm
- Shravan Nakshatra up to 8.39 am
- Moon enters Aquarius sign 8.06 pm
- Panchak start 8.06 pm

### FORECAST

SUNSET:	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	19:38 HRS
SUNRISE:	MAX	MIN	05:22 HRS
CITY			
Chandigarh	45	27	
New Delhi	46	28	
Amritsar	44	26	
Bathinda	46	27	
Jalandhar	45	26	
Ludhiana	45	25	
Bhiwani	46	30	
Hisar	47	27	
Sirsa	46	30	
Dharamsala	36	24	
Manali	29	16	
Shimla	31	20	
Srinagar	32	15	
Jammu	43	25	
Kargil	29	11	
Leh	24	08	
Dehradun	40	25	
Mussoorie	26	18	

TEMPERATURE IN °C



# A positive vote

The highest voter turnout in Kashmir in three decades bodes well for Assembly polls

At a time when almost the entire nation is reluctant to exercise its franchise, Kashmiris have shown courage and resilience to come out and vote despite its high-risk perception. Only Kashmir and Bengal have shown a surge in voter turnout this election. Bengal's case is understandable as it has been a political State all along but Kashmir has never shown such keen interest in general elections as in 2024. This surge in civic participation is being hailed by the Election Commission (EC) as a promising indicator for the forthcoming Assembly elections. It is being seen as a crucial step towards the restoration of democracy in the State. On August 5, 2019, the Government of India abrogated Article 370, which granted special autonomy to the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The move was accompanied by a series of political and administrative changes, including the bifurcation of the State into the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. The decision was met with mixed reactions, both domestically and internationally, and



led to a period of political instability and security concerns in the region. In the aftermath of this significant constitutional change, the Central Government has focused on integrating the region more closely with the rest of India, promising development, investment and a return to normalcy. One of the key components of this strategy has been the re-establishment of a democratic framework through local and Assembly elections. However, the biggest impediment had been people's resistance and mistrust of the civic authorities.

Now that they have voted in high numbers, they have in a way shown their willingness to have a democratic Government at the State level. The recent elections, which saw the highest voter turnout in three decades, mark a significant milestone in this process. The voter participation was markedly higher compared to previous elections, indicating a renewed faith in the democratic process among the Valley residents. This increase in voter turnout can be attributed to several factors, including improved security and Government initiative. This unprecedented voter turnout is a good omen for the upcoming Assembly elections. These elections are viewed as a pivotal moment for the restoration of democratic governance in J&K. The high turnout suggests that the people are eager to participate in the democratic process and would have their voices heard in governance. Their active civic engagement is essential for the legitimacy and success of the Assembly elections. It also reflects a broader acceptance of the political changes that have occurred since the abrogation of Article 370. Despite this positive development, several challenges remain. Additionally, the Government and EC need to address the grievances and aspirations of various sections of people to maintain the momentum of democratic engagement. Now the poll panel must ensure that the upcoming elections are free, fair and transparent, with a focus on maintaining the momentum of increased voter participation.

## PICTALK



Students celebrate with their teacher over Secondary School Certificate (SSC) results, in Mumbai

PTI

# Nurture dreams with open eyes and determination

Believe in the power of continued dreaming and the importance of supporting others in their journey towards realising their aspirations

Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon on 21 July 1969. We read about the historical event in the newspapers the next day. I think on a subconscious level, the event sowed the seed of the first dream that I saw with open eyes. For days on end, all that I could think of was ways to create a miniature earth and moon within the confines of our bedroom and the ways that I could send my own Apollo to the moon. My dreams kept on evolving. At that stage, all that I would look forward to was to move to the next class with good marks. Much later, coming from a family of first-generation engineers, it was only natural for me to join an engineering course. Towards the end of my course, I started dreaming of becoming an entrepreneur. I realised the difficulties in pursuing this goal at that stage due to the limitations of a middle-class background. I parked my dream, to be retrieved at an appropriate time. I thought of my next steps. At the age of 21, it was only



natural to dream of a good job, followed by marriage and children and promotions; till I realised that I wanted something beyond the predictable routine of a Government job. This led me to join the private sector. It was now time to bring forward my earlier dream of being an entrepreneur. The dreams kept on evolving with my advancing age; some were discarded, some were attained and few remain, hoping for fruition in the years to come. One unfulfilled dream is to help others, much younger and less privileged than me, to dream. A child is born a child. It does not know the meaning of being

poor, till others make it conscious of the disparity. I firmly believe that each human being dreams with open eyes; it could be a prayer to be able to see the dawn next day, a hope that the wages would be better tomorrow, or the belief in a better life. I know a couple, now settled in America, who have started a foundation to assist the underprivileged young. The lady passionately told me about the introductory annual session that they arrange for the youngsters, usually at some rated property, to give them exposure to a life that currently is beyond their means, but which they might be able to lead one day if they pursue their dreams. I was sceptical as I thought that such an environment might be too intimidating. My fears might be unfounded. The Internet has made available a plethora of possibilities to the younger generation. A young boy, whose education we have been supporting for the past few years, wants to be an astronaut. He might not

make it, but the best advice that I could give him and others, is to continue to dream even if you fail — there is always something new to look forward to. We know of people who get paralysed or lose their eyesight and sometimes even their limbs. Yet, there are many instances of people overcoming their handicaps through sheer grit and courage. A visually impaired young woman found dumped in a waste bin 25 years back, cleared Maharashtra services examinations recently. There are many more around us. All that they need is for someone to help them nurture their dreams. We need only to remember writer Mary Anne Radmacher, "Nurturing is not complex. It's simply being tuned in to the thing or person before you and offering small gestures toward what it needs at that time." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

# India needs substantial defence investment

The BJP's defence manifesto, dubbed 'Modi ki guarantee,' pledges robust security measures but faces criticism for overlooking persistent threats and insufficient defence spending

India's Twin Challenges Warrant Active Deterrence: Achievable through Investment in Defence BJP's defence and national security manifesto is Modi ki guarantee for Surakshit Bharat. It launched a massive 15-day campaign to invite suggestions through face-to-face meetings and the NaMo app from around 10 mn supporters. The election manifesto is immersed in Modi pictures and a surfeit of Modi ki guarantees. There is plenty the BJP is taking credit for. Eliminating terrorism though attacks occurred only last week in J&K. Cross Border Terrorism has a tragic history: attack on Parliament in December 2001 (under BJP rule) and Mumbai 2008 under United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dispensation. In 2001 BJP applied coercive diplomacy -Operation Parakaram- which was partially successful. In 2008 UPA exercised strategic restraint — doing nothing. Its zero tolerance for terrorism was demonstrated by Uri and Myanmar surgical strikes in 2016 and Balakot air strikes in 2019. These created deterrence against spectacular terrorism. BJP's claim of no attack in the last decade is wrong: terrorists struck at Pathankot, Pulwama and Uri Brigade Headquarters and 2950 civilians and security forces were killed in terrorist-related incidents between 2014 and 2023. BJP's inventory of achievements is impressive: revocation of Article 370, 52 per cent reduction in Left Wing Terrorism, with Home Minister Amit Shah declaring it will be crushed within three years. There is an overall decline of 73 per cent in the insurgency in the northeast but no mention of Manipur where violence has continued for one year and repolling ordered twice. Manipur, a serious embarrassment for the Government will reignite insurgency. Given the violent situation on the India-Myanmar border, with the Junta fighting a losing battle with rebels, Myanmar will present a major threat to the North East. Hailing CDS as an achievement, the BJP emphasised the completion of theorisation soonest. Further infrastructure development in the northern



borders is matched by a thrust towards the security of the Indian Ocean Region. Defence manufacturing and Atmanirbharta figure prominently under Making India a Global Manufacturing Hub. There is no mention of China or Pakistan and dealing with the twin threats they pose even as the opposition has attacked the Government for loss of territory in east Ladakh which the Government has denied emphatically. Clean chit to China will resolve the border dispute on India's terms difficult if not impossible. Restoration of status quo ante (April 20, 2020), demanded by successive Army Chiefs, is also not realizable. The lack of political guidance to the Armed Forces is a major deficiency. The first indication in four years that agreement on theorisation is nearing came from RM Rajnath Singh this month. Leaving it to the CDS whose operational role is unclear to obtain consensus on the allocation of resources, the job profile of service Chiefs when theatre commanders are in place and operational command and control of theatres is unworkable without inputs from RM and NSA to CDS. Equally, NSA Ajit Doval and the National Security Council Secretariate have to update the National Security Strategy submitted by Integrated Defence Staff in 2021. Surprisingly, the Government has not taken

“DEFENCE ALLOCATION HAS PLUMMETED FROM A HIGH OF 3.5 PER CENT IN CONGRESS RULE IN THE LATE 1980s WHEN I WAS A MEMBER OF THE DEFENCE PLANNING STAFF TO LESS THAN 2 PER CENT TODAY, EVEN WHEN THE GDP HAS RISEN EXPONENTIALLY

these two interlinked issues — Theatrisation and NSS— seriously enough. Speculation is rife these will happen within one year of BJP 3.0. During the UPA rule, NSS was prepared thrice. The issue most befuddling is the static of defence spending on which the 2024 BJP manifesto is silent. The Congress on the other hand has Stated in its current manifesto that it will arrest the decline in defence spending and allocate sufficient funds. Sufficiency of funds is a challenge no Government has addressed. Defence allocation has plummeted from a high of 3.5 per cent in Congress rule in the late 1980s when I was a member of the Defence Planning Staff to less than 2 per cent today even when the GDP has risen exponentially. The latest SIPRI report shows India's defence budget is USD 84bn compared to China's USD 296 bn. In defence allocation, for 2024-25, defence outlay was increased by 4.7 per cent which is the lowest in ten years (except in 2020-21) when it was 1.45 per cent of the GDP. As a percentage of GDP defence spending has not reached even 2 per cent at a time when two full-fledged wars are being fought along with several skirmishes. The capital budget for modernisation best illustrates the parsimony: the gap between the amount demanded and the amount allocated in 2015-16

was Rs 16,646 crore while in 2022-23 it rose to Rs 63,328 crore. Government officials offer the perennial excuse that defence forces can't spend the money. Amit Cowshish who was financial advisor (Acquisition) a decade ago says the 1.9 per cent of GDP in the current fiscal is 13 per cent of Government expenditure. A defence spending budget which is 3 per cent of GDP alone can begin to catch up with China in military capability. The rest of the world is investing hugely in defence with 31 Nato nations committed to reaching 2 per cent of GDP with the UK pledging to reach 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027. Even pacifist Japan has decided to put aside the 1 per cent spending on defence constitutional limitation and will spend 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027 and invest USD 315 bn to augment capabilities and deterrence. The capital cost of catheterisation and attendant reforms have to be factored in. Modi has to bite the bullet to deter China and with Jaishankar try to make the twin threat challenge one-front. Modi's This is not the era of war is day-dreaming! (The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka, and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### ERRANT VETS KILL KERALA'S WILDLIFE

Madam — Apropos the news story "Errant vets shoot to kill Kerala big cats, jumbos," published on May 27, this is my response. The recent deaths among wild animals in Kerala, including elephants, tigers, leopards and cheetahs, raise serious concerns about the State's conservation efforts. The tranquillizer shots administered by veterinarians are fatal in many cases, leading to questions about the competence of veterinary doctors and the quality of the drugs used. The animals are often captured and then killed, with the excuse that they are "trespassing" into human settlements in search of food and water. However, a closer examination reveals that the encroachment is the other way around, with human settlements expanding into former reserve forests. The destruction of water bodies and greenery due to encroachment and illegal quarrying has left the animals without a place to live, leading to starvation and, ultimately, death. The situation is dire and if left unchecked, Kerala's forests may soon become deserts and its wildlife may become museum pieces.

Dhruv Malhotra | Mumbai

### WAR IN WEST ASIA PERSISTS

Madam — Apropos the news story "Hamas racket attack triggers air raid sirens in Tel Aviv," published on May 27, this is my response. There seems to be no end to the war in West Asia. While Hamas claimed on Sunday that it fired a 'large rocket barrage' at Israel's commercial hub of Tel Aviv, Israel has ignored the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) ruling, asking it to halt its offensive in Rafah immediately. It has also intensified attacks across Gaza. Israel's decision to ignore the ICJ ruling is unfortunate. In persisting with its military action to 'eliminate Hamas', Israel has inflicted untold suffering on Palestinians, giving rise to a humanitarian crisis in a region that could do without renewed polarisation. Far from achieving its objectives of destroying Hamas and its military infrastructure, Israel is probably aiding the terrorist group's fresh

## Domestic airfares remain globally low



Apropos the news story "Domestic airfares on a northward trajectory; still among the lowest globally, say experts," published on May 27, this is my response. As a regular newspaper reader, the escalating airfares in India, soaring up to 40 per cent, have caught my attention. Despite being among the lowest globally, the recent surge reflects the challenges faced by the aviation industry, primarily due to capacity constraints exacerbated by supply chain issues. The rise in fares, though significant in percentage, seems less drastic considering inflationary pressures. Industry experts suggest this trend may persist until FY2026, signaling a structural shift. However, the affordability of air travel in India, compared to developed markets, remains commendable. The discourse around finding a balance between operational efficiency and revenue generation is crucial. Airlines must navigate this delicate equilibrium to ensure sustainability in a dynamic market landscape. Achieving profitability at varying load factors underscores the complexity of the aviation business, emphasising the need for adaptive strategies. In essence, while the surge in airfares may present short-term challenges, addressing underlying capacity issues and maintaining a balance between cost and revenue is imperative for long-term viability.

Aaradhya Patel | Delhi

recruitment. In disregarding calls from its closest ally, the US, Israel is undermining the rules-based global order. About 143 countries have supported full UN membership for Palestine and three European countries—Ireland, Norway and Spain—have decided to formally recognise Palestine as a State for 'peace in the Middle East'. Israel's friends and partners, the US in particular, need to stress to Tel Aviv the diminishing returns of its current course of action. The peace and security in the region and the fate of the multilateral rules-based order hang in the balance. Disruptions like these have a long-term ripple effect on an already tense world.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

### MARVELLOUS ANATOMY OF A BRANCH

Madam — Apropos the news story "Genesis of Growth: From Bud to Branch," published on May 26, this is my response. The intricate anatomy of a branch is a testament to the remarkable adaptability and resilience of trees. From the initial bud formation to the eventual shedding of

unproductive branches, each stage of growth is a masterclass in strategic planning and resource allocation. The delicate balance between auxin and cytokinin hormones ensures that the tree grows in a way that maximises its exposure to sunlight and minimises shading, while the development of lignin provides a robust defence against pathogens and pests. The branching patterns of trees are a reflection of their genetic makeup and environmental conditions, with different species adopting various strategies to optimise their growth and survival. The branches themselves serve as vital conduits for water and nutrient transport, providing habitat and support for a diverse range of organisms. Ultimately, the cycle of growth and retreat in trees serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of change and the wisdom of knowing when to let go, inspiring us to adapt and evolve in our own lives.

Kiara Mehta | Hyderabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

THE MYSTICAL NATURE OF SHIVA’S THIRD EYE

It is a potent symbol of destruction, creation and spiritual awakening



SWAMI CHARANASHRIT

In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva, the destroyer and transformer among the Trimurti, is often depicted with a third eye on his forehead. This eye is not just a physical feature but a powerful symbol with deep spiritual and metaphysical connotations.

**The Origin of Shiva's Third Eye**


The third eye of Shiva, also known as the “eye of wisdom,” is associated with many legends and mythological stories. One prominent story explains how Shiva’s third eye emerged. It is said that when Shiva was in deep meditation, Kamadeva, the god of love, attempted to disturb his meditation by shooting an arrow of desire. In his fury, Shiva opened his third eye, from which a powerful beam of fire emerged, reducing Kamadeva to ashes. This event not only signifies the destructive aspect of Shiva but also underscores the concept of burning away desires and illusions to achieve a higher State of consciousness.

**Symbolic Meaning**

Spiritual Insight: The third eye is often seen as the center of higher consciousness and wisdom. It represents the ability to see beyond the physical and perceive the underlying truths of the universe. In this sense, Shiva’s third eye signifies spiritual awakening and enlightenment.

Destruction and Regeneration: Shiva’s third eye embodies his role as the destroyer of evil and ignorance. The fire that emanates from the third eye symbolises the destruction of impurities and the subsequent regeneration and purification of the soul. This destructive power is necessary for the creation of a new and purer State of being.

Inner Vision: Beyond its destructive capabilities, the third eye is also a source of inner vision and clarity. It allows Shiva to see beyond the superficial and understand the deeper realities of existence. This inner vision is essential for guiding his actions and decisions, making Shiva a just and wise deity.



**Cultural and Religious Significance**

The third eye holds profound importance in various aspects of Hindu culture and spirituality. It is often associated with the “Ajna” or “brow” chakra, one of the seven primary chakras in the human body, which is believed to govern intuition and insight. Practitioners of meditation and yoga often focus on this chakra to develop their inner vision and achieve spiritual growth.

In iconography, Shiva’s third eye is frequently depicted in sculptures, paintings and other forms of art. It serves as a reminder of the deity’s transcendent powers and his ability to look beyond the ordinary. Temples dedicated to Shiva often have representations of the third eye, symbolising the presence of divine wisdom and protection.

**The Third Eye in Contemporary Understanding**

In modern times, the concept of the third eye has transcended religious boundaries and has been embraced in various spiritual and esoteric traditions around the world. It is commonly associated with the pineal gland in the brain, which is thought to play a role in regulating circadian rhythms and has been linked to mystical experiences.

For many spiritual seekers, the third eye represents the pursuit of higher knowledge and self-awareness. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness and certain forms of yoga are often aimed at “opening” the third eye, enabling individuals to gain deeper insights into their lives and the universe. Shiva’s third eye encapsulates the essence of Shiva’s role in the Hindu pantheon as a deity who destroys in order to create anew, who sees beyond the physical to understand the profound truths of existence. The third eye serves as a guiding light towards enlightenment and inner peace, reminding us of the power of true vision and the necessity of transcending the illusions of the material world.

*(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)*

Creating food systems for tropical climate

As climate change reshapes our environment, its impact on food systems becomes clear. We must model our food systems for resilience to ensure food security in a warmer world



“

GENETIC ALTERATIONS IN PLANT BREEDING ARE BOTH NATURAL AND HUMAN-INDUCED AND HAVE BEEN THERE FOR YEARS. THESE METHODS INVOLVE CROSS-BREEDING, ALTERING DNA WITH RADIATION, OR PLANTING A GENE LIKE A PEST-RESISTANT BT GENE INSERTED IN THE COTTON SEED

Climate change is bound to affect our food systems. The impact of rising CO2 levels may impact crop yields in complex ways like altering plant metabolism, changing soil fertility, erosion by pests and several others. Thus our food systems must be modelled for resilience in a warmer world. While we must make behavioural shifts in our food habits, it is also important to revisit history to learn how science has contributed to addressing the food question in the past. The introduction of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) during the Green Revolution made us overcome the Malthusian trap in the mid-20th century, which threatened a mass starvation-like situation. HYVs produced more grains per plant, requiring less land and resources, however, the use of fertilisers and pesticides also increased.

**Targeted & Precision Gene Editing**

Genetic alterations in plant breeding are both natural and human-induced and have been there for years. These methods involve cross-breeding, altering DNA with radiation or planting a gene like a pest-resistant Bt gene inserted in the cotton seed. The conventional methods for human interventions involve changes in a large part of a plant’s genetics, resulting in both intended and uncertain consequences like enhancing one trait and an inadvertent suppression of others. However, technologies like CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) offer precision cut-and-paste-like operations at the ladder level in the DNA helix (the nucleotides).

This accuracy thus minimises the risk of unintended edits in the genetic material. The tool is derived from natural defence systems in bacteria and the breakthrough led to a Nobel Prize win for Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier in the year 2020.

To get a more intuitive feel of the technology, think of the conventional gene editing technologies similar to a random insertion of a chapter in a book which might look rather messy whereas CRISPR has the ability of adding that chapter well aligned with the context and information flow of that book. Although not entirely free of risks, it is widely believed that CRISPR holds immense potential for creating climate-resilient crops like a wheat plant thriving in summer, similar to how the HYVs addressed the challenges during the Green Revolution.

**The AI Advantage :**

Proteins are the building blocks of life. These proteins are synthesised upon activation of certain genes in the plant or animal cell. One of the biggest mysteries of life on earth is to understand what triggers the synthesis of a particular protein in a cell and how a protein molecule is shaped in 3-D, as this understanding helps in determining the protein’s function and how it would interact with other such molecules to create organ structures or say an enzyme.

AI tools like Google’s AlphaFold attempt to predict these 3-D structures of protein molecules by reading the cellular codes in the form of amino acid sequences. It’s quite similar to imagining a complex machine and its functional-

ity, say an automobile engine, merely by reading the instruction booklet meant for its assembly. No doubt an AI-enabled enhanced and faster understanding of life’s fundamental systems like the protein structures can help in the creation of more resilient crop varieties.

**Key Concerns:** No doubt there are risks associated with gene edits. It is very much like tinkering with life’s basic systems and this may have consequences beyond the intended genetic material, species, geographies and time horizons. Beyond the perceived threat of these scientific misadventures, there are ethical concerns associated as well like the creation of designer babies or large corporations monopolising the technology.

**Way Forward:**

While we must tread with caution in the gene space, we should also realise that genetically modified organisms have already entered into the world’s food systems. A large part of animal feed is genetically engineered and several ingredients in human food too have such modifications.

The benefits of gene tech are not limited to food crops rather they have path-breaking implications on human health in terms of disease prevention or cure and myriad others. The recent introduction of indigenous CAR-T cell therapy by India, targeted towards genetically engineering T cells (immune system cells) for cancer cure is one such example. The Indian Council of

Agricultural Research is working in the field of CRISPR to develop crop varieties suitable to the country’s needs.

The need of the hour is to build robust knowledge systems, invest in genetic engineering research, create robust institutional mechanisms for stakeholder collaboration including the consumers and envisage regulations that blend civilisational ethics and the tenets of contemporary science. In conclusion, climate change necessitates a resilient approach to our food systems, incorporating advanced technologies like CRISPR for precise genetic modifications.

This innovative tool, inspired by natural bacterial defenses, offers targeted solutions for creating climate-resilient crops with minimal unintended effects.


Combined with AI advancements in understanding protein structures, these technologies promise significant improvements in agricultural productivity and sustainability. While ethical and safety concerns remain, the benefits of genetic engineering extend beyond agriculture to human health.

By investing in research, fostering collaboration and establishing ethical regulations, we can harness these advancements to secure our food future in a warming world.

*(The author is an officer of the Indian Railway Service of Mechanical Engineers. He has been a UK Commonwealth Scholar; views are personal)*

Time to prioritise human life over commerce

The Ghatkopar tragedy underscores the urgent need for stricter safety measures and accountability to prevent future incidents driven by commercial greed



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In a massive human tragedy, involving human negligence, 16 innocent lives were lost and almost 75 people were injured when a hoarding fell on a petrol pump in Ghatkopar, a suburb in Mumbai on May 13. It is guessed that the hoarding had a weak foundation and probably fell due to the heavy winds that were blowing that day and struck several people who were present at a nearby petrol pump. It is learnt that the hoarding was three times the size sanctioned by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and stood on the land owned by the Government Railway Police (GRP). The advertising panel that held the hoarding in question was put by Ego Media whose owner Bhavesh Bhide

was arrested in this connection on Thursday. This incident would not have occurred if care had been taken by those who are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring observance of legal norms. Any damage or harm caused to persons, naturally, raises concerns of some kind of negligence or human carelessness. It is apparent that some negligence was involved and legal norms were violated.

There was negligence on the part of the people who put up such a dangerous advertising panel as well as the local authorities.

The natural question here is why was the company allowed to put an advertising panel, that posed danger to human lives, in violation of the relevant norms and why some action to remove such a dangerous panel was not taken in time by the concerned authorities. There is clear negligence of the owners and workers of the company that put this panel on the public road as they could reasonably foresee that such a panel may cause harm or injury if care is not taken. But there is also apparent negligence of the local authorities whose accountability is required to be fixed as their responsibility is to keep watch on city roads and, wherever necessary, take quick action to prevent accidents and damage. In this particular matter also, there is an obvious indifference towards the breach of duty and negligence as is apparent in the general attitude of apathy and lackadaisical approach in the Government functionaries as well as among the common people in India. This incident has posed many questions involving faulty urban governance in Indian cities as well as highlighting the general apathy towards human life in our country.

There is no doubt that the Ghatkopar incident was an accident and accidents do occur despite precautions and they happen even in the most developed nations. But incidents and accidents causing deaths, injuries and damages are rampant in India, perhaps, much more than in any other country.

The national newspapers are full of news of deaths, injuries and damages caused either due to road accidents, dog attacks, fire incidents, drowning in rivers, lakes and swimming pools or due to negligence in many other situations including while doing medical procedures. What is surprising is that such news does not invite or attract much public reaction and only some hue and cry is raised in bigger matters for some time which is gradually forgotten. The Government officials also do not seem much bothered by such incidents and they also respond momentarily to assuage the public outcry for the time being.

The thought that perplexes one here is how unfortunately so many innocent and precious lives were lost and what impact it would have had on their family members. Many of those who died must have been the sole breadwinners in the family on whose income the family may have been dependent. The unexpected deaths of near ones and injuries to those who survived must have caused huge shock and left indelible marks on the psyches of relatives and injured that will remain a constant source of pain for them for the rest of their lives. The loss of relatives as well as the source of income will turn this tragedy into a double jeopardy for the shattered and grieving family members.

Anyone, with an awakened mind and a sensitive heart, who is witnessing rampant human tragedies regularly happening in India, naturally shudders to think about whether there is any guarantee of security or value of human life in this country.

Ghatkopar tragedy among other such incidents again compels one to think that whether every individual, in this country, is so insecure and vulnerable that anything can happen to them anytime and anywhere and there is always a possibility of an accident occurring with them due to negligence and callous apathy of others towards human life. This dismal atmosphere makes the author recall a Statement from a friend’s son who had long back gone to study in England. When asked about the difference in life between India and England, he sadly quipped that in England people do not let even their animals die and go to every extent to save their lives, but in India, we see people regularly dying like animals, without much compassion being felt by Government or people. Hope that the Ghatkopar incident will raise concerns and make the Government and people more careful and responsible and a general atmosphere of care and value for human life shall prevail to save precious human lives in our nation.

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