

# How the Constitution played a cameo role

Pundits didn't think it could have the power of 'Garibi hatao' or match up to the machismo of 'Ab ki baar 400 paar'. Yet somehow the Constitution became the dark horse of the election



**CULT FRICTION**  
**SANDIP ROY**

**T**rigonometry often felt mind-boggling. The differences between *khair* crops and *rabi* crops in geography class felt dreary. And the laundry list of later Mughals and British governor-generals and viceroys could get quite confusing. But no subject felt as deathly dull in school as civics.

At least history had winners and losers. Geography came with mountains and rivers even if I confused the Narmada with the Tapi. But civics just came with duties, obligations, rights and amendments, all very worthy and all very dull. It was like the Isabgol dietary fibre of school subjects—essential for the system to function smoothly but utterly bland.

That is why it's been such a surprise to see the Constitution play a cameo role, and a pivotal one at that, in the 2024 general election. In school I would pray to be saved from civics class. But this election "Save the Constitution" or "Samvidhaan bachao" became quite the rallying cry.

Pundits didn't think it could have the power of "Garibi hatao". Or match up to the machismo of "Ab ki baar 400 paar". Yet somehow the Constitution became the dark horse of the election.

Though the BJP won the election, it came up well shy of its 400 *paar* boast. When the victorious National Democratic Alliance met to formally choose their leader, Narendra Modi first paid obeisance to the Constitution, bowing before it and then touching the book to his forehead. Meanwhile, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi carried a pocket-sized version around to make his point. The Constitution is no longer the doughy book that weighed down my civics class. It's become a piece of performance art.

In fact literally so. This year Hand for

Handmade, a network of artists and craft patrons, chose 75 artisans from across the country to create 1x1m pieces, 75 tapestries that paid tribute to the Preamble to the Constitution in its 75th year. The 2024 edition of the Mahatma Gandhi University Arts Festival in Kottayam called itself "We, the People of India", the opening phrase of the Preamble. Right before the *pran pratishtha* or consecration ceremony at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya got underway in January, many celebrities, especially from the Malayalam film industry, shared an image of the Preamble on their social media handles without any commentary.

The Preamble had become not just a pledge that we learnt by rote in school, but also a tool of protest. But it was an amulet as well, a talisman to protect oneself against charges of being branded an anti-national seditious troublemaker.

Long before this election, the women protesting against the government's Citizenship (Amendment) Act in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh in 2020 marked Republic Day by reading the Preamble of the Constitution at midnight. At that time, writer Kapil Komredid told me, "Their song is the national anthem. Their standard is the Indian flag. Their holy book is the Indian Constitution. That's an extraordinary sight for anyone to behold, especially anyone who loves India."

At a time when dissent can easily be labelled "anti-national", this became an act of what some called "constitutional patriotism".

There were precedents. In December 2017, scores of non-profit organisations, many of them Dalit and anti-caste, came together for the Elgar Parishad in Pune to speak up against casteism and communalism. When violence broke out at Bhima Koregaon after that, the police alleged it had been instigated and provoked by "urban Naxalites" and Maoists who had organised the Elgar Parishad. In fact, two retired judges, both Marathas, were the main organisers. One of the two, Justice P.B. Sawant said, "Our main theme was to save the Constitution and the nation." The Bhima Koregaon case is still ongoing, but Alpa Shah writes in the 2024 book *The Incarcerations—Bhima Koregaon and the Search for Democracy*



Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi holds a copy of the Constitution, at a press conference on 4 June.

in India, the allegedly "anti-national" event actually ended with an activist leading the audience in a pledge to protect the Constitution and its values.

Several years ago, tribals in Jharkhand erected monoliths as part of the Pathalgadi movement to assert their rights. Once those monoliths were used to commemorate ancestors of the Munda tribe. Though the government cried foul, villagers inscribed lines from the Constitution and details from the Act meant to protect tribal areas from exploitation on the stone slabs to remind the government of what the Constitution had promised them.

Of course more than the Constitution, it's the Preamble that's captured the imagination. In 2020, the Kerala government proposed making it mandatory reading during morning assembly in schools. The Centre for Law & Policy Research says its Preamble on a T-shirt line is back in stock. One sus-

pects that it's not just because the Preamble is profound but because the Constitution itself is just too voluminous for ordinary people to digest. The legal scholar Upendra Baxi called it an "unparalleled exercise in verbosity". Now politicians might be touching it to their forehead, calling it their holy book but most of us, activists, politicians or just *aam aadmi* in T-shirts, have never actually read this book.

In fact, despite its hallowed status now, especially after the elections, the Constitution had plenty of detractors when it was initially drafted. In the 2023 book *The Colonial Constitution*, Arghya Sengupta recounts how the Gandhian Kari Manimantiaiah, future chief minister of Mysore state, complained that instead of hearing the roles of the verna or the silar, the Constitution resembled the "music of an English band".

Lately there's been a buzz that the

Constitution itself needed to be "decolonised" and the BJP had to hastily distance itself from its then Uttara Kannada MP Anantkumar Hegde when he claimed in March that the BJP needed to win 400 seats so it could "rewrite" the Constitution. Hegde was denied a ticket, but the Constitution was suddenly very much part of the electoral campaign. Some wanted to change it. Some wanted to protect it. But either way it became something that belonged to the people.

In a way the Prime Minister was acknowledging that reality when he tweeted after the election results came out, "It is our Constitution, due to which a person like me, born in a poor and backward family, got the opportunity to serve the nation. It is our Constitution, due to which today crores of countrymen are getting hope, strength, and a dignified life."

He was in effect admitting that the

so-called Constitution that was supposedly the bequest of the elite belonged to the little people as well. That was the contention of Yale University assistant professor Rohit De in his 2018 book *A People's Constitution*. There he pointed out that very ordinary people, some whom might well be looked down upon by the *bhadralok*, have used the Constitution to reshape their lives.

A Parsi man challenged the Prohibition laws in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1950 saying he should be permitted to "exercise his right to possess and consume foreign liquor" and the Bombay Prohibition Act restricted his freedom of speech and action and violated his right to equal treatment. A sex worker in Allahabad went to court in 1958 saying the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act violated her fundamental right to practise her profession. In 1957, Muslim butchers filed petitions against cow slaughter laws. Though the Supreme Court upheld most of the cow slaughter laws, De writes he was amazed to find that more than 3,000 petitioners, all of them Muslim, 90% from the Qureshi community, had signed or put their thumb print on the petition. "Thus the Hanafi Qureshi case was possibly one of the earliest class-action cases in post-independent India,"

writes De. Whether the cases succeeded or not is not the issue. That the cases happened at all is a marker of engagement.

In his book, De writes that even though India did not have an organisation like the American Civil Liberties Union, ordinary lawyers and ordinary people made the courtroom the "space of the unexpected" where "instead of citizens encountering the state, the state suddenly encounters its citizens."

In a way Elections 2024 were a continuation of that encounter.

And we shouldn't have been so surprised because all those cases of Muslim butchers, tribals in Jharkhand, mothers in Shaheen Bagh, the sex workers and dancers of Allahabad served as a prelude to that encounter.

*Cult Friction* is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

## 10 YOUNG STARS AT EURO 2024

Euro 2024 might be the last dance for some icons but a host of young players are ready to impress on the big stage

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**L**et's go back to Euro 2008. A certain Luka Modric had just signed for Tottenham Hotspur before the tournament began. While the Spurs faithful waited to see more of their summer signing, it was at the Euros that Modric shined. Modric scored Croatia's first goal at Euro 2008, which was hosted by Austria and Switzerland. He inspired the team on a remarkable run till the quarter-finals, where they lost to Turkey. The 22-year-old was included in the team of the tournament, becoming only the second Croatian to do so after Davor Suker. Modric went on to have a storied career—a Ballon D'or, multiple titles at Real Madrid and becoming Croatia's most capped player. But Euro 2008 was his turning point.

On 14 June, Euro 2024 kicked off in Germany. The biggest tournament before the 2026 World Cup, the Euros could be the last dance for the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Modric and France's Olivier Giroud. But there are others ready to stake their claim as stars of the future.

Previous editions of the Euros have unearthed many gems. Euro 2024 also began on the same day as the summer transfer window for the Premier League, while most other European leagues will open their window on 1 July, bang in the middle of the Euros. Top clubs will use the tournament as an audition for potential transfer targets.

**Lamine Yamal, 16, Spain**  
Lamine Yamal is the latest jewel from Barcelona's La Masia. Left footed and capable

of playing both as an attacking midfielder or winger, Yamal has been breaking records ever since he entered Barcelona's squad in April 2023. He scored on his senior debut for Spain in September 2023, becoming their youngest player and goalscorer. Yamal showed his talent again on 9 June in Spain's first friendly before the Euros, with a great assist for Fabian Ruiz's goal in a 5-1 rout of Northern Ireland. Former Barcelona coach Xavi stopped short of comparing Yamal to Lionel Messi but said the 16-year-old "can mark an era in football".

**Warren Zaire-Emery, 18, France**  
PSG might have lost Kylian Mbappe to Real Madrid but have a potential gem in Warren Zaire-Emery, who already has more than 50 appearances for the club and a Ligue 1 winner's medal. Zaire-Emery made his debut for France in November 2023, scoring against Gibraltar, at just 17, in a 14-0 victory. For a tall midfielder, Zaire-Emery possesses a decent burst of pace and is tenacious in tackles, capable of easily starting attacks from the midfield.

**Florian Wirtz, 21, Germany**  
The German league keeps producing wonderful talents and Florian Wirtz is testament to that. Wirtz played a crucial role in Bayer Leverkusen's remarkable 2023-24 season, which saw them win both the Bundesliga and the DFB Pokal, scoring 18 goals across all competitions. Having missed the

2022 World Cup due to an injury, Wirtz will be raring to go on the international stage once again. A brilliant dribbler, Wirtz is equally good with either foot and not afraid to shoot from a distance.

**Jeremie Frimpong, 23, The Netherlands**  
One of the most exciting right-backs in European football, Frimpong was equally important in Bayer Leverkusen's domestic double-winning season. His tally of 9 league goals is an impressive return for a right back who hasn't featured much for the Dutch national team. Frimpong's energetic runs from defence could be a potent weapon for the Oranje.

**Davide Fratesi, 24, Italy**  
Davide Fratesi has slowly made his way to the cream of Italian football. Last season he won the Scudetto with Inter Milan. Fratesi is capable of playing in both attacking and defensive mid-field roles. He's slowly developing a niche for late runs into the 18-yard box and scoring crucial goals—a trait he showcased earlier this week against Bosnia and Herzegovina with a cracking volley in Italy's last friendly before the Euros.

**Kobbie Mainoo, 19, England**  
One of the bright spots from a dismal league campaign for Manchester United, Kobbie Mainoo plays like a veteran. Evading tackles, playing short, sharp passes, Mainoo can find spaces where others cannot. He is calm on the ball and also scores crucial goals, as seen in the FA Cup final. His performances have not gone unnoticed and Gareth Southgate has fast-



England's Kobbie Mainoo.

born when Slovenia last made it to the Euros back in 2000. Now, he could be their most precious attacking resource.

**Joao Neves, 19, Portugal**  
Move over Cristiano, there's a new rising star in Portuguese football. A product of Benfica's youth system, Neves is a dynamic midfielder known for his work rate and tackling. He can press, pass and dictate the flow of a game, which makes him versatile. Neves is a mainstay at Benfica. With the likes of Joao Palhinha, Ruben Neves and Bruno Fernandes ahead of him in the national team, he's one for the future.

**Johan Bakayoko, 21, Belgium**  
Drilling with speed and trickery, Johan Bakayoko is a defender's nightmare. He was instrumental in PSV Eindhoven's championship winning 2023-24 season, bamboozling defenders and bagging 12 league goals. According to OptaJoe, Bakayoko also averaged 2.6 chances created from open play per 90 in the Champions League last season—the most of any winger in the tournament.

**Rasmus Hojlund, 21, Denmark**  
Speed, strength, finishing and excellent hold-up play—Rasmus Hojlund has everything a modern-day No 9 is asked of. Despite a tough start to life at Manchester United, Hojlund recently became the youngest player to score in six consecutive Premier League games and finished the season with an impressive tally of 16 goals across all competitions. The left-footed striker has been in electric form for the national team. He scored a hat-trick against Finland in March 2023 during the Euro 2024 qualifiers, where he finished as Denmark's top-scorer with 7 goals. In Germany, the Danes will look to Hojlund once again for the finishing touch.

tracked the teenager into the England setup. Jude Bellingham might bring the X-factor to England's line-up, but it could be Mainoo at its fulcrum.

**Benjamin Sesko, 21, Slovenia**  
The fact that Benjamin Sesko was on the radar of many top European clubs says a lot about his quality. RB Leipzig have tied him down to a new contract—and rightly so. Sesko is Slovenia's youngest ever

scorer and touted by many as the player who could break Zlatko Zahovic's record of most goals scored for Slovenia. A towering presence at 6ft, 5 inches, Sesko has remarkable poise and finishing ability. Sesko wasn't even



**A thought for today**Both poverty and prosperity  
can lead to emigration

CHINMAY TUME

## Kerala To Kuwait

A deadly fire says Indians also exploit Indian migrants

Community networks are a crucial enabling factor for Indians to find work across the country and indeed the world. But the Kuwait fire that took 45 Indian lives is a reminder that such networks can also have a dark side.

**Trust and betrayal** | News that the building in which the deaths took place was a fire hazard waiting to explode — from cardboard and plastic being used to partition workers into cramped rooms to doors to the rooftop being locked — was painful enough. A subsequent revelation that an Indian managed the building and also employed most of those who died, somehow felt 'worse'. It's obvious why. Because this now becomes a case where not only was workplace safety not provided in a foreign country, an Indian employer also thought Indians didn't deserve better. Separately, there is the vexed issue of illegal migration, where trusted stores and agents play an even more fraught role. Indians btw have become the third largest unauthorised immigrant population in US.

**Home and abroad** | Networks on which Keralites, Gujaratis, Punjabis and others have relied to make legal homes across the world, are an invaluable social and economic resource for India. The Kuwait fire reminds us that even these are not without tales of desertion, betrayal, fraud. Or milder letdowns. Say students who are happy to have Indian student associations helping them with the commute, housing etc upon landing on foreign campuses, then find these to be oppressively parochial. A public policy that tries to even out all the dingy knots of human nature will be pointless. Still, GOI should increase its efforts to ensure safe working conditions for migrant Indian workers, whose numbers are bound to keep going up. Experts suggest a national-level migration database will be useful in this direction.

## Baloney About Meloni

Behind the male obsession with how women netas look

As Italy hosts G7 summit, we've been flooded with Giorgia Meloni jokes and memes. The most powerful politician in EU right now, she has been reduced to a blonde stereotype, wink-wink nudge-nudge. Like other women in high offices, Meloni is being seen through a male prism — hot or not? A few years ago, at talks between Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon, the tabloids compared the bodies of the two politicians, asking: 'Never mind Brexit, who won legs-it?' No matter how influential she is, no matter what she knows or becomes, a woman can always be subjected to such demeaning framing. Her power is almost a red rag, an invitation to take her down.

Our images of public authority are inevitably male and larger than life. In our power structures, man is the norm and women are seen as aberrations who 'broke barriers' to get there. Because men see women as either sexual objects or nurturers, women who aspire to high office have to actively live down these ideas, or exploit them, by playing the parts to their own benefit. Ignoring these stereotypes is not easy; nor is pretending to be a man.

Hillary Clinton was cast as a scary emulsifier for being openly ambitious. Angela Merkel, who led Germany for 16 years, was as no-nonsense as it gets, but was boxed into a matronly 'mum' image anyway. Finland's former PM Sanna Marin was criticised for her youth. New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern and Brazil's Dilma Rousseff faced their own witch-hunts. In recent years, there has been public pushback against this kind of gendered scrutiny. We have seen many prominent politicians take these templates head-on, and lead in their own ways. But as the Meloni discourse shows, old-fashioned misogyny dies hard.

## The Secret Sauce Of Stardom

Fame depends on network effects and groupthink

How did Taylor Swift become Taylor Swift? Or Steve Jobs, or Leonardo da Vinci? *How To Become Famous: Lost Einsteins, Forgotten Superstars and How the Beatles Came to Be* by Cass Sunstein is an exploration of how some people achieve iconic status. Extraordinary as they are, their fate has as much to do with the cult of the serendipity. How does that serendipity work, and how can it be engineered? Fame is often seen as a bubble that pops. But long-term fame is not a matter of caprice or infatuation; something causes Mozart or Jane Austen to endure, rather than their peers Salieri or Mary Brunton.

Success stories often focus on random narratives: the dropout or the highly educated, Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos, whose example works. It's hard to identify the exact qualities that make for success — especially since those traits may be equally found in those who are unsuccessful. Of course, hard labour and resilience are required. Random encounters matter too. If young Cassius Clay had not had his bike stolen, reported it to a police chief who advised him to learn boxing, would Muhammad Ali, the superlative star, come to be? Meanwhile, why does Bob Dylan define an era, while an equally original, poetic and deep singer like Dylan Conner, who went viral on Spotify, was forgotten for decades?

Influencers have always been crucial. If prominent people in your group like something, it catches on. And this appeal grows exponentially: the more well-known someone is, the more their reputation snowballs. These reputational cascades. Quite apart from the merits of a book or show or statesman, we want to talk to others about them. Taylor Swift's

explosive popularity is an example of these network effects. Keats found like-minded acquaintances talking up his work on a small scale, a collective chatter that became the buzz of fame. The Beatles had their manager to thank, for his relentless belief and effort that drove their early success.

Sometimes, reputations are created posthumously, as with the cult of Jane Austen. Her work hit the right spot, family and publishers championed her tirelessly like celebrity endorsers and commercial efforts might today. Keats wasn't necessarily better than his peer Leigh Hunt; it's not just about literary worth, but also extraneous factors and accidental advantages that make lionised writers.

Why did Star Wars become such a phenomenon? Nobody saw it until the studio executives. Sure, audience reception was rapturous and reviewers declared it amazing to start with. But again, word of mouth in the sci-fi community, the reputation cascades and network effects played a huge role — even now, you watch it to be part of the group. It's the same with the Marvel universe.

Social scientists speak of the lost Einsteins and Shakespeares and Teslas, who may be disadvantaged by poverty, gender or race, lacking role models and exposure. But there are other reasons that innovators fail to make it. Maybe the zeitgeist wasn't on their side, there was no wave for them to catch. They might not have been born into the right families, found the right networks, enemies, champions or inspirations. Fame is a matter of lucky breaks, the book reminds us — and that also means there are other reasons that innovators and talents existing among us, right now. All they need is attention and opportunity.

### mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



# A Chapati On Democracy's Tawa

- Around half of India's electorate are floating voters ● They change their choices every election
- Measuring the swing vote is tough ● All of this is true for both LS & assembly polls

Atanu Biswas



Democracy is like a chapati on a tawa, it is said. Electorates must keep flipping it constantly to prevent burning. Does that mean, though, that voters should elect a new govt every five years? Not really. But we notice a 'flip' every time a govt is changed or its strength significantly curtailed, or enhanced, through the electoral process. Even if the party in office and its strength don't really alter, some sort of 'flipping' is a constant in a democracy.

Number of seats BJP has in 2024 is 63 fewer than its 2019 tally, while the number Congress holds has increased by 47. Is that, however, the whole story? This time, in fact, an MP from a different party, in comparison to 2019, has been elected on around 20% of the 543 seats, or a whopping 38.4% of the total.

**Keep flipping** | If four out of 10 MPs are elected from a different party than in the last election, isn't that *poriborton* (change)? But this occurs in practically every election. For example, BJP gained only 21 seats in 2019 compared to 2014 and Congress only 8. Yet, it's significant to note that compared to 2014, in 2019, as many as 187 constituencies, or a staggering 34.4% of LS, elected an MP from a different party.

To use a recent assembly election as an example, the number of seats held by incumbent TMC in Bengal in 2021 stayed largely unchanged from the previous election, as Left and Congress were entirely replaced by BJP as opposition in the state. The real *poriborton*, however, was beyond that. A total of 292, or 44%, of the constituencies had winners from a different party than in 2016.

Also, when DMK led alliance returned to office in Tamil Nadu in 2021, of assembly's 234 seats, 111 (or 47.4%) had

winners from parties other than the 2016 winner.

**Maintain the count** | Measuring the proportion of people who changed their voting choices is difficult. BJP's vote percentage fell by just 0.8% in 2024, while Congress's climbed by a meagre 1.8% overall. While share of SP increased by 2 percentage points. Perhaps a fraction of a percentage point moved in either direction in the vote shares of the majority of the other parties. Apparently, adding them up would mean that, at most, 10-12% of the country's electorate

**This time, an MP from a different party, in comparison to 2019, has been elected on around 20% of the 543 seats, or a whopping 38.4% of the total**

had a change of voting choice. However, that would be gross underestimation in actuality.

**Reading the fine print** |

A larger proportion of shifting votes will be obtained if you add the percentage of vote-changes for each political party in each state. If you redo the process for each constituency instead, the number will rise further. Additionally, if data from all of the country's EVMs is combined with results from past elections, one might obtain a lower bound on the percentage of votes that have changed.

However, it will only be a 'lower

bound' because there are countless instances in which voter 1 switched from party A to party B, voter 2 switched from party B to party C, and voter 3 switched from party C to party A, maintaining the total count. Additionally, some old voters exit and some new voters enter the democratic exercise. Thus, the dynamics are also impacted.

**Keep rolling** | The percentage of floating voters should be rather significant, or else how could the BJP's vote share double from less than 18% in 2009 to about 38% in 2019? Also, how could Congress's vote

share drop from 44% in 2009 to about 18% in 2019?

Left's percentage dropped to less than 5%, and it is 5.67% in 2024.

Therefore, a guesstimate that all will over 50% — possibly even 60% — of all the electorate are floating voters, meaning they're open to changing their voting preferences. In fact, a 2014 CSDS study also concluded that 43% of Indian voters go with the 'hawa'.

**Global outlook** | What about other countries?

According to Linda Killian's 2012 book *The Swing Vote: The Unruffled Power of Independents*, 40% of American voters, their largest voting bloc, are independent. These voters occupy a wide range of political and ideological space and have influenced the results of every election since World War II.

And their number keeps increasing. The British electorate is also 'volatile', per British Election Study. In three elections between 2010 and 2017, 49% of UK voters didn't vote for the same party while 43% of voters changed parties between 2010 and 2015. It, however, makes sense that the real percentage of floating voters would be higher because a volatile voter would necessarily not have supported a different party.

Political parties are fully aware of this — if not, who do they target in their election campaigns? So, democracy's *chapati* must be constantly flipped. Higher the flame, more frequent the flip — all to prevent burning. The *hawa* may be felt, or it may even be subtle. But *poriborton* is always blowing in the wind of democracy.

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## Civility In Politics? It's Really Up To Us, Voters

Once we get what uncivil political practice means, we'll understand we need more than just nice netas

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Can civility return to India's politics? It's an urgent question. A frequently asked question. And, for all its good intentions, a misleading question.

When we say or even write about 'civility', we usually mean one of the following: politeness, being respectful, being nice, speaking softly, not being overly argumentative. But 'civility' — Latin root 'cives' — asks much more of us than manners and a similar inflection in Latin (civitas) or public space. As an analysis hosted by the Hannah Arendt Centre points out, 'the practice of civility is the practice of being a citizen. To be "civil" is to go beyond your private self and be a "public person" — a person with rights.'

Civility is, therefore, deeply entwined with politics. It's a 'political virtue that upholds the political ideal that amidst our differences and plurality, we can still engage with each other as citizens'. So, politics uncivil when we, including our politicians, can't engage with each other, just because we can't agree on important stuff.

If politicians greet each other politely in Parliament's Central Hall, but in public space, they want to annihilate each other's organisations, or they dismiss every point their competitors make, politics is uncivil. Even if the annihilation or the dismissal is wrapped in courteousness.

This is a crucial distinction, and it played out in these elections. Many in India's chattering classes were — rightly — put off by shrill campaign rhetoric and vitriolic personal attacks. In contrast, many in India's voting, poorer classes were more alarmed by the possibility that their constitutional rights — specifically, reservations — were under alleged threat.

Poorer Indians intuitively understood what uncivil politics means — politics that can potentially threaten citizens' rights. Politics that says, 'If we win big, we don't have to listen to anyone, engage with anyone, least of all those who don't agree with us.'

So, when we, meaning the better off classes, ask whether civility can return to politics, what we should

be really asking for is not so much polite, witty speeches and drawing room decorum on the hustings (on the stump, for readers who prefer the American version). We should be asking for politics that doesn't see engagement with rival politicians as a weakness. That doesn't see the existence of rival politicians as an affront. That internalises the true concept of citizenship — belonging to the same place, we don't have to be alike.

When RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat recently said the opposition is not an adversary, he was speaking for civility in politics in its real sense. Of course, many politicians are not realistically speaking, or even conceptually, uncivil. Bhagwat's remarks, he also spoke against 'arrogance'. But that's all right — so long as 'liberals' don't dismiss Bhagwat because he's RSS.

Liberals, and their sometimes close, sometimes distant cousins, the Left, can be uncivil in their politics. Just as the Right can be. True, the Right is more frequently uncivil, across democracies. But the Left-liberal is no better at the worst. Politics for a 'Hindu nation', even if practised with unfaultless politeness, is uncivil in a religiously plural democracy. So is courtroom politics that doesn't engage with those who claim to speak for the majority. Politics that says Israel can do any damn thing in Gaza and Rafah — because Hamas started it — is uncivil. So is politics that says Israel, a rare democracy in West Asia, be condemned as a nation, and Israelis, many of whom are fierce critics of Netanyahu, be tarred as a people.

Once we understand what civility in politics means, the answer to the question we asked at the beginning — can civility return

to Indian politics — is much more complex. It involves a reborn: politics is first about responsibility (to the people) and recognition (of differences), and then about winning and losing.

Can such a change happen organically? Will politicians admit, OMG, we have been terribly uncivil, that's not done. If you think that, your optimism is the stuff of Page 1. More likely, politicians in a democracy will respond to the one thing they think about all the time — the vote.

If election results show enough voters dislike uncivil politicians, more realistically speaking, or even conceptually, uncivil politics, politicians may get the message, or some version of it. Since and since 2024 elections any which way there's no getting away from this conclusion: the results were a voter's shot across the uncivil politician's bow.

If politicians choose to accept the true meaning of this verdict, a reborn is possible. Not a perfect way, of course. Never expect that in politics. But a demonstrable change, nonetheless.

But politicians may also choose not to accept it. Partly perhaps because they can't abide such a thought. And partly perhaps because power induces selective amnesia. The grandness of political office can wipe out memories of those moments when a narrative, broken, and invocations of ever-lasting electoral infallibility came apart.

So, what then? Simple. It's up to us, voters. We must send the message again, and again, to whichever party is guilty of uncivil politics — the message hits home.



### Calvin & Hobbes

I USED TO HATE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, BUT NOW I ENJOY THEM.



I REALIZED THAT THE PURPOSE OF WRITING IS TO INFLATE WIDE IDEAS, OBSCURE POOR REASONING, AND INHIBIT CLARITY.



WITH A LITTLE PRACTICE, WRITING CAN BE AN INTIMIDATING AND IMPENETRABLE FOG. I WANT TO SEE MY BOOK REPORT?

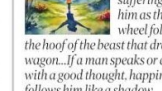


THE DYNAMICS OF INTERBENEING AND MONOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES IN DICK AND JANE: A STUDY IN PSYCHIC TRANSLATIONAL GENDER MOSES.



### Sacred space

If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, suffering follows him as the wheel follows the hoof of the beast that draws the wagon. If a man speaks or acts with a good thought, happiness follows him like a shadow.



Gautam Buddha

## Langar Fosters Empathy And Community Solidarity

Stuti Malhotra

Throughout the current week, numerous locations have hosted instances of chabeel. This traditional Sikh practice involves serving the public a refreshing, sweetened drink typically made with water, sugar, and sometimes flavoured with rose essence or other ingredients, during the hot summer months. The practice is particularly associated with commemorating the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth Sikh guru. Offering chabeel is a symbolic act of kindness and solidarity, honouring the guru's teachings.

In Sikhism, langar is not just a communal duty but a transformative spiritual institution. It's a place where human parity, honour of labour, and human well-being, and endeavour for the Divine converge, creating a sense of unity and equality that extends far beyond the dining table and inspiring all to engage in acts of selflessness.

While individual acts of charity can sometimes be seen as fostering self-centredness, engaging in selfless service and devotion is a powerful tool for transcending the ego that separates a person from God and their inner self. Those who hold a deep devotion for the Divine willingly assist individuals, as an expression of their devotion to the Lord. This act of service imparts valuable life teachings like putting others before oneself, embracing modesty, and nurturing empathy.

Guru Nanak Dev initiated this movement to challenge the dominance of

the wealthy over the less privileged. Alongside this sacred endeavour, the gurus actively endorsed the practice of langar, which soon became a prevalent tradition. The communal kitchen symbolised the bedrock of equal treatment and camaraderie among the guru's disciples.

Guru Angad Dev played a pivotal role in expanding the concept of langar (free kitchen), which was established by Guru Nanak. This served the needy and amplified the reach of Guru Nanak's mission. It marked the Sikh's first lesson in contributing to a communal fund, Dasvand tradition, of giving one-tenth of one's earnings or resources to support community and those in need. Mata Khivi, Guru Angad Dev's wife, dedicated herself to tending

to pilgrims and visitors.

Guru Arjan Dev invited all members of the Sikh community to partake in the langar or free kitchen meal before meeting him. He expressed this principle through the saying: *Pahulay Pangat*. *Posthway Sangat* — first sit in the langar, then go to the guru. Subsequently, this practice became a fundamental component of the gurdwara, firmly ingrained in its ethos.

The gurus demonstrated through their own lives how the concept of universal kinship should be practised, and a community kitchen serves as the most vivid illustration of this principle. The langar extends beyond mere feeding; it holds a doctrinal significance encompassing social engagement, collective involvement, and a communal obligation to provide sustenance to the hungry, assist the less fortunate, and foster selfless acts of societal assistance.

### THE SPEAKING TREE









# The Statesman

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## Poll dissection

The 2024 Lok Sabha election results underscore the dynamic nature of Indian politics. As the dust settles, a closer look reveals intriguing insights into the performances of the two main contenders: the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the INDIA bloc. The electoral outcomes, winning margins, and regional variances tell a story of a nation divided yet united in its democratic spirit. In general category seats, the NDA, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, won 227 out of 412 seats compared to the INDIA bloc's 174. However, the INDIA bloc showed strength in seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC), winning 43 out of 84, a slight edge over the NDA's 40. In contrast, the NDA dominated the Scheduled Tribes (ST) seats, securing 26 out of 47, while the INDIA bloc managed only 17.

The urban-rural divide offers another fascinating lens through which to view the election. The NDA's dominance is clear in urban areas, winning 39 out of 55 seats, compared to the INDIA bloc's 15. However, the INDIA bloc managed to narrow the gap in rural constituencies, winning 219 out of 488 seats, while the NDA secured 254. This suggests that while urban voters continue to favour the NDA, the rural electorate is more contested, reflecting perhaps different priorities and issues. Winning margins provide another layer of analysis, revealing the extent of each alliance's hold on their constituencies. The NDA has a significant advantage in seats won by margins over 25 per cent, securing 55 out of 79 such seats. Conversely, the INDIA bloc performed better in closely contested seats with winning margins between 5-10 per cent, capturing 62 out of 121 seats in this category. This pattern indicates that while the NDA claimed decisive victories in several areas, the INDIA bloc remained competitive in tighter races.

Regionally, the results paint a diverse picture. The INDIA bloc performed well in southern India, winning 75 out of 129 seats, while the NDA won 49. This is notable given the BJP's historic challenges in these states. In contrast, the NDA demonstrated strongholds in central and the Himalayan states, winning 48 out of 54 and 11 out of 15 seats, respectively. The northern and western regions showcased mixed results, with the NDA leading in northern India and a close contest in the west. Eastern India saw a balanced performance, with the NDA securing a slight edge. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections highlight the complexity of India's political landscape.

The NDA's overall victory, bolstered by strong urban support and decisive wins in general category and ST seats, contrasts with the INDIA bloc's resilience in rural areas and SC seats. These results underscore the dynamic interplay of regional and demographic factors in Indian elections. As both alliances reflect on their performances, the focus will inevitably shift to addressing the diverse aspirations of the Indian electorate, ensuring that the democratic process continues to thrive.

## Cautious Fed

The US Federal Reserve's decision to maintain interest rates within the 5.25 per cent-5.50 per cent range and signalling only one rate cut in 2024 reveals a nuanced approach to economic management. Despite acknowledging progress towards its 2 per cent inflation target, the Fed's caution reflects a broader concern about the resilience of inflationary pressures and the need for sustained economic restraint. This conservative stance highlights the complexity of the current economic landscape. The Fed's projection of only a single rate cut in 2024, down from three anticipated cuts in March, indicates a deliberate pivot.

This move, despite the modest progress in reducing inflation, underscores a growing recognition that the fight against inflation is far from over. The central bank's increase in the estimated long-run neutral rate to 2.8 per cent from 2.6 per cent suggests that policymakers are adjusting to a reality where higher interest rates may be necessary for longer to achieve price stability. One critical aspect of this decision is its timing. By pushing the start of rate cuts potentially to December, the Fed effectively removes the possibility of a rate reduction before the November Presidential election. This delay could be seen as an attempt to maintain economic stability and avoid any perception of political influence. It also aligns with the Fed's mandate to focus on long-term economic health rather than short-term political cycles.

The Fed's acknowledgment of "modest further progress" towards the inflation target, coupled with a slightly higher end-of-year inflation rate projection of 2.6 per cent, signals a cautious optimism. However, it also reflects the challenges of navigating an economy where inflationary pressures, though easing, remain persistent. The fact that consumer prices did not rise at all in May is a positive sign, yet the central bank's cautious approach suggests that one month of data is insufficient to declare victory over inflation.

This decision also has implications for market expectations and investor sentiment. The initial market response, with US stocks holding gains and US Treasury yields falling losses, indicates a degree of confidence in the Fed's measured approach. However, traders of rate futures who had anticipated a September start to policy easing may need to recalibrate their expectations. The market's reaction also underscores the delicate balance the Fed must maintain between managing inflation and sustaining economic growth. The Fed's new economic projections, indicating a slightly above-trend growth of 2.1 per cent and a stable unemployment rate of 4 per cent, present a mixed picture. On one hand, these projections reflect a resilient economy capable of growth despite higher interest rates. On the other hand, the need for higher rates over a longer period suggests underlying vulnerabilities. This careful balancing act will be crucial in navigating the economic uncertainties of the coming year, underscoring the importance of a steady hand at the helm of monetary policy.

# Personalized Medicine

Today there is a lot of discussion in scientific circles about personalized medicine. It is now recognized that the same medicine may not work on all patients suffering from a disease, because the biological constitution of the patients is not the same. The first example of personalized medicine is transfusion medicine based on ABO blood groups; Karl Landsteiner should be recognized as the father of the concept of personalized medicine



June 14 is a day to remember. On this day in 1868, Karl Landsteiner was born. Two hundred years before this date, on 15 June 1667, the first human blood transfusion was administered by Jean-Baptiste Denis. Denis was accused of murder, because the person who received the transfusion died.

For millennia, the life-preserving function of blood was strongly believed. For curing seizures, Romans who suffered from epilepsy drank the blood of bleeding gladiators.

Blood is considered a symbol of life in most religions and cultures. Even though blood has been considered as a substance that contributes to good health, the idea of transfusion was conceived because of two scientific breakthroughs: William Harvey's discovery in 1628 that blood circulates in the body and Christopher Wren's invention of the syringe in 1659.

Withdrawal of blood, known as bloodletting, was one of the commonest medical practices to cure or prevent illness. It was practiced from antiquity until the late 19th century. Leeches or razors were used to draw blood.

Bloodletting was not done by physicians but by barbers, who were called barber-surgeons. During those times, physicians considered performing of surgery to be below their dignity.

A 15-year old boy was suffering from uncontrollable fevers for two months. A barber-surgeon performed bloodletting by leeches 20 times, to no effect. With the assistance of Paul Emmerich, a barber-surgeon, Jean-Baptiste Denis transfused, on 15 June 1667, about twelve ounces of lamb blood into the veins of the boy.

Apparently, the boy's condition improved the next morning. With this success, Denis became bold and performed a few more such transfusions.

However, while performing a third transfusion of calf blood into a notorious madman in Paris in November 1667, the patient started to shake violently. The transfusion had to be aborted. The patient died the next day. A court-case was filed by the

patient's wife accusing Denis of murder. After some hearings, the court cleared Denis. The court also banned blood transfusions. Soon thereafter, the French parliament, the Catholic Church, and the Royal Society also declared ban on blood transfusions. Until the mid-19th century, transfusion ceased to be a part of medical practice.

James Blundell, an obstetrician and surgeon at the Guy's Hospital in London revisited blood transfusion as a treatment option. Blundell's humanitarian instincts were aroused by the frequently fatal outcome of women who bled profusely after childbirth. He decided to revive what he called the "neglected operation" of blood transfusion. However, unlike his predecessors, he decided not to use animal blood, but to use human blood for transfusion to humans.

Blundell's procedure of transfusion was to collect blood of a donor in a cup and then to quickly infuse it into the recipient's vein by using a syringe. After a series of failed transfusions, in December 1828, Blundell carried out an unquestionably successful blood transfusion on a woman who bled profusely after delivering her third child. A physician who was present during the transfusion was the donor.

However, the bases of a transfusion was not understood. In 1875, Landois noted in his book 'The transfusion of blood' (in German) that when red blood cells of one species were mixed with the serum of another, clumping or lysing of the cells occurred.

The full understanding was published by Karl Landsteiner in 1900 in his article titled "On the knowledge of the anti-fermentative lytic and agglutinating effects of blood serum and the lymph" published in a German science journal. Interestingly, the agglutination of human red blood cells was reported in a footnote. For the first time, Landsteiner pointed out the physiological behavior of the agglutination reaction among specimens of mixed human blood, discussing the possibility of individual variations.

Before this publication, human red cell agglutination generally had been accepted as being caused by an abnormality in at least one of the reacting specimens. The irony, in his article on blood groups, was that Karl Landsteiner did not recognize the importance of his contribution; "I hope this will be of some use to mankind," he wrote. Eventually, in 1947, he published a book titled "The Specificity of Serological Reactions."

Landsteiner (fourth from left in accompanying photograph) was awarded the Nobel prize for his discovery of the blood groups in 1930. Interestingly, this is the same year in which C.V. Raman was also awarded the Nobel prize.)

He not only discovered the ABO blood groups, but also many other blood groups including the Rhesus blood group. When we say that my blood group is A, positive; the A refers to my blood group with respect to the ABO system (for which four types A, B, AB and O are possible) and the 'positive' refers to the Rhesus system (for which two types 'positive' and 'negative' are possible).

Landsteiner worked out the donor-recipient blood-group relationship to prevent fatal agglutination reaction. An interview for the newspaper Der Wiener Tag (The Vienna Day) on 15 November 1930 contained the following: When asked "What led you to the discovery of blood groups?" Landsteiner replied "I began these investigations 30 years ago, starting from the fact that differences exist in the blood of different animal species. I set out to examine the question whether individual differences are not present within a species."

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

## Fight against drug trafficking remains challenging

According to authorities, the number of drug cases and offenders arrested have increased with more serious, complicated and unpredictable developments. There are many new drugs that are not included in the list of management.

Hidden drugs blended in goods, foods, drinks have been illegally traded and transported illegally in larger quantity to Viet Nam for consumption, or then transported to the third country. By road, criminals often take advantage of long borders, complex mountainous terrain, many trails, openings and gaps, as well as open mechanism and policies in export, import, immigration, customs procedures for mixing, hiding and illegally transporting narcotics from Laos and Cambodia to Viet Nam through the northwestern, central - Central Highlands and southwestern provinces.

The smugglers concealed narcotics in their own backpacks, in food and even within their own bodies. Substances have been combined with items that have been deposited, expressed, or non-commercial presents given to Viet Nam citizens in Europe, America, Africa and Oceania for use domestically or to be transported to a third country, or vice versa.

The customs sector has promoted the combined strength of the whole industry, especially the specialised

## Việt Nam News

forces in drug prevention and control.

In order to effectively combat drug smuggling in all stages, routes, and places we have maximised external assistance resources within the framework of mechanism for coordination and collaboration with functional forces, ministries, sectors, agencies and organisations.

We have also organised training to raise awareness, skills and knowledge of laws and drug prevention and control in the field of customs.

We still actively participate in international cooperation initiatives as well as worldwide drug prevention and control campaigns. Collecting drug evidence and arresting traffickers is the only way to successfully prevent illegal drug transgressions from abroad to Viet Nam. To accomplish this, close combat collaboration is required.

Customs has collected, analysed and evaluated information and documents related to criminal groups and taken professional measures to arrest offenders.

The police and customs authorities have been actively cooperating from the information sharing and verification stages. We break crime rings fast and efficiently by using expert techniques. Customs force faces many challenges.

Buying and selling goods via electronic method is very easy. While drugs are purchased without paying in advance, traffickers can monitor the shipping time as well as time for customs clearance. If the goods arrive in Viet Nam but it faces obstacles in customs clearance, they will abandon the goods.

Traffickers hide drugs in shipments of sea transport which is difficult to check such as frozen goods, detergent, animal feed, wooden furniture, agricultural products, plastic particles, machinery and exported granite.

More traffickers are taking advantage of the sea route to buy and sell drugs. In addition, there are more and more synthetic drugs, some of which have not been updated in the data of drug detection devices and are not included in the control list of legal documents.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

## Positive signs

SIR, Please refer to today's report "Nawaz Sharif, Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif congratulate Modi on assuming office". Shortly after assuming charge as Foreign Minister for a second term, S Jaishankar said that India would want to find a solution to the years-old cross-border terrorism. His statement came on the heels of the messages posted on X by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and ex-PM Nawaz Sharif, congratulating PM Modi on his re-election. While Mr Shehbaz confined himself to a terse sentence, Mr Nawaz expansively appealed for replacing hate with hope and seizing the opportunity to shape the destiny of the two billion people of South Asia. Mr Modi was equally terse in thanking Mr Shehbaz and no less eloquent in reminding Mr Nawaz that the

people of India had always stood for peace, security and progressive ideas. The exchange of messages is significant as India-Pakistan ties have been in deep freeze since the Pabna terror attack and the retaliatory Balakot airstrikes of February 2019. The situation worsened after India revoked Article 370 of the Constitution and bifurcated Jammu and Kashmir in August that year, even as the hopes raised by the opening of the Kartarpur corridor were snuffed out. However, some positive signs have been visible of late. Alluding to the 25-year-old Kargil War, Mr Nawaz admitted last month that Pakistan had violated the Lahore Declaration in 1999. Interestingly, during the Lok Sabha election campaign, some BJP candidates promised the resumption of India-Pakistan trade via the Attari-Wagah crossing. Given the context, both New Delhi and Islamabad need to take a step forward, even if it's tentative to start with. This will help in reducing the trust deficit and bring the two neighbours to the talks table.

Yours, etc., Chokan Das, Kolkata, 11 June.

## DIRE POVERTY

SIR, This refers to your editorial "Rural election in States and Union (June 11). The spectre of growing unemployment and unabated price rise of daily needs looms large, specially over the marginalised rural class. The socio-economic inequality is evident from the statistics that one per cent of the population possesses 40 per cent national wealth and the poor 50 per cent hold 6.4 per cent. The world's hunger index indicates India's position at 111 out of 125 countries and the country trails behind all the neighbouring countries. This is indeed an appalling socio-economic scenario.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party suffered a serious setback and failed to achieve the expected mandate in the just concluded parliamentary election primarily because it lost over a third of the rural constituencies it had won in 2019. Despite the claim that India is the fastest growing economy globally, the benefits of growth have failed to reach to the rural heartland which constitutes 60 per cent of India's population. During

## BE FEARLESS

SIR, The fourth pillar of democracy in India is seeing a new low as India's rank in the World Press Freedom Index has dropped from 150 in 2022 to 161 in 2023. It is a big blow to the voices of the people. Almost all newspapers and news channels are seen singing praises of the ruling government which is embarrassing for any sensible person. They have forgotten that they are the voice of 1.4 billion people. Neglecting their aspirations will cost them dear in the future. It is time that they stand up for the people and for the people even if it means going against the government. They need not fear anyone because they are backed by 1.4 billion people who have the power to change the government according to their will and they have released a trailer of that in 2024 General Elections.

Yours, etc., Noopur Banah, Tezpur, 12 June.

the Covid period, while a vast majority of rural people were practising frugal living, during serious economic distress, the number of billionaires increased. It is insignificant if the national economy flourishes leaving the vast majority of the population in dire poverty. Yours, etc., Dilip Kumar Sengupta, Birati, 11 June.



# Economic shortsightedness is jeopardising Italy's G7 ambitions



MARIANNA MAZZUCATO & GIOVANNI TAGLIANI

Italy is hosting the 50th G7 summit in Fasano. Ahead of the meeting, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government announced an ambitious Africa-centered development plan and invited the leaders of several African countries and the African Union to attend — the largest number of representatives from the continent at a G7 summit since 2017. Ms Meloni unveiled her Africa initiative, known as the Mattei Plan, at the Italy-

Africa Summit earlier this year. It aims to establish international development partnerships focused on energy, growth, and immigration. The plan is named after Enrico Mattei, the founder of Italian oil giant Eni. In the 1950s, Mattei broke the monopoly of the major oil companies by offering developing countries more favourable partnership agreements. These agreements often allowed developing economies to retain 75 per cent of the profits, in contrast to the less equitable terms imposed by the dominant oil giants. Mattei also viewed state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as an essential component of national development strategies and considered personal entrepreneurship a public duty.

Ironically, Eni is now part of Ms Meloni's €20 billion (\$21 billion) privatisation plan, which involves selling SOE shares to reduce the public debt. Ms Meloni's privatisation programme is a misguided combination of outdated theories

and failed policies. The economic rationale for reducing public debt through rigid fiscal rules is based on a misinformed and short-term view of government finances that overlooks the long-term macroeconomic impact of mission-oriented public investment, especially its ability to crowd in private capital and stimulate economic growth. Italy's economic history is a case in point. Both private and public investment declined between 2009 and 2016, and started to rise only after public investment increased in 2019.

Ms Meloni's privatisation plan is indicative of Italy's short-termism, aimlessness, and absence of a serious industrial strategy. Well-governed SOEs can boost economic development and create technological spillovers, sectoral complementarities, and economies of scale and scope. Moreover, SOEs can provide patient capital and enhance a country's technological capabilities, both independently and through their supply chains. To be sure,

Italian SOEs have not always been conducive to transformational change. In fact, their historical trajectory reflects the country's economic struggles. The energy crisis of the 1970s, for example, affected state-owned steel producers, as technological efficiencies and demand shifts led to widespread job redundancies. With layoffs proving politically toxic, intense price competition resulted in heavy losses and budget shortfalls, leading to increased state support. This, in turn, led to excessive government influence and triggered calls for privatisation.

In the 1990s, Italy initiated the largest privatisation programme in continental Europe, dismantling much of its industrial backbone instead of fostering innovation. For example, while the telecommunications conglomerate STET allocated 2 per cent of its revenues to research and development (R&D) between 1994 and 1996, calculations show that its privatised successor, Telecom Italia, spent roughly 0.4

per cent on R&D between 2000 and 2002. The semi-public firms that survived, like Eni, often lacked a mission-oriented, whole-of-government industrial strategy. These trends reflect the broader challenges facing the Italian economy: Political and managerial shortsightedness, lack of direction, inadequate public and private investment in R&D, and insufficient human-capital formation. The labour-market reforms of the 1990s and 2000s led to precarious work conditions, disincentivising long-term investment in skills and training and reducing productivity. Ms Meloni's flawed privatisation plan is representative of a broader global trend. Although the International Monetary Fund has recognised that austerity does not reduce debt-to-GDP ratios and hurts growth, European policymakers still cling to obsolete fiscal rules that push governments to sell industrial assets to reduce public debt. Instead of promoting sustainable industrial strategies, this

approach provides only short-term relief. Despite Ms Meloni's attempt to present an innovative development vision, her government's embrace of outdated theories provides little hope for realising the G7's economic agenda and partnership with Africa. Instead of fostering a greener, more inclusive economy driven by investment and innovation, Ms Meloni has adopted the same shortsighted approach that is responsible for many of Italy's problems. Despite its branding, Ms Meloni's government has failed to live up to Mattei's legacy of public ownership and international cooperation. To address Italy's economic challenges, policymakers must walk the talk and adopt a forward-looking industrial strategy.

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ILLUSTRATION-BINAY SINHA



## Navigating a MAD world



VIEWPOINT  
DEVANGSHU DATTA

The US, Russia, China, France, the UK, India, Pakistan and North Korea acknowledge possessing nuclear weapons. Israel is believed to have a secret arsenal. Iran may also be on the verge of developing nukes.

South Africa dismantled its arsenal but it is "nuclear-latent", meaning it could rebuild an arsenal quickly if it chose. There's a long list of nations like South Africa, which are all a "screwdriver's turn" away from possessing nukes. There are also 28 nations (apart from ones with nukes) that "endorse" the use of nukes, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) members, South Korea and Taiwan.

The technology to make a Hiroshima-type device has been around for 80 years. Making a thermonuclear or "hydrogen bomb", which is

far more powerful than an "atom bomb", is hard, but not necessary. Even an old-fashioned World War II atom bomb can flatten a city.

Processing radioactive material to make it weapons-grade is a big stumbling block, even though spent fuel from nuclear power plants can be reprocessed to weapons-grade. Israel has twice attacked facilities in Syria and Iraq, acting on suspicions that these facilities could create weapons-grade material. Iran's nuclear programme was also hit by a sophisticated cyber-assault said to have been authored by Israel, or Israel and the US in tandem.

ICAN (the International Campaign to abolish Nuclear Weapons) estimates the acknowledged nuclear nations plus Israel hold over 12,000 warheads between them. That's enough to cause mass extinction many times over. Just a few of those devices going off could trigger a "nuclear winter", where sunlight is blocked out by dust and debris for years, killing all vegetation.

It is impossible to guarantee that a preemptive first strike will cause sufficient damage to prevent a retaliatory second strike or a tertiary strike. Nuclear submarines, for example, will survive strikes on land-based missiles. So, if Nation A launches a strike, Nation

B will retaliate, and both will suffer losses; and, if Nation B thinks Nation A has launched, nation B will also launch before its arsenal is destroyed. This scenario of MAD, or mutually assured destruction, is the keystone to most strategies designed to prevent nuclear war. Arguably, nukes are the reason why the Cold War never became "hot", since Nato and the Warsaw Pact nations were rational of launch orders are charged. On several occasions, false alarms triggered by technical glitches in warning systems have nearly caused nuclear shootouts.

Proliferation increases potential flashpoints. Ukraine, for example, could be a trigger point. So could the subcontinent, Korea, Taiwan, or Gaza. Also warning systems and missiles are increasingly likely to be semi-autonomous and controlled by artificial intelligence or AI, which is one reason to fear AI causing extinction events.

But as of now, human beings handle the "nuclear football", though different nations have different systems for nuke control. (The nuclear football is the briefcase where the US stores launch codes).

Are all the human beings

in charge of launch codes rational and sane? Nobody knows much about the sanity of North Korea's leadership. Whatever the outcome of US elections in November, the football will, one way or another, be held by one of two men, who are both believed to have cognitive issues by their detractors.

Yet another nuclear power is led by somebody who claims "non-biological" origins, and that nation's western neighbour has a fractured polity where it isn't even clear who holds the football. Another nuclear nation is led by a man who has turned Gaza into an apocalyptic hellcape without even using nukes.

Another nuclear nation is embroiled in an unending war in Ukraine, and it has issued repeated nuclear threats in the last three years. Yet another nation recently war-gamed an invasion of Taiwan. Looking on the bright side, however, while the UK is headed into elections, the next Prime Minister will likely be sane, and France's President seems rational.

This scoreline doesn't inspire much confidence since the world could edge into MAD if a madman is in charge of just one of the nuclear powers. This is one of the many scenarios where one is left to wonder what is wrong with the way geopolitics works.

## Which way the Sangh flows

Occasional lovers' tiffs have marked the history of RSS-BJP relations. To think that Nagpur will bring about any change in leadership is a misreading of both its intent and its power

What was the Rashtriya Swamivatsav Sangh (RSS) thinking when it decided to unleash a flurry of statements, widely seen as expressing disapproval of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government for its *athankar* (arrogance)?

The four specific instances include Sarsangchalak Mohan Bhagwat's speech at the conclusion of the RSS workers' training, and a specific reference to *athankar* by Jyotesh Kumar, a member of the Sangh's executive committee and chief patron of the RSS-backed Muslim Rashtriya Manch. Mr Kumar said that Bhagwan Ram had punished the BJP's arrogance by limiting it to 240 seats, way below the halfway mark. He also the justice of Ramjiya ensured that the INDIA bloc was kept even lower at 237 because it is "Ram virdhii" or anti-Ram.

Ratan Sharda, an RSS intellectual often articulating the organisation's viewpoint and ideology on TV channels and in newspaper op-eds, had more specific criticism over the BJP undermining its own ideological commitment by inducting many known critics of the RSS, and thereby paying the price.

The fourth is an article in the RSS mouthpiece, *Organiser*, blaming the alliance with the AIP Jawar Nationalist Congress Party for the debacle in Maharashtra. Read together, these four instances look like the first coordinated criticism of the BJP under Narendra Modi by the RSS in the past decade. In fact, Mr Bhagwat in his speech counselling the RSS said he'd prefer *pratikash* (the other side) to *virodhi* (Opposition). Which brings us to our next question: What is the RSS trying to achieve? Caught in this flutter are all sides with stakes in power politics or a voice in the political debate.

First of all, it is most certainly amused by the ready celebration of its latest "intervention" by the liberal side. For a community that fought the RSS ideology for decades to now find solace in its chief's non-specific criticism is ironic as well as desperate. Even some in the Congress have expressed the same wish, partly to ease the BJP, but partly also in the belief that it will weaken Narendra Modi. There's been a flurry of articles and social media posts with Mr Bhagwat's quotes, generally saying, "We understand that you

(Prime Minister Modi) won't listen to us. But at least listen to Mohan Bhagwat." In this brave new post-June 4 universe, the RSS chief is seen as less illiberal — and more acceptable — than the Modi-Shah BJP. This is an incredible misreading of the situation. The fact is that occasional lovers' tiffs have marked the history of RSS-BJP relations. These rarely change anything substantively. To think that Nagpur will bring about any change in leadership is a misreading of both its intent and its power.

This election has shown Mr Modi's critics that he is beatable. It will, however, require much hard work over the next five years, one state election after another, to achieve that. It can't happen through any internal coup whatsoever, whether blessed by the RSS or not. Plus, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to suggest that the RSS is in the mood to unsettle its own government.

If they are the guru and the current BJP leadership their *shishyas*, see this criticism as a disappointed teacher upbraiding their favourite pupils for indifferent performance. It isn't if the RSS and the BJP haven't been at odds at different points in time. We will list three. But this, after the election results, isn't one such.



SHEKHAR GUPTA

### NATIONAL INTEREST

This BJP was formed in 1980 from the wreck of the original Bharatiya Jana Sangh, after the Janata Party, with which it had merged in 1977, crashed. Since then, we can't find how a 20-year-rich has marked the BJP relationship. Each time, the BJP emerged chastened. Think of 1984, 2004, and now 2024.

The first, 1984, was not the BJP's fault. It is just that the RSS, concerned about the crisis in Punjab, was swayed by what it saw as the imperative of national interest. In those weeks of crisis, it concluded that India was going to be more secure under Rajiv Gandhi than under another coalition government that might include the BJP. There was also that storied meeting between Rajiv and Sarsangchalak Balasahab Deoras.

I covered that election, especially in Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, and found the RSS workers not just absent from the BJP campaign, but often spreading the word to vote Congress for stability and *rashtrvaht*

(national interest). The RSS had no complaints with the BJP. It is just that it wasn't its time yet.

In 1998, the RSS celebrated the rise of the first BJP-led coalition under Atal Bihari Vajpayee. His personality and temperament, however, clashed with that of then sarsangchalak K S Sudarshan, and by 2003, the strain was visible to all. The RSS was again less than forthcoming in the 2004 election, which Vajpayee and L K Advani advanced by about five months. This is when they lost power, albeit narrowly.

Many of these irritants were underlined by Sudarshan in a two-part *Walk the Talk* interview for *Organiser* in April, 2005. To be sure, the approach for the interview had come from the sarsangchalak's office. I hadn't asked for it, because RSS chiefs rarely, if ever, give interviews. Sudarshan's tone, after Vajpayee had lost power, was "Serves him right. If only he had listened to us." By this time, the RSS had also noted the rise of a much younger leader in Narendra Modi, way more faithful to its ideology.

Fast forward another 20 years and the itch came in the run-up to the 2024 campaign. The BJP now believed that all it needed to do was campaign in Modi's name, that it would be a one-man campaign for them by him. The RSS might have felt a little slighted, particularly at the ground level, in spite of the fact that so many aspects of the ideological project of the RSS in Article 370, Ram Mandir, triple talaq abolition — had been achieved. Mr Modi was also careful to give Mr Bhagwat pride of place at the Ram Mandir consecration.

The ideology was never undermined, but the *svayamsamraksh* was not made to feel that he wasn't so indispensable anymore. Mr Bhagwat said in his speech earlier this week that the RSS did in this election what it always does: Fine-tuning public opinion. But the BJP itself had stated that it believed it had grown up and could walk on its own, without needing the RSS's little finger to hold on to. This is where the relative indifference could have come from.

That, however, was before the results. The point is made, and it's over. This government, the power of Modi and Shah, are indispensable for the RSS, particularly as it is set to launch its 100th anniversary celebrations. That's why its words merely mean chastisement from a doting teacher to a favourite pupil. Reading anything more into this would be over-reading. The RSS will be happy to support for Mr Modi's *pratikash*. Mr Bhagwat, as we write this, is in Gorakhpur, discussing with Yogi Adityanath the next moves to strengthen the BJP in rural Uttar Pradesh.

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## Airbrushed existence

### EYE CULTURE

VEENU SANDHU

The compulsory art class back in school had a certain consistency about it. The art teacher's "paint a landscape" instruction would trigger what could be called photocopied creativity: Brown peaks, sometimes sharp, sometimes mound-like, with a dash of yellow atop for snow; an undulating green terrain; a little cottage with a door in the middle, windows by the side and a tree nearby; a duck pond in front of the cottage or else a stream running from the mountains, a couple of birds; a cheerful sun; and blue skies pinned with white, cotton-like clouds — the fair-weather cumulus.

The lack of imagination this idyllic scene reflected would later start to worry art teachers in new-age schools that pride themselves on encouraging children to forge their individual identities and find their own expression.

Cloned creativity aside, you could tell that if you stepped into one of those paintings and took a deep breath, the air that would fill your lungs would be cool and sweet — not the kind we breathe in cities like Delhi. Last month, Delhi's air quality, which is the worst among the world's capital cities, was in focus, yet again, in the form of an unusual public art project. Called "Hawa Mein Baat" (conversation in the air), it had over 40 women from various sectors of Delhi's informal economy creating artwork that highlighted their experiences of air pollution. The exhibition was put up at Nand Nagri, an area near the

Uttar Pradesh border in the northeastern part of Delhi, which is home to a large resettlement colony. Bad air is an equaliser.

Uncontained by physical borders and artificial boundaries, it impacts everybody. However, dialogues and affirmative actions around air pollution don't extend to everybody. They have blind spots. These women represented one such blind spot.

The creative text on the wall material and knick-knacks, they conveyed their experiences and dreams. A tapestry, for instance, depicted a park scene, with trees, people and clean skies, much like those painted in the art class. Landscapes, titled "Meheeng Hawa" (expensive air), it expressed the desire for clean air that was out of reach. Jars of dirty water spoke of what happens to clothes left outside on a balcony for a few days in the areas where the women live.

An India-focused journal published in the *Scientific Reports* journal last year established that socially disadvantaged populations are disproportionately exposed to air pollution. Initiatives such as Clean Air Fund, which are working to tackle air pollution across geographies, also emphasise that low-income communities are often least responsible for air pollution but are most exposed to it.

Academia and civil society have been trying to draw attention to or address this largely invisible villain. The governments, not so much. In three to four months from now, when temperatures begin to cool and air pollution becomes visible, they will get into action mode again to

tackle a crisis that demands year-round attention.

A section of Delhi will pull out air purifiers; the ones who have the luxury of time and means will head to cleaner destinations for the visibly problematic months; and folks such as the women who were part of "Hawa Mein Baat" will likely go on as usual, breathing in air that would then be many times more toxic.

The creative text on the wall had a close relationship with the environment. A fascinating research published by the National Academy of Sciences last year studied some 100 artworks by Joseph Turner and Claude Monet to find that their paintings depicted trends in 19th century air pollution. Turner, an English Romantic painter, lived from 1775 to 1851, his lifespan coinciding with the First Industrial Revolution. And Monet, the French artist often identified as the Father of Impressionism, lived from 1840 to 1926 — the period of the Second Industrial Revolution.

Industrialisation, the environmental "sin" attributed the environmental context in which Turner and Monet painted, — and their paintings captured "changes in the optical environment associated with increasingly polluted air" — is the "sin" of the Industrial Revolution, thereby moving towards hazier contours.

Speaking of haze, a colleague pointed out how even films set in big Indian cities always appear to lack the visual clarity that smog-free washed look one finds in movies set in the Western world. They do indeed.

## Atoxic triangle



### BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Only some leaders combine charisma, megalomania, and cult. The combination is rare and toxic, and the outcome is lethal. In my column last month, I wrote about what happens when megalomania combines with cult. One reader asked the outcome if charisma was added to the leadership menu of megalomania and cult. The answer is blowing in the wind.

Harvey Weinstein is charismatic. As a film producer, he is also a cult figure. Since upcoming youngsters believe that association with him is worth a huge price, megalomania sets in. Weinstein's Netflix movie about Mr Weinstein to appreciate the cumulative effects — it is titled *She Said*.

### Megalomania

Authority derives from three sources. First, and oldest, is charismatic authority, which comes from achievements, character,

heroism, and demagoguery, like Alexander or Cyrus. Second is traditional authority, which, for example, facilitates acceptance of the son of the founder as the legitimate successor in a family-managed enterprise. Third, and most modern, is rational-legal authority, which imputes authority to an administrative position, for example, an appointed judge or bureaucrat. There are other definitions, but these are the important sources of authority that are at the root of megalomania.

### Charisma

According to sociologist Max Weber, charisma is the perceived supernatural quality of an individual that sets that person apart from other human beings. For centuries, charisma (subjective perception) and rationality (an objective reality) could not coexist. Weber opined that the triumph of post-enlightenment Western society was that the individual and office had been separated through a rational view of authority. Charisma is like the price of shares; it is based more on expectations of performance. This is why celebrities are required and valuable even when under duress to pan masala. Their charisma is assumed to transfer to the product.

Readers would be familiar with the charisma attributed to business leaders like R D Bhat and Keshub Mahindra. From the world of gurus, there are Sri Sri Ravishankar and Sadhguru.

Politics, films, sport — all these fields produce charismatic heroes. A few of them live up to the image, but many are seen, especially with hindsight, to have been incompetent, toxic, or fraudulent.

### Cult

It is an organised group whose purpose is to defy an individual. Members are indoctrinated through psychological and pressure strategies, and they brook no criticism of their leader. In turn, the leader nurtures an imagined existential threat from the outside forces. The cult members regard the leader as the exclusive authority to know the "right" path. Such leaders love praise for sure.

During his lifetime, when Gandhi was referred to as "Mahatma", he expressed his disapproval of being so called. While he was alive, Jamsheji Tata did not bring any venture as Tata. His early ventures were Alexandra Mills, Empress Mills and Indian Hotels. After his death, his successors associated his name with new ventures. Through the practices of his successors, "TATATA" became the required and valuable even when under duress to pan masala. Their charisma is assumed to transfer to the product.

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*Swamynatha Bodhasya, Yogo Bhavati Dikshaya*, which is a call for mitigating sorrows by moderation in eating and recreation, by balance in work, and by regulation of sleep.

### All combined

Why is the combination of cult, megalomania, and charisma toxic? Because the leader starts to believe that he is infallible and defies mortality and fallibility. The leader who is trapped in a syrup of megalomania, charisma, and cult displays what author Morgan Housel terms "the danger of smart people." These are, First, very smart people try to intelligently explain every little event, like why the stock market moved up or down yesterday; second, smart people feel so much pressure to maintain their intellectual reputation that they fail to change their mind even when it is called for; third, being smart makes it difficult to listen to people who are not as smart as they are; and fourth, if you believe that there are less smart than you, you have a sure recipe for danger.

Which is more dangerous — megalomania, charisma, or cult? Charisma by itself cannot be considered dangerous. When a charismatic leader is combined with megalomania, then beware. You have a sure recipe for danger. The writer is an author. His new book, *Embracing the Future: the new science of business transformation*, was published in February 2024. rgopal@themindworks.me