



Opinion

THURSDAY, JULY 11, 2024

COMBATTING DENGUE
Union health minister JP Nadda

To sensitise communities regarding the Aedes mosquito which generally bites in the daytime, awareness campaign among schoolgoing children and others to wear clothes that keep the body fully covered, and keeping various water containers, pots etc., free of stagnant water will be taken up at a massive scale

Fix the supply chain

India needs to be both a consumer and a crucial contributor to the global shift towards sustainable automotive solutions

THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT by Ola Electric's founder Bhavish Aggarwal that the company is working on producing lithium-ion battery cells to power its electric two-wheelers is a reminder that while our transition towards electric vehicle (EV) technology and product is progressing at a good pace, the supply chain management needs to move to a higher gear. Ola Electric, which is the country's largest selling two-wheeler EV manufacturer, is building a 110-acre Gigafactory, with an initial capacity of 5 gigawatt-hour (GWh), which will eventually be scaled up to 100 GWh, in phases. It plans to meet its need for batteries as well as supply to other customers, both in India as well as overseas. Since battery packs comprise 35-40% of the cost of EV two-wheelers, Ola is looking at vertical integration, which will help it in both scaling up its two-wheeler business as well as reducing costs.

Since India is the world's third largest emitter of CO₂, electrification of the transport sector and the shift towards EVs is seen as a means to achieve the target set by the government for net-zero emissions by 2070, the need for lithium-ion batteries is important. The demand for batteries will continue to rise as products get popular and newer players enter the market. For instance, Maruti may have good presence in EV, but it plans to launch its first such product in 2025 and is expected to drive 20% of battery cell demand by 2035, just behind the current market leader, Tata Motors, at 22%. The share of EVs in the passenger vehicle segment today is around 2%, which is set to rise to 20% by 2030. In two-wheelers, the market share which at present is around 6% is projected to rise to 45% by then.

The outlook may seem bright on the product side, but the supply chain remains fragmented. With domestic production of EV battery cells still in a nascent stage, it is imported from China, South Korea, and Japan. According to S&P Global Mobility's estimates, by 2030 only 13% of total EV battery cell demand will be sourced domestically. This underlines the need for auto manufacturers to invest heavily in domestic cell manufacturing facilities. The government is doing its bit through policies like production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for advanced chemistry cell battery storage and the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid & Electric Vehicles. Industry majors like Rajesh Exports, Amara Raja, Reliance Industries, and Adani Group also plan to build lithium-ion battery cell factories and ramp up domestic EV production capacities.

Domestic players and EV battery cell manufacturers in India are also forming joint ventures (JVs) with international cell makers, module makers, and pack suppliers. For instance, Suzuki Motor formed a JV with Toshiba and Denso in 2017 to construct a cell manufacturing plant in Gujarat. Such JVs and value chain integration will lead the industry to gradually build supply chains and reduce outsourcing. However, this needs to be expedited. The government and the industry should work together to ensure that the pace is maintained and targets are not missed. It's important that as the industry evolves, advanced technologies and strategic partnerships are integrated as they are key to sustaining growth and achieving the electrification goals set by the government. Such a holistic approach will ensure a future where India is both a consumer and a crucial contributor to the global shift towards sustainable automotive solutions.

S&P 500 targets don't make sense

PIPER SANDLER & CO. IS ELIMINATING its price target for the S&P 500 Index. Its Wall Street counterparts should follow suit.

The financial services firm's chief investment strategist Michael Kantrowitz said that because the market's performance was being driven by a handful of heavily weighted stocks, index targets were no longer very useful, as *Bloomberg News's* Alexandra Semanova reported last week. He said it would be more helpful and efficient to focus on individual stock projections for the handful of large and idiosyncratic companies that were driving the performance.

Kantrowitz made the right decision, but I suspect that the targets have been useless for far longer than he acknowledges.

Kantrowitz is bound to face criticism that he is changing a game he has struggled to play. He started cutting his price target bit too late in 2022 (as did most prominent strategists, frankly) and then remained one of the most outspoken bears throughout the monstrosity in 2023. As to his rationale for the move, market concentration and correlation are constant in flux, that's the nature of the beast, and strategists have to work with the hand that they're dealt.

But it's price targets themselves that are the real problem, not the 2022-2024 market. As I've documented before, strategist targets imply a false sense of precision and routinely lead investors astray. The average strategist in *Bloomberg's* survey often gets the direction of markets right but not very much else. The average point estimate at the start of the year regularly misses the actual outcome by a wide margin.

What's more, if you were to closely track changes in the consensus price target and actively trade off that, selling whenever the index rose above the target, and buying when it fell below, history shows that you would reliably underperform a simple buy-and-hold strategy. Bottom-up price targets are also reliably unreliable.

I don't blame the strategists for failing at an impossible task. The majority of them coalesce — knowingly or unknowingly — around "safe" estimates that defy the true range of potential outcomes. Kantrowitz has gone out on a limb with his calls, and deserves credit for that. The same goes for Marko Kolanovic, JP Morgan Chase & Co's former chief global market strategist and co-head of global research, who has been the victim of cheap shots on social media since he left the firm after a rough couple of years. Kolanovic, an obviously brilliant guy with a PhD in theoretical physics, was known as "Gandall" until his crystal ball seemingly broke in 2022. But to his credit, he continued to swing for the fences until his exit.

In a sense, the debate around price targets has parallels with what's happening in global central banking circles. The Federal Reserve and other central banks issue closely watched projections about the economy and policy rates, but there has been gathering enthusiasm for a proposal by former Fed Chair Ben Bernanke to introduce scenarios instead of simple point estimates. Like the S&P 500 targets, I'd argue that those projections convey false precision, even those coming directly from policymakers atop the most powerful institution in global finance.

Personally, I like the idea of scenarios. They help the public better appreciate the panorama of risks and rewards. But they also present unique challenges and must be done the right way. Like point estimates, scenarios assume a certain amount of human foresight, and, in reality, it's sometimes the scenarios we can't imagine that most move markets.

Strategists and economists will face tough choices — and a lot of trial and error — in deciding how many scenarios to present. Too many and you confuse the public; too few and you oversimplify the situation. And all the public fixates on the most extreme and dramatic outcomes and pays short shrift to more likely ones?

In my view, those are risks worth taking in equity market analysis, because the plain vanilla index target hasn't served the investing public very well, and Piper Sandler is right to give it the axe. The world is an uncertain place, and we would all be better off — strategists and their readers alike — if we stopped pretending we could predict the future to the exact index point.



JONATHAN LEVIN

Bloomberg

Co's former chief global market strategist and co-head of global research, who has been the victim of cheap shots on social media since he left the firm after a rough couple of years. Kolanovic, an obviously brilliant guy with a PhD in theoretical physics, was known as "Gandall" until his crystal ball seemingly broke in 2022. But to his credit, he continued to swing for the fences until his exit.

IT IS BECOMING evident that with increasing carbon emissions, humankind is moving towards an existential crisis. Extreme weather events have become common, and indiscriminate use of fossil fuel for power generation, mobility, and industrial purposes is contributing to rising emissions. Thus, the call for a faster transition to clean energy is getting stronger. Renewable energy (RE) has crossed a big milestone with global capacity addition exceeding fossil fuel. Around 3,400 gigawatt (Gw) capacities have been installed, comprising of 30% of total power generation.

India's economy requires massive energy to sustain its growth. India is projected to have the fastest-growing energy demand globally by 2035, contributing 30% to the total increase. The recent surge, exceeding 4.2% per year, will most likely result in India surpassing China as the largest energy market by 2030.

Despite having one of the biggest coal reserves, India is consciously powering its growth using green and clean energy sources. At the Conference of the Parties (COP) 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi committed that the nation's installed RE capacity will reach 500 Gw by 2030. The target is ambitious but achievable. But, considering the energy growth in India's incremental demand in the electrification of mobility, we might have to double the installed RE capacity to 1 terawatt (Tiw) by 2035.

India's journey towards clean energy has gained momentum in the past 10 years and positioned it as a global leader. As of May, it has an impressive installed capacity of around 191 Gw, led by 85 Gw of solar power. The remarkable growth is largely driven by government initiatives promoting clean energy. The National Solar Mission, launched in 2010, has been a cornerstone that has helped set targets and incentivise large-scale projects.

The journey towards 1 Tiw will be challenging. There are prerequisites to achieving this.

Availability of land: Land acquisition is a complex time-consuming process.

● BUILDING GREEN CAPACITY

WITH CLEAN ENERGY JOURNEY GAINING MOMENTUM, INDIA CAN ACHIEVE 1 TW CAPACITY BY 2035

A blueprint for RE ambitions

VINEET MITTAL

Chairman, Avasda Group



The key challenges are outdated ownership records, price discovery mechanisms, mutation, and end-use changes. Making sure land is available to add almost 800 Gw in the next 10 years will require massive collaboration between the central and state governments. Large tracts available with states can be considered for RE projects at fair market prices or on lease. According to the *Wasteland Atlas of India*, 17% of India's landmass has been identified as wasteland. After properly assessing these, such land parcels can be considered for RE projects.

Power evacuation infrastructure: Augmentation of transmission infrastructure has not kept pace with RE capacity addition. It's quite concerning that Rajasthan, which has one of the highest radiation intensities in India, does not have enough existing and upcoming connectivity for new projects till 2028.

The Central Transmission Utility has decided to use high-voltage direct current (HVDC) technology for new transmission. While the technology is manageable at lower levels, it's becoming difficult with the increase in absorption of more renewables. System operators and regulators are urging RE generators to forecast their generation to minimise demand-supply imbalances, leading to an increase in penalties. But it's not fully solving the issue. Solar energy is only available during the day. Thus, increasing RE consumption requires developing storage facilities such as pumped hydro and battery energy storage solutions (BESS). The Central Electricity Authority has fore-

To have an installed RE capacity of 1 Tiw, India needs an investment of \$350-400 billion over the next 10 years. It implies a large base of lenders and equity investors

imports to meet shortages with additional safeguards for network security. Deeper engagement with non-Chinese suppliers will also be required to meet medium- to long-term demand.

Lastly, public sector undertakings like Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited can be encouraged to invest in manufacturing HVDC equipment on their own by forming joint ventures.

Policy consistency: In the last few years, there has been abrupt policy decisions such as imposing safeguard duty and basic customs duty, and increasing

goods and services tax rates. Also, some governments have been more punitive as they unilaterally cancelled contracts that were only restored after courts intervened. We need a consistent policy at the central and state level, and a legal and regulatory framework should remain unchanged for at least 5-10 years.

Grid integration and storage solutions: Grid integration is increasingly becoming a massive problem. While manageable at lower levels, it's becoming difficult with the increase in absorption of more renewables. System operators and regulators are urging RE generators to forecast their generation to minimise demand-supply imbalances, leading to an increase in penalties. But it's not fully solving the issue. Solar energy is only available during the day. Thus, increasing RE consumption requires developing storage facilities such as pumped hydro and battery energy storage solutions (BESS). The Central Electricity Authority has fore-

cast a need for 48 Gw/236 Gwh of BESS and 62 Gw of pumped hydro by 2030.

Financing: To have an installed RE capacity of 1 Tiw, India needs an investment of \$350-400 billion over the next 10 years. It implies a large base of lenders and equity investors. However, there is an urgent need for diversifying sources of capital providers and focusing on relatively cheaper sources. In this regard, relaxing investment norms for insurance firms can be transformational. Similarly, strengthening the market for green bonds will play a significant role.

Focus on distributed generation: According to the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, India has a rooftop potential of 600+ Gw, of which less than 15 Gw has been exploited. There is also a large potential for smaller decentralised projects in rural areas to feed directly into 33/11 kilovolt (kV) substations and be located near load centres.

The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan is seeing traction, especially after Maharashtra designed and implemented a massive capacity addition for solar plants under the scheme. The aggregate capacity planned to be added in over 1,000 rural locations in Maharashtra is around 20 Gw, which will directly feed into 33/11 kV substations.

Impetus on domestic manufacturing: India largely depends on imports for capital equipment and RE. Due to geopolitical developments, India must aggressively pursue manufacturing. While the Centre has done its bit by introducing production-linked incentive schemes, tariff and non-tariff barriers, more effort is needed to create basic infrastructure such as access roads and power. The government has committed to lowering India's projected carbon emissions by 1 billion tonnes by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2070. This can turn into reality with the alliance of the government, the private sector, and the citizens. The future depends on what we do in the present, said Mahatma Gandhi. This holds true for India's RE ambitions.

More than a footnote in history



BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, EAC-PM

IHAVE NO intention of converting this column into a Neogy biography. In an earlier column ([bit.ly/3tR4IAL](#)), I wrote about Kshitish Neogy (1888-1970). But a few bits need to be added. In that column, I mentioned that in 1946, he became a member of the Nuclear Commission, which led to Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In October 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Lord Wavell (*Selected Works*). "It may interest you to know that over a month ago I requested Mr. K.C. Neogy to become a delegate in our U.N.O. delegation to America. He accepted it, but soon after he expressed his inability to do. The reason he gave was that conditions in East Bengal were fast deteriorating and that a general attack on behalf of the Muslim League was expected in the near future. Mr. Neogy did not wish to leave his family in East Bengal when everybody there seemed to be expecting this mass attack." Nehru also said this in an interview he gave to the press in September 1946. As for the proposed Indian delegation to the U.N.O., originally the Government had invited Sped Raza Ali and Pandit Hridayanath Kunzru. Neither of them was able to accept. Later, Mr. Neogy was invited and he accepted, but in the past few days Mr. Neogy informed me that he would be unable to go owing to more or less domestic reasons."

We know Neogy was a member of Indian National Congress and was elected

to the Constituent Assembly (1946) from Bengal. But before this, there was the Central Legislative Assembly and, representing Bengal, he was elected to this in 1920, 1923, 1926, and 1930. Now that a lot of information has been digitised, we can find more from Parliamentary records. He was elected at Presidency College, Kolkata, and Dhaka College and was married to Lila Devi. From 1935 to 1940, he was the *deewan* of Mayurbhanj state, a fact that is perhaps not generally known.

His permanent address was in Southern Avenue, Kolkata. In 1939, Charulal Mukherjee published a book titled *The Santals*. It was dedicated to Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanja Deo of Mayurbhanj and Neogy was some kind of inspiration for the monograph. In January 1938, he wrote to the author, "I am glad that you are thinking of bringing out a comprehensive book on the Santals, incorporating your past writings on the subject. As you know we have a very large Santal population in Mayurbhanj, and would like to encourage a regular ethnological and anthropological survey of this as well as other aboriginal tribes inhabiting this state. In case, however, you feel interested in undertaking a study of our Santal population on the spot, I shall

There are reasons why Neogy faded away from public memory. Once Nehru, who was fond of him, was no longer around Neogy lost his importance

arrange for requisite facilities in the matter. Mayurbhanj state did help the author in his survey.

There are two reasons why Neogy faded away from public memory. Once Nehru, who was fond of him, was no longer around Neogy lost his importance. Plus he aged. More importantly, Neogy wrote little, almost none at all, other than what was part of committee reports. An exception was a piece he wrote titled "Rabindranath Nath Tagore: The Poet Laureate of India" (Which educated Bengali could avoid writing on Tagore?). This was published in *The Open Court* in 1917. (Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913.)

"In deed, the hidden acclamation in the East of Rabindranath Tagore as a world-poet of the first magnitude, has made a few critical spirits in India shake their heads in doubt and weigh and scrutinize the measure of praise that has been given to this illustrious son of Ind. Whether the halo that surrounds him to-day will endure is more than one can say. And these Indian critics are inspired with the fear that what appears to be a natural splendor radiating from a lustrous gem of the Indian deep, may, after the excitement of the passing hour has spent itself, prove to be but the

The only written piece that goes under Neogy's name is a piece in a slim monograph titled "What Happened After Gandhi's Arrest"

illusive effect of some handy optical stage device, impressed into service at the impatient call of the goading desire of the West for something fresh and quaint in the way of stimulants... Overwhelmed as the poet has been by the eulogy and benediction with which he has been greeted from all quarters, he does not seem to be quite happy with his Indian audience. After his first return from Europe, Rabindra Nath was received everywhere in India with affectionate regard. But he seemed to suspect that much of the honor showered on him, particularly in his native province of Bengal, was but the echo of the tributes of praise that were unstintingly rendered to his genius in the West... It might be said that a poet was often-times more honored by posterity than by his own generation." This might seem contrarian, said Mahatma Gandhi. But in 1917, there was a grain of truth to it. And reluctant though Bengalis might be to admit it, in 1913, Bengal didn't applaud the Nobel Prize wholeheartedly.

The only other written piece that goes under Neogy's name is a piece in a slim monograph titled "What Happened After Gandhi's Arrest". This was published by the India League of America in 1942. But this was actually a speech delivered in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1942. We are often accused of not documenting history properly. It is a malaise also relevant for KC Neogy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Superpower status

India is on track to become a superpower by 2047, even if it doesn't achieve high-income status. With a projected population of 1.67 billion by 2050, surpassing China and the US, India's growing influence and strong ties with the West position it well for superpower status. However, the journey is not without challenges. We need to accelerate its GDP growth per capita to match China's

trajectory, and while becoming a high-income country by 2047 may be unlikely, achieving upper middle-income status is a more realistic goal. India's vast population means it can match the total economic output of the US if its GDP grows at a modest 5% annually till 2047. However, India faces challenges such as global economic slowdown, protectionism, geopolitical conflicts, climate crisis, and uncertainties related to artificial intelligence. Overall, India's journey

toward superpower status is promising, but it requires navigating obstacles and seizing opportunities. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Missing numbers

After declaring the goods and services tax (GST) numbers with regularity since the start of the year, the government has failed to announce the numbers for July with no explanation for the chasm in the practice. Suspensions will be raised

about something in the numbers that could hurt the government. There are unconfirmed reports that the top 10% wealthy individuals contributed just 3% of the GST collections and this is certain to raise allegations that the government was on their side. Data is an important tool for taking economic decisions, and many companies could be hurt by the lack of numbers. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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[OUR TAKE]

Modi in Moscow, in a balancing act

New Delhi's ties with Russia have held strong, but the challenge now is to make the West see reason in India's strategic choices, autonomy

The diplomatic tightrope being walked by India over the conflict in Ukraine was on display as Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting at the Kremlin, in the glare of television cameras, that no solution can be found on the battlefield. The optics of the Putin-Modi bonhomie had been marred on the day the Indian leader arrived in Moscow for his first visit to Russia in five years by a Russian missile strike on Ukraine's largest children's hospital. Modi amplified his message about ending the war in Ukraine, especially to prevent the death of innocent civilians, and the Global South's expectations for peace.

The big challenge now will be setting this relationship to New Delhi's partners in the West as merely an expression of India's national interests and not an endorsement of Putin's Ukraine policy or his political system. Images of Modi embracing Putin triggered outrage in the West. While European friends may be willing listeners, Washington, caught in the presidential poll season, might not be amused, though India-US relations appear to have been firewalled from New Delhi's legacy ties. Despite India's strong nudge to end hostilities and return to the path of dialogue, Putin appears in no mood to heed such advice. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's critical remarks suggest New Delhi will have to work harder to convince its partners in the West of its stance on Russia.

Modi's visit to Moscow was also significant for the ambitious target set by the two sides to drive trade to \$100 billion by 2030. Two-way trade is already more than double an earlier target of \$30 billion by 2025, thanks to India's massive increase in purchases of crude. Given India's growing energy needs, achieving the new target shouldn't be too difficult but the real problem is balancing it. India's exports to Russia have been insignificant for years and currently languish at \$4 billion. Indian corporates and banks with significant exposure to the western financial system are reluctant to venture into Russia because of the fear of sanctions. India's trade basket will have to be significantly expanded alongside increased access to Russia's markets and the creation of a reliable system for trade settlement insulated from the West's extensive sanctions regime. Russia will also have to address India's continuing concerns about Moscow moving closer and closer to Beijing. However, India-Russia relations have stood the test of time and the message from the Moscow meet is that it continues to be on an even keel.

The challenge that is coaching Team India

The Board of Control for Cricket in India made Gautam Gambhir's appointment official on Tuesday, although this was pretty much a done deal and there were no other really major candidates in the fray. His success as mentor of Kolkata Knight Riders in the 2024 season of the Indian Premier League showed him to be a smart tactician and a builder of teams as well. In his role as mentor for the Lucknow Super Kings, he found a way to do the same. His intensity, seen by some as a disadvantage, actually works well in the context of building and motivating high-performing teams.

But as Anil Kumble can probably tell him, coaching Team India is a different cup of tea altogether. One of Gambhir's main tasks will be to win over the dressing room, one used to Rahul Dravid's understated way of working. And that will call for greater tact on his part. Young players in the team will likely have no problem — he'll push them hard, back them to the hilt and reward their successes. But the seniors have played with and against him, have heard him speak critically about them on news channels and know that he doesn't like to take prisoners.

Gambhir likes to have a say in how things unfold unlike Dravid, or Ravi Shastri (who came before). They firmly believed that he was the captain's team, and their job was mainly to help it function at its best. At some point during his three-year stint, the new coach will also have to take a call on the future of some of the seniors, and that may test him too. Gambhir starts with the team on a high, thanks to a World Cup win — but that just raises expectations of his own stint.

A new cadre of unicorns to build developed India

Governments are partnering with non-profits for population-level impact to address pressing development challenges. These system-support organisations drive change and ensure long-term impact at the grassroots

Once upon a time, in villages of the heavily forested Gadchiroli district tucked into the south-east corner of Maharashtra, the infant mortality rate (IMR) was a shocking 121 out of 1,000 live births. SEARCH For Health, a non-profit that works to improve public health in rural India, successfully reduced IMR from 121 to 30 by way of its intervention in Gadchiroli, bringing it down to less than a quarter of the previous levels. Their intervention was the adoption by the government of Maharashtra where IMR was reduced by 51%. Their programme has now been implemented across India. We refer to such organisations that are partnering with governments for population-level impact as System Support Organisations (SSOs).

The government is central to resolving India's growth and develop-

ment challenges, playing the roles of the service provider, regulator, and funder. And governments are open to engaging with civil society organisations that provide them with specialised, technical, and administrative inputs to create outsized impact.

These SSOs are like a new category of unicorns that stand out not for their billion-dollar valuations, but for the impact they have achieved by supporting governments to overcome a myriad of issues in sectors ranging from education to health to policy design to road safety. Here are some more examples of SSOs. Vidhi, which works to strengthen policies and governance, has assisted the central and state governments with 394 projects that included drafting Acts, Rules, and Regulations.

Vidhi was instrumental in framing landmark laws like the Aadhaar Act and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. SoSILIFE Foundation (SLF), which aims to improve road safety and emergency care in India, piloted the Zero Fatality Corridor (ZFC) model in the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, which resulted in 58% reduction in fatalities (despite increased traffic on the expressway in this period). They are now working with the ministry of road transport and highways to expand the ZFC model to the top 100 most dangerous highways in the country. SLF also piloted secure India's first Good Samaritan Law, which protects and empowers people

who help victims of road accidents.

While all three SSOs work in different domains and have chosen different methods to achieve results, a systems change approach is what unites them. The systems change approach necessarily entails working with the government as it is the main actor in accelerating India's growth. For large-scale impact in their respective domains, the SSOs work in close collaboration with the Union and state governments to get to the root of the problem and resolve them for the long-term, rather than suggest quick fixes or band-aid solutions.

A report by The Convergence Foundation and India Impact Sheroes studied 20 SSOs in India, including SEARCH, Vidhi, and SLF, that have adopted systemic impact — or what we call the Piramal Foundation which has collaborated with NITI Aayog to strengthen last-mile delivery in aspirational districts. The practices include using data and evidence for building scalable solutions, and working with governments to inform policy design and implementation. The inward-looking processes account for everything from a systems change orientation at the leadership level, to aligning with funders who need to know that this approach will not necessarily bear fruit in the short run, to building a



Ashish Dhawan



Non-profits and the government are working together to improve nutrition and hygiene in schools, and enhance the livelihoods of farmers

diverse talent pool in-house. These internal structures and culture are key to building organisations that are resilient and lasting to make a long-term systemic impact.

It is, however, important to acknowledge at this point that besides the organisation's intention and practices, funding plays a critical role in enabling systemic impact. In the last decade or so, we have seen several leading Indian philanthropies put their (financial and strategic) weight behind systems change and work with governments across India.

Tata Trusts, for example, the Piramal Foundation which has collaborated with NITI Aayog to strengthen last-mile delivery in aspirational districts. The practices include using data and evidence for building scalable solutions, and working with governments to inform policy design and implementation. The inward-looking processes account for everything from a systems change orientation at the leadership level, to aligning with funders who need to know that this approach will not necessarily bear fruit in the short run, to building a

government's National Nutrition Mission. They provide managerial and administrative support to the district and state administrations for effective implementation of the mission.

The Azim Premji Foundation too has collaborated with a group of non-profits and the governments of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu to improve nutrition and hygiene, enhance the livelihoods of small farmers, and rehabilitate mentally ill homeless people respectively. These philanthropic initiatives recognise that investing in systems change and working with the governments will give them the highest ROI in terms of scale and sustainable impact.

The government, funders, and SSOs, all need to come together for transformative, large-scale impact by keeping systems change at the forefront. By committing to systems change, we will be laying the foundation for India to become a developed nation.

Ashish Dhawan is founder-CEO, The Convergence Foundation. The views expressed are personal

Case to respect and protect women's reproductive rights

In the late 1990s, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) appointed me as the Goodwill Ambassador for South Asia. All charged with my new role, I set out to speak with many women whom I was working with in the slums of Mumbai. I also visited hundreds of women in villages and realised that having multiple children was not their choice. They were aware about the harmful impact it had on their bodies and the children, many of whom were malnourished and many more were anaemic. I remember telling a woman that I would arrange a regular supply of contraceptive pills for her, which she could take discreetly without her mother-in-law or husband knowing. She looked at me with disbelief at my ignorance, and said, "Didi, do you really think there is a single spot in my butt where I can hide something without the other family members knowing?" Discussing family planning was seen as a taboo in many communities.

Several factors including patriarchal attitudes and social norms restricted women's autonomy in making decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health, including family planning. This fact needed to be brought to the table in the numerous dialogues concerning gender equality, family planning and sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. I had the opportunity to interact with multiple stakeholders — from government officials to community leaders and the public as a Member of Parliament from 1997 to 2003. I also had the opportunity to speak with many rural women. Since then, we've seen commendable progress in advancing conversations around family planning. However, much remains to be done to achieve India's Family Planning 2030 vision, which aims to increase access, choice, expand contraceptive options, and enhance the quality of family planning services. Access to modern contraceptives remains a significant challenge, and addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring gender equality.

Over the years, the basket of contraceptive choices has expanded significantly. These newer, safer and simpler methods can truly empower women to manage their health and their careers and lead more fulfilling lives. Challenges regarding knowledge and access to modern contraception for both men and women persist. Despite the availability of modern contraceptives, the use of traditional methods among married women (aged 15-49 years) has almost doubled — from 5.7% (2015-16) to 10.2% (2019-21), according to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data.

Moreover, we must confront and dismantle the misconceptions surrounding contraceptives. Societal attitudes often perpetuate myths and misinformation, creating a climate of judgement around women's reproductive choices. Public figures, activists, and leaders have a responsibility to challenge these prejudices and advocate for policies that respect and protect reproductive rights. By making these strategic efforts, we can ensure that every woman and her partner has the freedom to make informed decisions about her reproductive health, leading to healthier families, stronger communities, and a more equitable world.

We must ask ourselves: Are we truly addressing the root cause that hinders the widespread adoption of modern contraceptive methods? Additionally, how and why are modern contraceptives more effective — and who do they benefit?

All women globally should have unhindered and equitable access to a basket of contraceptive choices. In the Indian context, access to temporary, reversible methods is particularly critical, given the large young population in the country. Contraceptives like injectables, implants, and intrauterine devices (IUDs) provide reliable, long-term protection against unintended pregnancies. Furthermore, self-administered methods offer women greater autonomy, allowing them to manage their reproductive health with greater ease and confidence. While all contraceptive methods have their benefits, modern contraceptives for women are profound. They lead to better maternal outcomes by reducing the risk of unintended pregnancies and associated health complications. By enabling women to space their pregnancies, contraceptives contribute to improved health for both mothers and their children. Women can achieve better nutritional status, recover fully between pregnancies, and provide better care for their children. Furthermore, the ability to plan and space pregnancies empowers women to pursue education and career opportunities, leading to more autonomy and control over their lives, thereby enhancing their economic independence and leading more fulfilling lives, and overall well-being for themselves and their families.

According to NFHS-5, the unmet need for spacing has decreased from 12.9% in 2015-16 to 9.4% in 2019-21, highlighting the growing recognition of the benefits of spacing methods. After all, family planning is not just about preventing unintended pregnancies; it is about empowering women with the knowledge and resources they need to make the best decisions for themselves and their families. When couples have access to a wide range of modern contraceptive options, they can plan their lives better and contribute to creating a healthy and stable family. To truly empower women and improve their reproductive health, we must focus on creating effective, affordable, and reliable ways to access contraceptive methods and services around the country, family planning into primary health systems.

There is an imperative to inform and educate communities while prioritising the needs of newly married couples, those without children, and postpartum and post-abortion women. Moreover, we must confront and dismantle the misconceptions surrounding contraceptives. Societal attitudes often perpetuate myths and misinformation, creating a climate of judgement around women's reproductive choices. Public figures, activists, and leaders have a responsibility to challenge these prejudices and advocate for policies that respect and protect reproductive rights. By making these strategic efforts, we can ensure that every woman and her partner has the freedom to make informed decisions about her reproductive health, leading to healthier families, stronger communities, and a more equitable world.

Shabana Azmi is an actor/activist and former Goodwill Ambassador, UNFPA. The views expressed are personal



Shabana Azmi

[JOE BIDEN | PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES]

We know Vladimir Putin will not stop at Ukraine, but make no mistake, Ukraine can and will stop Putin. Russia will not prevail. Ukraine will prevail

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
 BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The food price constraint



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI, PANKHURI TANDON AND SHARVARI RAJADHYAKSHA

Upcoming budget needs to address structural issues that weigh down the agricultural sector

WORDLY WISE
 WHEN STATESMEN WANT TO GAIN TIME,
 THEY OFFER TO TALK.
 — HENRY KISSINGER

MESSAGE TO MOSCOW

PM's Russia visit frames Delhi's fraught challenge of multi-alignment — and its opportunities

NEW DELHI'S GRADUAL move from its Cold War-era principle of non-alignment to the more pragmatic multi-alignment could well have hit a wall in 2022. The war in Ukraine sharpened the renewed great power rivalries and India had significant partnerships with both sides — the traditional relationship with Russia on the one hand, and deepening ties with the US on the other. Two and a half years later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to Russia since the conflict began shows that New Delhi is getting more adept on the diplomatic tightrope: While the visit saw warmth between PM Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin and a slew of announcements on trade, technology and the defence partnership, India also chided Moscow as it made a stronger pitch for peace. However, the vexed challenges of multi-alignment, of balancing competing and sometimes contradictory interests, remain. Two formulations by PM Modi during the visit are symptomatic of the complexity that India must navigate.

Reacting to the alleged bombing by Russia of a children's hospital in Kyiv, he said that such an incident was "painful" and "peace talks do not succeed amid bombs, guns and bullets". The joint statement "noted with appreciation relevant proposals of mediation and good offices aimed at peaceful resolution of the conflict in accordance with international law and on the basis of the UN Charter in its entirety and totality". These statements mark a sharpening of the PM's earlier formulation that "this is not an era of war", first made in 2022 and echoed in the G20 New Delhi Declaration. At the same time, they leave room for India to play the role of a bridge between Russia and the West. Calling Russia an "all-weather friend" is aimed at ensuring that Delhi and Moscow can carry forward their engagement despite the looming China factor and India's deep and growing ties with the US and Europe. The Ukraine war has isolated Russia from the West and its economic stability owes much to Beijing's backing. Given India's long-standing dispute with China over its aggression on the border and its need for Russian oil and arms, including spare parts and maintenance for pre-existing inventory, in the medium term, it is essential that the supply chains from Moscow are maintained.

Of course, Delhi's balancing act is growing more demanding in a polarised world. The current scenario is volatile, what happens in the US election later this year has significant ramifications — to what extent will the new White House reshape the dynamic with Europe and China? That's why the way forward for India is to continue to engage with all partners — bilaterally and in multilateral like the Quad, I2U2 and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation — based on its economic and strategic interests. If a partnership with the US, Japan and Australia is necessary to keep China in check in the Indo-Pacific, the relationship with Russia is needed for energy security and defence. Doing business with a growing India is in the interest of all sides.

IT'S HEATING UP

Breaches of Paris Pact's 1.5 degrees target are a reminder: Countries must build resilience against weather vagaries

THE AVERAGE GLOBAL temperature between July 2023 and June 2024 was the highest on record, according to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service's latest bulletin. The agency, among the World Meteorological Organisation's key sources of climate data, has revealed that in the past 12 months, the planet was 1.64 degrees Celsius hotter than in the fossil fuel era. The findings do not immediately mean that the world has defaulted on the Paris Climate Pact's 1.5 degrees threshold — that target is measured in terms of decadal averages and not yearly temperature. Last month was the Earth's hottest June on record. The onset of La Nina might bring relief to people in several parts of the world. Nevertheless, there are enough reasons to see the EU agency's data as a continuing signal in global temperatures. The "temporary" breaches of the 1.5-degrees target over the past two years are warnings to brace for a warmer world and bolster adaptation mechanisms.

Reducing GHG emissions and limiting the amount of warming has so far been the prime focus of climate policymaking. However, mitigation targets have historically been inadequate and the global community has never agreed on who shoulders the greater burden of decarbonisation. At the same time, it is increasingly becoming evident that even a decimal-point increase in global warming makes extreme weather events more intense and frequent. Last year, the IPCC's Synthesis Report warned that measures to build resilience are "largely small-scale, reactive and incremental with most focusing on near-term risks". The report underlined the need to weather-proof agriculture, secure people's livelihoods, protect the vulnerable from rising seas and rivers and strengthen healthcare systems.

In 2021, the New Delhi-based Council for Energy, Environment and Water's study revealed that more than 80 per cent of India's population is vulnerable to climate disasters, and most regions have low adaptive capacities. India does have a climate adaptation plan. But the toll taken every year by landslides, floods and heat waves underscores that much needs to be done to secure the vulnerable. Despite advancements, India's weather reporting system finds it difficult to keep pace with climate-related complexities. The infrastructure of even the metros like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru struggles to cope with extreme rainfall episodes. Like most parts of the world, India's climate adaptation project remains a top-down endeavour. It's time that policymakers appreciated that climate change is a global phenomenon that cannot overlook local solutions.

COACH GAMBHIR

He is likely to emphasise primacy of the team over individual glory. That can only be good

GAUTAM GAMBHIR'S STINT as the head coach of the Indian men's team can take cricket away from the celebrity culture that has come to define it, and towards an acknowledgement of the collective effort that results in victories or defeats. Never the flashiest or most-talented player in the team during his playing days, Gambhir reached the top of the game using the unglamorous attributes of hard work, grit, a strong mind and a solid work ethic.

It's this quality that is likely to appeal to youngsters coming into the team in a transitional phase of Indian cricket. stalwarts like Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma are outliers who are capable of working things out if they fall into a rut. All they may ever need from a coach would be reassurance, more than technical inputs. As far as the seniors are concerned, keeping the dressing room a happy place is key. It's the development of the less heralded players that should be the new coach's focus. Gambhir takes up the India job after guiding Kolkata Knight Riders to the Indian Premier League title in his first season as mentor. That team was characterised by a lack of big superstars — no player from the franchise featured in India's 15-man squad for the T20 World Cup.

Gambhir has often rallied against the tendency of turning cricketers into demi-gods. A part of it could be attributed to him not getting enough plaudits for stellar roles in the finals of the two World Cups India won during his time. Be it in stint as Delhi's Ranji Trophy captain or KKR coach, the former Lok Sabha MP is known to punt on youngsters with promise and stand by them. If it helps the younger players in the team in coming out of the shadow of their more celebrated teammates, it could only be a good development for Indian cricket.

MONEY POLICY IN India has been navigating diverging economic trends. While GDP growth continues to surprise on the upside, core inflation seems set on a downward trajectory. However, food inflation — typically considered idiosyncratic — has stayed stubbornly elevated, restricting the fall in the consumer price index (CPI) and restraining the Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India. Mint Road wants to rein in inflation at 4 per cent on a durable basis from 4.8 per cent now. But is this possible without falling food inflation?

Food commands nearly 40 per cent weight in the CPI basket. Hence, and as past trends also indicate, overall inflation cannot be tamed without bringing down food prices. In all the years that CPI has neared 4 per cent, food inflation has stayed below 4 per cent. Since 2000, the headline reading has gone below 4 per cent in just six years, with the most durable run seen during 2000-2006 when it averaged 3.9 per cent. Notably, food inflation averaged 2.5 per cent in those years.

Since then, there have been only two years of the headline number dipping below target — 2017-18 and 2018-19 — when it averaged 3.5 per cent. That was when food inflation was a mere 1 per cent. Food inflation surged after the pandemic to 6.4 per cent on average (between 2020-21 and 2023-24), higher than the 5.9 per cent overall CPI inflation.

In the 50 months since the first lockdown, inflation has remained above 4 per cent all through and food has been above 4 per cent in 39 months. Headline inflation has been above 6 per cent in 24 months (the upper limit of RBI's tolerance band of 2-6 per cent) while food has been above 6 per cent in 28 months. Even as overall CPI slid to 5.4 per cent in 2023-24, food rose to 7.5 per cent. It climbed further to 8.7 per cent in the first two months of the current financial year.

Hence, the easing of inflation to 4 per cent on a durable basis may be on shaky grounds at present. RBI expects average inflation at 4.5 per cent in the current year, with the last quarter at 4.5 per cent. This assumes a normal

The time has come for policy to factor in the effects of climate change since the absence of mitigating measures could lead to a structural increase in the risks to food inflation. Controlling climate change's impact on food will require help from fiscal policy. Agricultural infrastructure needs to be upgraded — from production to transportation and storage. For production, policy can help promote climate-resistant crop varieties. The introduction of heat-resistant wheat was a welcome step this year, which needs to be pursued for other crops as well.

Agricultural research needs to be incentivised. Currently, investments in R&D are just around 0.5 per cent of agriculture GDP, according to a 2023 paper by ICRIR.

monsoon and high base will lower food inflation. CPI has softened recently due to the slide in non-food inflation, including core inflation (inflation excluding food and fuel). At 3 per cent in May, core inflation was at a record low. This fall would suggest muted demand pressures on inflation, creating scope for rate cuts.

Time and again, evidence has suggested the pivotal role of food in controlling overall inflation. Since food has high weight and is purchased at a higher frequency, it is known to influence inflation expectations and can put pressure on wages.

Recent research (Are food prices the 'true' core of India's inflation?, RBI Bulletin January 2024) shows that large and persistent food shocks spill over into non-food inflation. Additionally, high food inflation hits the poor more since it has a higher weight in their consumption basket. Our assessment shows that the bottom 20 per cent of the population in rural and urban areas currently face nearly 50 basis points higher inflation than the top 20 per cent.

When will food inflation loosen its grip? Historically, the monsoon used to be its key determinant. Yet, climate change has increased the uncertainty around rains, and is progressively adding other weather shocks for agriculture. The key hope for this year is an above-normal monsoon. As predicted by the India Meteorological Department. Even so, its distribution, as always, remains uncertain. Despite the monsoon arriving on schedule, its progress has been slow. As of June 30, the all-India rainfall deficiency was 11 per cent below the long-period average. A pick-up in rains since then has plugged the deficit. But, to spur the rural economy and to tackle food inflation, we need adequate and well-distributed rains for the rest of the season.

To increase the risks further, other weather shocks such as heatwaves and unseasonal rains have added a fresh dimension to food production and its price outlook. With climate change, the frequency and scale of these shocks has been increasing, evident in the post-pandemic period. In 2022-23, heatwaves

and unseasonal rains contributed to a surge in inflation, even as the monsoon turned out normal. In 2023-24, El Niño was aggravated by global warming, leading to the driest August India had seen in recorded history.

While the shocks have been varied in nature, they have kept overall food inflation stubbornly high. Heatwaves have affected crop production by depleting groundwater levels, shrivelling wheat grains and pest infestations. They also affected dairy and poultry output. On the other side, unseasonal rains hit crops during harvesting and transportation stages, leading to losses.

The time has come for policy to factor in the effects of climate change since the absence of mitigating measures could lead to a structural increase in the risks to food inflation. Controlling climate change's impact on food will require help from fiscal policy. Agricultural infrastructure needs to be upgraded — from production to transportation and storage. For production, policy can help promote climate-resistant crop varieties. The introduction of heat-resistant wheat was a welcome step this year, which needs to be pursued for other crops as well. Agricultural research needs to be incentivised. Currently, investments in R&D are just around 0.5 per cent of agriculture GDP, according to a 2023 paper by ICRIR.

Irrigation infrastructure needs to be stepped up amid heatwave-linked risks to water availability. Despite government efforts, only 57 per cent of agriculture is covered by irrigation so far. Cold storage and food processing should be further encouraged. This will help reduce food wastage amid increasing risks to food supply. Until these structural issues are addressed, risks for food inflation are likely to stay elevated. Even though monetary policy has limited capacity to address these issues, it cannot ignore persistently high food prices if it wants to achieve its goal. The upcoming Union Budget needs to intensify efforts in this direction.

Joshi is chief economist, Tandon is senior economist, and Rajadhyaksha is economic analyst at CRISIL Ltd



LATIKA GUPTA

THE XIV DALAI Lama, who turned 89 on July 6, is popular for his modern perspective on life and politics. Over six decades, he has transformed himself from a spiritual and religious leader of the Tibetans to a teacher of democracy.

The Dalai Lama has provided magnanimous leadership to the Tibetan Government-in-Exile to peacefully fight for a democratic order. With his guidance, a constitution was launched by the Tibetans in 1963. In 1991, a charter for governance in exile based on Buddhist values, liberal democracy and human rights was launched. He emerged as a great teacher-practitioner who ushered Tibetans into a democratic way of life. He used the medium of "teachings", as is prescribed in Tibetan Buddhism, to nurture the idea of democracy in his followers.

By conceptualising democracy in specific ways and communicating it, he has created an organic discourse around its knowledge. His speeches help us identify a "teachable" version of democracy. He described democracy as a process using which the Tibetans could walk on a path leading to it (democracy) and continued to convey the scope for further reforms. He assured his followers repeatedly that democracy was connected with Buddhism.

This is consistent with the construct of "vehicles" in Tibetan Buddhism. Different vehicles of Buddhist practice are characterised by different manifestations of the role of the teacher. A "vehicle" possesses a base, path and fruit. The base is the experience, understanding, and personal development of the practitioner.

LEADER AND TEACHER

Through his work and teaching, the Dalai Lama has deepened a culture of debate

IN GOOD FAITH

The Dalai Lama remained consistent with the Buddhist tradition of training the mind to overcome afflictive emotions. While teaching and encouraging people to practise democracy, he maintained a position of spiritual freedom that refuses to strike back in anger or retaliation. The spiritual freedom with which the Dalai Lama has responded to violence is an inspiration to us all. This is where he has been a symbol of yet another aspect of the liberal outlook.

tioner. The path is the appropriate practice and the fruit is the accomplishment. The Dalai Lama has helped the exiles visualise democracy as a base of life, a path and also a fruit to be achieved. He paved the ground for thinking afresh about collective governance and the need to achieve a middle path between the cultural past and the modern present.

While introducing such complex ideas, he constantly refers to the role of education. His approach can be classified as that of the 20th-century educator John Dewey who considers education a social process. In this frame, the Dalai Lama emerges as a teacher who introduced a transformative idea to a large group of people, continually taught it and then asserted the need to practise democracy. He helped them develop the conviction that change will come if efforts are made.

He remained consistent with the Buddhist tradition of training the mind to overcome afflictive emotions. While teaching and encouraging people to practise democracy, he maintained a position of spiritual freedom that refuses to strike back in anger or retaliation. The spiritual freedom with which the Dalai Lama has responded to violence is an inspiration to us all. This is where he has been a symbol of yet another aspect of the liberal outlook. He has been open to the wisdom of other religions, a practice deeply rooted in his own Madhyamaka tradition of Buddhism. The Dalai Lama has presented a model of interfaith education which involves shaping a healthy religious identity grounded in the resources of one tradition,

respectful of differences among religious visions while remaining open to the beauty, goodness, and truth.

Learning to gain knowledge and wisdom is central to Buddhism. Its primary principle is that ignorance is the root cause of all suffering, and knowledge is the antidote. One of the most important ritualised practices is to gain knowledge through debate. The central purpose of Tibetan monastic debate is to defeat misconceptions, establish the correct view, and clear objections to that view. It involves mastering several verbal and non-verbal patterns, diligently learning and understanding the meaning of various philosophical principles. It is a part of the cultural patrimony that the Dalai Lama has reinstated and emphasised by promoting it in religious institutions and secular schools. It is taught to all the Tibetan refugee children. He has promoted debate as a way to arrive at a stable and resolved understanding of issues that may help Tibetans construct knowledge and face the challenges of living with uncertainties.

We can celebrate the Dalai Lama by acknowledging his work as an educational philosopher. The term "Dalai Lama" is itself made up of the Mongolian word *dalai* (i.e. vast/ocean) and the Tibetan word *bla-ma* (i.e. spiritual teacher) meaning Ocean-like Spiritual Teacher. The XIV Dalai Lama is a "Magnificent Teacher" indeed.

The writer teaches education at Delhi University. She was the FUK Fellow for Dalai Lama Studies in 2022



JULY 11, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

GOLDEN TEMPLE ACTION

THE GOVERNMENT ASSERTED that the secessionist movement in Punjab, under the increasing influence of external forces, had assumed menacing proportions, forcing it to take action in the Golden Temple complex and elsewhere in the state. The White Paper says that the anti-national movement matured with the active support of small groups operating from countries like the US, UK, West Germany and Canada.

KAR SEVA CONFUSION

THE UNION GOVERNMENT'S efforts to per-

suaide Sikh religious leaders to undertake kar seva of the damaged Golden Temple complex bounced back as the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee made it clear that the SGPC is authorised to undertake kar seva. Any decision on its launch would take place only after the Army was withdrawn — not only from the Golden Temple complex but also from all other gurdwaras in the state.

THIRD WORLD CONCERN

FOREIGN MINISTERS OF SAARC expressed their concern over the lack of response to the developmental needs of the Third World,

particularly on the question of the seventh replenishment of the International Development Association. They also expressed their distress over the stalemate in the North-South dialogue.

A CASE OF STOLEN EYES

A PECULIAR CASE of "theft" of a pair of eyes has come to light. According to a complaint lodged with the AIMS director by a resident of village Hathibana, Farukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh, his son, Ghanashyam's body when handed over to him after the post-mortem examination, was discovered to have its eyes replaced with a pair of artificial eyes.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Russia razor's edge

PM Modi's successful visit to Russia indicates a consolidation of bilateral ties despite geopolitical constraints



NANDAN UNNIKRISHNAN

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's successful visit to Russia has once again demonstrated India's ability to walk the geopolitical equivalent of a razor's edge and give everyone something to cheer about while providing stability to ties with a consequential partner.

The proponents of the bilateral relationship will refer to the warm words Modi had for Russia and President Vladimir Putin: The synergy of the political vision of the world; the charting of new areas of economic and scientific cooperation, and the slew of agreements that will open the path to reaching a trade turnover of \$100 billion by 2030.

Those who would rather see India and Russia drift apart will point to the frank words of the PM on Ukraine and the lack of significant military purchases. The PM's formulations on Ukraine — "the death of innocent children causes great pain", the solution to the war in Ukraine "cannot be found on the battlefield" and that "India is on the side of peace" and would do everything possible to achieve this peace — will echo across media for a long time. In today's geopolitical scenario, the visit cannot be confined to the bilateral context. It will be seen as New Delhi's emphatic endorsement of strong ties with Moscow despite the fighting in Ukraine, concerns about the Kremlin's growing ties with Beijing and Western pressures to de-couple from Russia. India and Russia also share the goal of ushering in a multi-polar world.

On Ukraine, Modi managed to convince the Kremlin to discharge all Indians in the Russian armed forces and assist them in getting back home. It is estimated that 30 to 40 Indians, four of whom have reportedly been killed, are currently performing various tasks with the Russian armed forces. Additionally, India and Russia agreed that the Ukraine conflict had to be resolved peacefully "through dialogue and diplomacy... in accordance with international law and on the basis of the UN Charter in its entirety and totality". Getting Russia to agree to this formulation in the joint statement doesn't mean that India will immediately throw itself into mediation mode. Still, this wording could be the basis on which Moscow and West-backed Kyiv could be nudged to the negotiation table.

Moscow's growing closeness with Beijing undoubtedly figured in the informal talks Modi had with Putin over dinner. During the discussions, Modi would have tried to gauge whether there has been any change in Moscow's traditional position of neutrality in India-China ties.

While the content of the Modi-Putin chat on China is unlikely to come into the public domain for some time, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's recent utterances on the subject suggest that there is no change in its long-standing stance. When referring to the India-China border clashes, at the recent Primakov Readings, Lavrov said that Russia looks at, "with understanding", India's current views on talks with China. Similarly, Putin would have sought an understanding of India's growing relationship with the US



C S Sankaranarayanan

and would have most probably been reassured that New Delhi would not allow ties with Washington to impinge on Indo-Russia relations.

On the bilateral front, the leaders would have spent considerable time discussing ways of boosting trade, which has been considerably hampered by the wide-ranging Western sanctions on Russia. Paradoxically, despite the war and related sanctions, India and Russia trade has grown exponentially from the barely \$10 billion before February 2022 to \$65.7 billion in the last financial year. The two sides traded goods worth \$17.5 billion in the first quarter of this year, suggesting that last year's figures are likely to be exceeded.

This rapid growth is attributable to the massive spurt in the purchase of Russian oil, which was being sold at discounted rates following the imposition of sanctions. The manifold growth in trade also brought new problems — payments and trade imbalance. The need to avoid sanctions on payments to Russia has led to the revival of rupee-rouble, which now accounts for nearly 60 per cent of payments. But the balance of trade is massively in Russia's favour, amounting currently to over \$50 billion. If adequate measures are not taken soon, this is likely to increase as energy purchases by India are likely to grow in the future.

These issues would have figured prominently in the discussions but understandably as in relation to military cooperation, specific

While the content of the Modi-Putin chat on China is unlikely to come into the public domain for some time, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's recent utterances on the subject suggest that there is no change in its long-standing stance. When referring to the India-China border clashes, at the recent Primakov Readings, Lavrov said that Russia looks at, "with understanding", India's current views on talks with China.

details are not being announced. But a perusal of the joint statement issued at the end of the visit hints at possible new payment mechanisms and identifies a whole range of new areas — agriculture, automobiles — which could be growth areas for Indian exports. The two sides have also agreed to intensify efforts on maritime and land connectivity projects — International North-South Transport corridor, the Chennai-Vladivostok and Arctic Ocean Northern maritime corridors — among others.

While details are sparse, the joint statement suggests that the interruptions in the flow of military spares and delays in weapons platform deliveries are to be addressed primarily through the setting up of production units in India, probably under the 'Make in India' initiative.

Given the above, it does not appear that the India-Russia relationship is in "terminal decline" as suggested by some commentators. On the contrary, the Modi-Putin dialogue indicates that efforts are being made to make bilateral ties more resilient, considering the current geopolitical realities and the limitations of both countries.

Modi and Putin appear to understand that the future of stable Indo-Russian ties will depend on how deeply the two countries can involve themselves in each other's national development projects.

The writer is senior fellow, Observer Research Foundation

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Modi reportedly told Putin that 'when innocent children are killed, the heart bleeds, and that pain is very terrifying'. But judging by the outcome of the summit, the Indian PM survived this pain and found comfort in Putin's friendly embrace."

— THE GUARDIAN

A plan for national well-being

Success of India's family-planning programme lies in making it integral to the health of communities and empowerment of women



J P NADDA

ON THIS WORLD Population Day, we reflect on India's journey in family planning and reaffirm our commitment to address the challenges that lie ahead.

As endorsed in the United Nations International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) in May, India has not only provided leadership to the ICPD agenda but has also demonstrated progress through improved family-planning services and improving health outcomes, especially maternal health and child health.

In India, people are opting for smaller families, averaging just two children. This trend reflects a significant shift over the past decade, during which more than half of women (57 per cent) in their reproductive age (15 to 49 years) have actively used modern contraceptives. This widespread use of contraceptives highlights the success of India's family planning programme. However, family planning is much more; it is integral to the health and well-being of communities and empowering women by providing them with rights and choices. With 369 million young people aged 10-24, India is on the brink of a transformative demographic shift.

Moreover, over the decades, the programme has evolved significantly, adopting various approaches to family planning, ranging from clinic-based to target-oriented methods, and the voluntary adoption of family-planning choices. This variation represents the adaptation of policies to meet the changing needs of the population.

The national population and health policies emphasise the necessity of addressing the unmet need for family planning, defined as the percentage of women who do not want to have children but do not want to delay child-bearing but are not using any method of contraception. The programme achieved a milestone in 2012 with the introduction of the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCH+A) approach, along with the emphasis on family planning through Family Planning 2020 and now Family Planning 2030. It has progressively focussed on raising awareness, fostering community engagement, improving access to information and services, expanding the range of contraceptive choices, ensuring quality assurance of services delivered up to the last mile, and implementing innovative strategies in high-fertility regions.

The growth and development of a country is linked to population dynamics. The aim is to maintain and achieve replacement levels of fertility both nationally and sub-nationally. India has already achieved replacement level of fertility at the national level (TFR 2.0) and 31 states/UTs have already achieved this milestone as per NFHS-5 (2019-21).

Family planning has also been recognised globally as reducing maternal and child morbidity and mortality. An important component of the programme is to focus on improving maternal and child health. This shift is necessary because family-planning strategies have to be adapted to India's de-

mographic diversity. The strategy also gives significant consideration to social issues such as age at marriage, age at first birth, and education. These factors are crucial for a holistic approach to family planning that addresses the diverse needs of the nation.

The Mission Parivar Vikas (MPV), one of the flagship family planning programmes of the government, was launched in 2016 for increasing access to contraceptives and family-planning services in 146 high fertility districts of seven states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Assam).

The approach uses awareness campaigns such as Saarthi Vaahans (awareness on wheels) and Saas Bahu Sammelans to address social barriers for young women to access contraceptives and providing Naya Pahal to newly married couples to sensitise them about responsible parenthood practices.

Improvements in the uptake of modern contraceptives in the MPV districts led to the government's decision to scale up this programme to all districts of the seven states and in six northeastern states in 2021.

Currently, the National Planning programme offers a variety of reversible modern contraceptive options encompassing condoms, intrauterine contraceptive devices, oral pills, MPV injections etc. In 10 states, covering two districts each, subdermal implants and subcutaneous injections are in the rollout stage, with plans for further extension.

As we commemorate World Population Day 2024, themed "Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancy for the Health and Well-being of Mother and Child", we acknowledge the efforts of our state counterparts and the relentless dedication of our health workforce, including ANMs, ASHAs, and other ground-level functionaries who are at the forefront of delivering crucial services.

The government is committed to overcoming barriers related to access, misconceptions about contraceptive methods, lack of awareness, geographical and economic challenges, and restrictive social and cultural norms. Substantial investments are being made to improve family-planning service delivery, including ensuring the availability of both temporary and long-term contraceptive methods, adequate budgetary allocations, and maintaining uninterrupted supplies at health facilities and through community-based workers. Additionally, family-planning services are being extended to the last mile through Ayushman Arogya Mandirs.

India's demographic dividend must navigate the complexities of sustainable development, urbanisation, migration, integrating digital services into our policies ensure that demographic growth translates into a sustainable future and inclusive prosperity. Successful interventions must go hand-in-hand with niche strategies. On this World Population Day, let us pledge to build a brighter and healthier future for all, with a special focus on marginalised and vulnerable communities across India. Let us strive for a future where our demographic dividend is fully realised, where every citizen has access to quality healthcare, and where the health and well-being of our people are the foundation of our nation's progress and prosperity.

The writer is Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare and Chemicals and Fertilisers



BIBEK DEBROY

I HAVE NO intention of converting this column into a Neogy biography. In an earlier column ("The administrator India forgot", IE, June 13), I wrote about Kshitish Chandra Neogy (1888-1970). But, a few bits need to be added. In that column, I mentioned that in 1946, he became a member of the Nuclear Commission, which led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In October 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Lord Wavell (Selected Works): "It may interest you to know that over a month ago I requested K C Neogy to become a delegate in our UNO Delegation to America. He accepted it, but soon after he expressed his inability to go. The reason he gave me was that conditions in East Bengal were fast deteriorating and that a general attack on behalf of the Muslim League was expected in the near future. Neogy did not wish to leave his family in East Bengal when everybody there seemed to be expecting this mass attack." Neogy also stated this in an interview he gave to the press in September 1946. "As for the proposed Indian delegation to the UNO, originally the Government had invited Syed Raza Ali and Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru. Neither of them was able to accept. Later, Neogy was invited and he accepted, but in the past few days Neogy informed me that he would be unable to go owing to more or less domestic reasons."

Why we forgot K C Neogy

His absence from collective memory speaks of a larger syndrome

We know K C Neogy was a member of Indian National Congress and was elected to the Constituent Assembly (1946) from Bengal. But before this, there was the Central Legislative Assembly and, representing Bengal, he was elected to this in 1920, 1923, 1926 and 1930. Now that a lot of information has been digitised, we can find more stuff from parliamentary records. He was educated in Presidency College (Kolkata) and Dhaka College and was married to Lila Devi. From 1935 to 1940, he was Dewan of the Mayurbhanj State, a fact that is probably not generally known. His permanent address was in Southern Avenue (Kolkata). In 1939, Charulal Mukherjee published a book titled *The Santals*. It was dedicated to Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanja Deo of Mayurbhanj and Neogy was some kind of trigger for the monograph. In January 1938, he wrote to the author, "I am glad that you are thinking of bringing out a comprehensive book on the Santals, incorporating your past writings on the subject. As you know we have a very large Santal population in Mayurbhanj, and would like to encourage a regular ethnological and anthropological survey of this as well as other aboriginal tribes inhabiting this state... In case, however, you feel interested in undertaking a study of our Santal population on the spot, I shall arrange for requisite facilities in the matter." Mayurbhanj state did

help the author in his survey.

There are two reasons why Neogy faded from public memory. Jawaharlal Nehru was fond of him and once Nehru was no longer around, Neogy lost his importance. Plus, he himself aged. More importantly, he wrote little, almost nothing at all, other than what was part of committee reports. An exception was a piece he wrote, titled "Rabindranath Tagore, the Poet Laureate of India", (which educated Bengali could avoid writing on Tagore?). This was published in *The Open Court* in 1917. (Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913). "Indeed, the sudden acclamation in the West of Rabindranath Tagore as a world-poet of the first magnitude, has made a few critical spirits in India shake their heads in doubt and weigh and scrutinise the merit of praise that has been bestowed on this illustrious son of India." Whether the halo that surrounds him today will endure is more than one can say. And these Indian critics are inspired with the fear that what appears to be natural splendour radiating from a lustful gem of the Indian deep, may, after the excitement of the passing hour has spent itself, prove to be but the illusive effect of some handy optical gadget. Neogy, impressed into service at the impatient call of the goading desire of the West for something fresh and quaint in the way of stimulants... Overwhelmed as the poet has been by the

eulogy and benediction with which he has been greeted from all quarters, he does not seem to be quite happy with his Indian audience. After his first return from Europe, Rabindranath was received everywhere in India with affectionate regard. But he seemed to suspect that much of the honour showered on him, particularly in his native province of Bengal, was but the echo of the tributes of praise that were unstintingly rendered to his genius in the West... It might be said that a poet was often-times more honoured by posterity than by his own generation. This might seem contrarian today. But writing in 1917, there was a grain of truth to it. And reluctant though Bengalis might be to admit it, in 1913, Bengal didn't applaud the Nobel Prize wholeheartedly.

The only other written piece that goes under Neogy's name is a piece in a slim monograph titled, "What Happened After Gandhi's Arrest". This was published by the India League of America in 1942. But this was actually a speech delivered in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1942. We are often accused of not documenting history properly. A malaise also relevant for K C Neogy.

The writer is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RETHINK SECURITY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Terror in Kathua" (IE, July 10). Terror operations seem to have been shifted to the south of Panaji. Forces thinned out with increasing strength rerouted to the IAC. Indian Army troops in the sectors south of Banihal should rethink their operating procedures given the changed scenarios — an increasing liaison with intelligence agencies and revamping intelligence mechanisms. Counter-terrorism activities must be based on a proactive approach. Such casualties given the highly professional nature of the armed forces is not acceptable.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Terror in Kathua" (IE, July 10). Frequent terror attacks on the Indian Army convoys in J&K appears to be a well-conceived conspiracy, presumably involving local elements. This may be a tactic to disrupt the upcoming state assembly elections. The recurrence of such tragic instances flies in the face of assurances that the Valley's security has been strengthened. The involvement of the local population is a matter of great concern and reflects the oversight of the intelligence apparatus.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THE BLAME GAME

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Mockery of Parliament" (IE, July 10). Maintaining decorum in Parliament is the duty of all, including the Prime Minister. The PM must realise that his stature has vastly diminished. It is no concession on his part to sit through and listen to the speech of the Leader of Opposition, rather it is his duty. He is known for frequently skipping the sessions in Parliament. The language he chooses to describe the LOP — "balak buddhi" is tactless.

Peter Mundackal, Dwaraka

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Mockery of Parliament" (IE, July 10). The writer, the Deputy Chairperson of Rajya Sabha has called the Opposition's sloganeering during the prime minister's speeches in Parliament as antithetical to the fundamental values of democracy. But, the lack of action suggests that the conduct was not punishable, unlike in 2023, when 146 opposition MPs were suspended. The onus to run both the Houses smoothly rests with the government. Let us forget the BJP's use of parliamentary disruption as a democratic exercise.

I R Murmu, New Delhi

OUR VIEW



Who is afraid of India's relations with Russia?

India's ties with Moscow needn't worry the West, given the role New Delhi can play in pursuit of peace. Indian strategic autonomy, however, would be better assured by economic success

Barely a year after US President Joe Biden hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House to much fanfare, it's the Kremlin now that is courting India's leader in much the same way. US efforts to woo India to its side—or the West—in a world riven by geopolitics may seem to have failed, as both Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin sang paeans to the two nations' enduring friendship on Tuesday. Sure, misgivings have emerged in the West and Ukraine's leader has expressed concerns. But New Delhi's parallel ties with Moscow aren't something that should make the Western bloc uneasy. With China and Russia in a "no-limits" pact, India can plausibly act as a channel of communication with Russia in an attempt to settle the conflict in Ukraine. New Delhi's geopolitical neutrality could grant it the role of an intermediary trusted by both sides. Although its peace-securing exertions are yet to come good, attempts by other countries' leaders having fallen flat means the West may need to depend on India. Notably, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre alluded to such an eventuality: "We believe India's long-standing relationship with Russia gives it the ability to urge President Putin to end his brutal war, an unprovoked war in Ukraine." This is an opportunity for a global legacy that India must not let pass, even if it is difficult to pull off.

That said, it's bilateral economic ties that took centre-stage during Modi's Moscow visit. Among the agreements struck, the most prominent is a plan to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030. Trade has already leapt up from the \$10 billion level a few years ago. Western sanctions imposed on Russia after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine resulted in Russian oil being

shipped in large volumes at a discount to Indian ports. Turned away by Western buyers, Russia found an eager consumer of its exports in India, which was glad to find an oil-shock absorber that could help keep local inflationary pressures in check. These imports have also helped soften the impact on global oil prices of the war in Europe by reducing Indian demand in the global full-price market. The deal's effect is visible in our trade data. Taken together, our exports to Russia and imports from there jumped to \$65.6 billion in 2023-24, more than six times the pre-pandemic figure. While this makes the target of \$100 billion by 2030 look achievable, there lies a problem in its composition, with the balance of trade tilted heavily in Russia's favour. We ran up a whopping \$57 billion trade deficit with Russia last year. In other words, what we exported was only a small fraction of what we imported. Unless this skew is corrected, scaling up bilateral trade may not prove sustainable. With Russia denied access to global dollar payment systems, this concern assumes even more importance. Rupee or rouble settlements will work only if trade is better balanced. Hence, like China, we must ship vast volumes of our products to Russia. For this, India must emerge as a global manufacturing hub.

India's global heft would also be easier to exercise if large markets grow reliant on supplies from here. Economic success arguably makes more space for strategic autonomy than a game of equidistance from geopolitical adversaries. As for the West, it need not worry about India joining an anti-West bloc, given our distrust of China. But a neutral India could yet be its best bet to keep the world order stable.

THEIR VIEW

India's response to urban floods needs an indepth study of causes

Complex water-table interactions under heavy rainfall suggest we need a much broader approach



ALOK SHEEL
is a retired civil servant who was once secretary, water resources, Kerala.

Every monsoon, social media is flooded with video footage of floods all over the National Capital Region (NCR), but the past few days had particularly alarming images. While corruption in public works and climate change have amplified the damage, the underlying problem is more basic.

Some eight years ago, I had argued on these pages that flash floods have long been a feature of life in the Indo-Gangetic floodplains. Archival sources on south Bihar dating back to the 1860s, when India was primarily an agricultural economy, showed that sudden floods during the rainy season were the norm, as the Gangetic riverine network overflowed its banks. These floods, however, receded within days, causing little damage and leaving a layer of fine silt that replenished the soil and enhanced farm productivity. Drought and monsoon failure, rather than floods, were the main worries then.

The origins of waterlogging on the floodplain can be traced to early public developmental works under British rule, such as canals, all-weather roads and railways, that involved construction of embankments that often blocked lines of natural drainage. The problem has been compounded since with large-scale urbanization. The NCR, located on this floodplain, needs just three hours of heavy rainfall to be flooded, and isolated pools of floodwater can stagnate for

days, harming infrastructure, private property and even life. Mumbai, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram and other Indian cities suffer similarly.

Eight years ago, I was of the view that better drainage could resolve the problem. On further reflection, since, it has dawned on me that it's so complex that flash floods in NCR cannot be prevented, only mitigated and managed.

If NCR were situated on a coast, excess water could drain into the sea. Delhi, however, is on the inland Indo-Gangetic floodplain that's one of the flattest places on earth. Normal rainfall water goes into water harvesting structures that recharge the phreatic/surface water table (natural bodies like rivers, ponds, open-raw wells and other artificial structures). But under incessant and excessive rainfall, this phreatic table gets fully recharged and rises to ground level. This water table differs from the intricate web of deep sub-surface aquifers, from which tube wells draw water and where water has accumulated over millennia. The two tables are linked, but we don't know exactly how.

Once the phreatic water table is fully charged where can the excess water go, especially since river levels are rising and overflowing their banks?

In coastal cities, the answer is clear, as sea-drainage guards against floods provided an adequate drainage system is in place and in good repair under routine maintenance. In floodplains, however, drainage to the sea can only occur over an extended period, since rivers have to cover a long distance to reach their outlet. Flash floods take place on account of this time difference. Once heavy rains cease, the waters subside and recede back into the original river bed.

What then are the possible long-term solutions, assuming drainage systems are well designed, adequate and kept in good repair?

First, more upstream reservoirs (including hydroelectric projects) in the hills, from where the rivers flow down to the floodplain. There are associated

environmental, technical and flooding concerns that need to be addressed, though, while designing these. Reservoirs have indeed been increasing over time, but might be inadequate to prevent flooding downstream as monsoon rains cover the entire Indo-Gangetic plain, and much of the flow into rivers at this time is downstream.

Second, desilt, deepen, revive and increase the area under ponds, wells, lakes and other water harvesting structures where excess water can flow during the monsoon season. These water storage devices would also increase water availability during the long dry season that follows the monsoon and during which there is extensive water shortage, both for drinking purposes and agriculture.

Three, minimize the built-up area under concrete, asphalt, etc., in urban areas so as to increase the recharge of sub-surface water. We need more parks, playgrounds, uncovered sidewalks by roadsides, buildings, etc.

Four, the blocked natural lines of drainage need to be de-obstructed while designing and reworking drainage systems so that excess water can flow towards the Yamuna and not accumulate in low-lying areas. Underpasses in particular should be avoided. It is far better to have elevated overpasses.

Five, needless to say, drainage systems need to be well maintained and kept in good repair so that they are not clogged with dirt, waste material, plastic, etc., that obstruct the flow of water.

My broad sense is that while such measures would mitigate the problem during monsoon rains, ultimately there is no preventing the water table from rising in the floodplains during the rainy season, as historical evidence cited in the article indicates, and consequential flash floods. Large and dense urban agglomerations like the NCR are fundamentally unsuited to such a vast flat floodplain that is so far from the sea. Urban planners and architects need to take seasonal flooding into account.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Like air pollution, flood risk is a threat that government should be protecting us against.

BARRY GARDINER

THEIR VIEW

Relieve solar panels of tariffs and see them proliferate

MANOJ PANT



is visiting professor at Shiv Nadar University.

Most people would now agree, given the recent heat wave in India and around the world, that climate control is high on every country's agenda. Though it was hardly raised in India's recent elections, this probably indicates that there are no serious political differences on this issue. In fact, India announced its commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 at COP-26 in November 2021. Additionally, India aims to reduce its emission-intensity by 45% below 2005 levels and increase non-fossil power capacity to 50% by 2030, as part of its August 2022 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) update. As the same government continues in India, it is likely that these commitments will continue to occupy prominence in policy pronouncements. While tackling climate change (to reduce greenhouse gases and carbon intensity) involves a host of measures that include reduced vehicular emissions, less use of fossil fuels, etc., one area in need of greater policy attention is rooftop solar power as an

alternative to traditional sources of power. In India, most power is from fossil fuels.

To meet emission reduction targets, increasing rooftop solar capacity is crucial. However, India's installation of solar panels lags the national target of achieving 40 gigawatts (GW) of it by 2022, with only 7.3GW achieved by 30 November 2022 (official data). Recognizing the vital role that rooftop panels play, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the PM Suryodaya Yojana on 22 January this year to support rooftop solar panel installations for households consuming less than 300 units of electricity per month.

The PM highlighted India's significant rooftop potential in the context of the 2070 net-zero goal. As the green-energy sector continues to grow, Modi has expressed his belief that both investors and industry will benefit. In the past, Union budgets have often been used to provide incentives for climate-control measures. However, the Budget for 2024-25 is expected to go further on India's climate commitments. Thankfully, there is a way to boost the adoption of rooftop solar power without major financial commitments or loss of government revenues. This is because it can help households lower their power bills.

Cheapen rooftop solar panel installations: Apart from a battery, solar panels require lithium wafers (almost solely made by China), solar cells and the final element, solar modules. Solar cells and modules are crucial components. However, since April 2022, India has imposed a 40% customs duty on solar modules and a 25% duty on solar cells.

The PM highlighted India's significant rooftop potential in the context of the 2070 net-zero goal. As the green-energy sector continues to grow, Modi has expressed his belief that both investors and industry will benefit. In the past, Union budgets have often been used to provide incentives for climate-control measures. However, the Budget for 2024-25 is expected to go further on India's climate commitments. Thankfully, there is a way to boost the adoption of rooftop solar power without major financial commitments or loss of government revenues. This is because it can help households lower their power bills.

The social (and private) benefits of eliminating customs duties on solar panel inputs like cells and modules can be calculated. To calculate its benefit in terms of saving on electricity usage expenditure by households (the consumer surplus), we first identified the levelized cost of electricity (LCOE) for rooftop solar power. The 'levelized cost' is calculated assuming tariff-free imports of solar cells and modules, and is found to range between ₹3 per kilo Watt hour (kWh) and ₹5 per kWh, based on research findings. Next, we obtained the average electricity

tariff rates from the Niti Aayog's India Climate and Energy Dashboard. These rates were ₹6.74 per kWh nationally and ₹9.36 per kWh in Delhi. We then calculated the electricity-bill expenditure savings for households by subtracting the LCOE of rooftop systems from the average electricity tariffs.

This difference represents the financial benefit per kWh of electricity generated by rooftop solar installations.

We obtained India's total consumer surplus by multiplying this difference with the projected total solar energy generation capacity. Our calculations show a consumer surplus of ₹96,000 crore if the 2026 target of 40GW is achieved. If India's full residential rooftop solar potential of

637GW (according to CEEW 2022) is achieved, it would result in a far larger consumer surplus of ₹15.2 trillion nationally and ₹75,000 crore in Delhi alone. This assumes that the consumer pays the full cost of installing and maintaining rooftop solar panels. So these savings could be even

higher if the government subsidizes installation costs, as is the current practice. In 2022-23, the government collected ₹2,160 crore in duty charges on imported solar modules meant for 2.6GW of power capacity. If India were to import solar modules for 637GW of capacity to fulfil its entire residential rooftop potential, the duty collected would still amount to just ₹5.2 trillion. This is far less than the aggregate energy cost benefit of ₹15.2 trillion. Even if we assume that only 25% of the full potential will be fulfilled, the realizable gains would be large enough to justify ending import duties on key inputs for solar installation.

Given that sunlight, the planet's ultimate power source, is free, what consumers could save from rooftop panels (even as they contribute to carbon-exhaust reduction) far outweighs the loss from reduced import duties on solar modules. Reducing duties on solar modules and cells would lower costs for domestic assemblers and decrease the final price of solar panels in India, thereby encouraging wider adoption of solar energy. At the very least, the forthcoming budget should start phasing out duties on imported cells and modules over the next few years to better enable everyone to work towards India's climate commitments.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Insolvency code reforms should aim for swift and just resolutions

Let's minimize process delays, uphold recovery principles, address group failures better and reduce space for ad hoc rulings



SHARDUL S. SHROFF
is founder and executive chairman of Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co.

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) reforms are expected to be announced in the finance minister's forthcoming Budget speech. As the IBC is a complex business law on the solvency of corporate enterprises, it deserves priority attention.

When the IBC was adopted by India in 2016, Parliament had intended that the time period for insolvency resolution be mandatorily limited to 330 days, inclusive of one extension and the time taken in legal proceedings. This time limit is observed more in the breach than in performance. We must recognize that a delay depreciates the value of the enterprise in question, often causing a drastic drop in value. There is no evaluation mechanism to determine the balance of public interest versus private interest when resolution proceedings are stalled (by injunctions, for example). But it's clear that the loss of a lender's security value affects the tax-paying public adversely, as public money is lost, and so such losses need to be clipped.

First, new amendments to the IBC must stipulate provisions akin to Section 41(ha) of the Specific Relief Act, 1963 (as amended), to prevent any injunction from being granted in favour of failed resolution applicants, as they have no financial stake in the corporate debtor. Injunctions impede or delay the completion of corporate restructuring in time. Delays are seen to be caused by obstructive promoters, third-party litigators or competitors getting injunctions with an oblique motive to cripple their competition, and this must stop.

Second, the priority accorded to the secured financial creditors of an insolvent business has a great bearing on the cost of credit in India. Secured lenders adjust financing costs based on the priority that their claims are expected to get and the certainty of being able to recover dues in priority of their charge, whether the company is liquidated or not. Any dilution or disruption of the priority order in insolvency proceedings goes against globally accepted principles and market practices. As India seeks external money for distressed asset acquisition financing and international interim financing, the country must abide by global norms. Otherwise, international and national lenders would avoid participating in the Indian market for distressed assets.

Third, three judgements of the Supreme Court in the cases of *Rainbow Papers Ltd*, *Paschimanchal Vidyut Vitaran Nigam Ltd* and *Vidharbha Industries Power Ltd* have significantly impacted or slowed down the process of admission of insolvency applications, which is the first step for the protection of companies faced with insolvency. The *Rainbow Papers* case has created a significant hurdle for the resolution of insolvency of distressed corporates. It places the recovery of sover-



eign debt in the first-priority category along with dues to secured financial creditors. The government back in 2016 had decided to relegate itself to fifth priority, as if its dues were equated with those of 'operational creditors' under Section 53(1)(e) of the IBC. Urgent amendments are needed to nullify the impact of these judgements and restore the earlier *status quo*.

Fourth, the siphoning of bank funds or corporate money by promoters is a well-identified perversion. Some crooked promoters create group enterprises and create multiple entities in India and abroad to facilitate the movement of funds and diversion of money fraudulently. In cases involving group enterprises, the IBC should incorporate provisions for procedural coordination among such entities (and their substantial consolidation) and clear rules to deal with perverse and criminal behaviour involving the misappropriation of creditor and/or public-sector funds. These must apply in India and extra-territorially as well. Protocols may need to be put in place for reciprocity between countries on common procedures, so that assistance can be sought in dealing with fraudulent diversions of funds, the country can better enforce recoveries and also resort to other remedies. Monies and assets thus recovered would add to the pool available for distribution to creditors that need to minimize their losses.

Fifth, cross-border insolvency, as expected to be incorporated in India's IBC, may not yet be in line with recommendations of the UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), which prepared and adopted a model law on enterprise group insolvency in 2019. States need to be equipped with modern legislation addressing both domestic and cross-border insolvency relating to multiple debtors and creditors of the same group.

We need to take a leaf out of Singapore's Insolvency Restructuring and Dissolution Act of 2018 to legislatively provide for a moratorium over a company that can be extended to its holding company, ultimate holding company and subsidiaries to enable group-wide restructuring and asset tracing. Minimally, such protocols need to be established between India and its trading partners by means of appropriate reciprocal arrangements.

Sixth, ad hoc solutions or mechanisms crafted by particular judgements have been applied in India for group insolvency and cross-border cases, as seen in the cases of *Jet Airways* and *Videcon*. This exposes a bare cupboard for dealing with group insolvency involving multinational creditors and debtors, which need to participate in the process under the assurance of legislative certainty, rather than on the basis of fallible judicial discretion and judge-made procedures.

Lastly, the IBC and its regulations and their adjudication by the National Company Law Tribunal and its appellate body reveal a conflict between the principles of value maximization and time-bound resolution. Breaching statutory regulations by sidestepping these as merely 'directory' and not mandatory casts corporate insolvency cases into dispute. Not only is it against the Rule of Law that India abides by, it causes international participants to contend that the insolvency law and its procedures have little certainty and sanctity in India. Evaluating their risks as unacceptably high, such participants then avoid participation in the Indian market. This does not serve the country's economic interests well.

These are few salient examples of shortcomings that need to be addressed as India moves to amend the IBC to boost its efficacy as a law for tackling cases of corporate insolvency.

Banning Airbnb rentals can't fix an urban housing shortage

Such bans distort supply and may eventually worsen the problem



BETSEY STEVENSON
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Short-term rentals have made markets for lodging space more efficient AFP

When it comes to housing, almost all governments say they want to make it more affordable—and then embrace policies that do the opposite. The latest illustration of this is a ban on short-term rentals, imposed in Barcelona just last month, while similar policies are being tried in New York and elsewhere. The theory is that services such as Airbnb take units off the market, driving up rental costs. By effectively banning Airbnb, cities are betting that they can make affordable housing better available.

That's not what happened in New York. Instead, hotel prices rose and tourists were pushed into New Jersey, benefiting homeowners and businesses there.

A ban on Airbnb may sound good to local residents who see it as opening up more housing for them. Yet, by that logic, why not ban home offices or even commercial real estate? Both take up space that could in theory be used for more homes. The truth is, all these restrictions ultimately make residents worse off.

The first reason is economic. A strong economy needs space for commerce, of which tourism is a part. There has always been tension between visitors and residents. Visitors are there to have fun, so they may be loud, messy and disrespectful. They also spend on restaurants, at shops and for entertainment. That benefits locals. The crash of the tourism economy during the pandemic hurt many communities and bankrupted many businesses.

People who advocate Airbnb bans rarely argue that they want fewer tourists. And if places want tourism, they need to provide tourists somewhere to sleep. Those higher hotel prices that come after significant limits on short-term accommodations will ultimately lead to the development of more hotels—using space and capital that could be used for residential housing.

Limiting short-term accommodation can make less space for residences by reducing market flexibility. The beauty of letting families make their own decisions about whether to rent out their home is that when demand is low—for example, when the Olympics come to Paris—then supply can elastically respond. High demand drives prices higher, which will convince some people to stay with friends or family, go on vacation to a less crowded place, or even take in a tourist.

This increases density during peak times and lets locals benefit from demand. Without such flexibility, a city would need more hotels, and then those rooms might stay empty most of the year.

Yes, a ban on Airbnb may cause some city residents to put their place on the traditional rental market or take in a housemate. But others may simply leave. There is no doubt that current homeowners are hurt when a city adds new restrictions on how they can use their home, but future homeowners are also hurt. Some people can afford living in a city only if they can rent out their place on Airbnb.

The development of platforms such as Airbnb has helped democratize the hotel business by allowing any homeowner to tap the tourist market. But there is a more profound change: The rise of short-term rentals is helping to democratize homeownership, which remains the primary wealth of most households. Short-term accommodations offer Americans a way to put this wealth to work for them, giving them with less steady or lower incomes another path to home ownership.

As an economist, I see this change, which allows for the more efficient use of housing capital, as miraculous. Living standards improve when people get more bang for their buck.

Tourists can be more noisy or messy than residents would like. But there are ways to address these problems without a ban. Limitations on the number of guests or number of days a property can be rented out, combined with stronger enforcement of local noise ordinances, can help reduce the negative impact on neighbours.

Governments are using the rise of short-term accommodations as a scapegoat for their own failure. Consider some of their other policies: rent control, which indirectly reduces supply by lowering the returns to building housing; limits on density, which directly reduce supply; restrictions or processes that slow down construction and reduce the return to housing development; and tax systems that encourage people to hold onto property even as fewer people live on it.

The best way to reduce the cost of housing, as several of my Bloomberg Opinion colleagues have pointed out, is to build more housing. And, I would add, we should also continue to raise people's incomes. That means ensuring that they can use their housing as fully as possible—to live in, to work in, and to rent out when they are not using it. EBLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

Do we have free will? The answer has big implications

BIJU DOMINIC



is chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics, and chairman, FinalMile Consulting.

On 25 October 2023, Robert Card, a US Army reservist walked into a restaurant and bowling alley in Lewiston, Maine, and shot dead 18 people. After the incident, he was found dead with self-inflicted gunshot wounds. Everyone in that small town and many around the world were keen to find out why Robert committed this heinous crime. His family too was keen on an answer to this question.

Card's brain was sent to Boston University for further examination. The analysis found that repetitive sound-waves of the blasts he was exposed to during his military stint had caused much damage to the inner workings of his brain. According to Dr. Ann McKee of Boston University's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Centre, "While I cannot say with certainty that these pathological findings underlie Mr. Card's behavioural changes in the last 10 months of life, based on our previous work, brain injury likely played a role in his symptoms."

This diagnosis of Robert Card's brain

raises many questions. Where exactly does the accountability for his mass shooting lie? Is Card, the person, to be held guilty of it, or his damaged brain?

Almost always, society at large, law enforcement agencies and even the prevalent legal systems assume it is the former. So, had Card been alive, sending him to prison or even the gallows would have been the usual response of the justice system. But if a damaged part of his brain was actually responsible for that ghastly act, would it not have been better to have Card admitted to the neurological ward of a hospital?

Unfortunately, Card's case was not very rare. There are many individuals with damaged brains living around us. The recently published book, *Determined: Life Without Free Will* by Stanford University neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky, is significant in this context. A belief in free will, the ability of humans to decide what is right or wrong before taking action, is integral to any discussion on human behaviour. According to the book, human decisions are not the outcome of free will. Our actions spring from prior causes: our environment, upbringing, genes and primeval causes that go back to the Big Bang. Sapolsky clarifies that the absence of free will does not mean the absence of an

ability to veto our actions; nor does it make an individual to run amok. The book focuses on the origins of our intentions.

The book's key proposition is built on the work of several others. Prominent among them is Benjamin Libet, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Francisco.

He did an experiment in 1983 whose provocative findings many find hard to accept even today. This experiment involved a respondent having to press a button with his or her fingers. The respondent was to decide which finger to use for the pressing action at predetermined times. Meanwhile EEG data was collected of the respondent as he or her fingers were moving.

It was found that from the time a person decides to use a finger to press the button, it takes 200 milliseconds for that action to happen. This is the time it took for the respondent's brain to activate his motor cortex and then muscles to undertake the task. But there was another highly intriguing observation made. About 500

milliseconds before the respondent had decided to press the button, a readiness potential was captured by the EEG that the finger had committed itself to that action.

It was always believed that a human action begins when an individual consciously wills an action. But Libet's experiment proves that much before an individual thinks consciously of taking an action, another part of the brain has already willed that action.

Studies by neuroscientist Patrick Haggard of University College, London, and another by John-Dylan Haynes and colleagues at Humboldt University, Germany, who used more sophisticated fMRI machines instead of EEG machines, replicated Libet's study with the same

results. So these experiments clearly cast a serious shadow of doubt on the existence of a conscious free will.

A 1989 paper, *The Nervous System in the Context of Information Theory* by Manfred Zimmermann of Heidelberg University concluded that of the 11 million bits of the

human brain's processing capacity, only 77 bits are available for use at a conscious level. This fact that more than 99.99% of human brain processes occur at a non-conscious level has further reduced the importance that scientists accord the conscious self in human decision-making.

Occasionally comes a theory that causes a paradigm shift in human thinking. Think of the helio-centric theory of Nicholas Copernicus, the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin and the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein. These have all forced significant shifts in human thinking.

In the past few decades, much new knowledge has emerged about neuro-biological facets of human behaviour. This knowledge is converging on a new theory of human behaviour that replaces existing theories based on human decisions arising from our conscious free will.

The emerging theory of human behaviour is founded on the vast non-conscious processes of the brain. This new theory will force us to rethink all that we thought we knew about human behaviour. Since it concerns all that we humans do, it will possibly have implications that reach far beyond the paradigm-shifting theories of Copernicus, Darwin and Einstein combined.

Studies show non-conscious decisions get taken before we consciously 'decide' our course of action

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Monsoon mayhem

The flooding in Indian cities during monsoon is an annual phenomenon, yet authorities fail to fix it

We have a love-hate relationship with the monsoon season. Every year, it is one of the most eagerly awaited phenomena as it gives respite from the scorching summer and infuses life into the fields. But when it arrives, all hell breaks loose; streets flood, daily life is disrupted, traffic jams occur, and there are unfortunate incidents of loss of lives and property. It's a recurring event that civic authorities fervently wish did not happen. This year, the cities of Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Gurugram have been particularly hard-hit, highlighting ongoing infrastructural challenges and the perennial struggle to manage monsoon impacts. Mumbai, India's financial capital, has a long history of flooding during the monsoon season. The city often finds itself paralysed by waterlogged streets, disrupted transport systems, and submerged homes. This year is no exception. Despite significant investments in infrastructure, including the Brihanmumbai Stormwater Disposal System (BRIMSTOWAD), the city continues to grapple with flooding. The system, designed to handle a high volume of rainwater, often falls short due to various issues such as clogged drains, unplanned urbanization, and inadequate maintenance.



Once known for its pleasant climate and lush greenery, Bengaluru, the Indian Silicon Valley, has seen an alarming increase in flooding incidents over recent years. This monsoon season also it is facing waterlogging and traffic snarls. Key tech hubs and residential areas have been submerged, affecting daily life and business operations. With four of its lakes overflowing, there are chances of more misery visiting the city as two days of heavy downpour are predicted by IMD. Bengaluru's flooding woes can be attributed to a combination of factors, including rapid urbanization, encroachment on lakes and stormwater drains, and insufficient waste management. Gurugram, a major satellite city of Delhi, has not been spared either. Gurugram often resembles a vast lake during the monsoon. Interestingly, Gurugram is much younger than Mumbai or Bengaluru but faces the same problem of waterlogging and drainage. Indeed, its woes could be attributed to poor town planning and a lack of concern among the authorities who seem to have made it a habit to ignore the issue. The persistent flooding in Indian cities during the monsoon season raises critical questions about urban planning and governance. Despite recurring floods, why do these problems remain unresolved? Fixing monsoon flooding is no rocket science. We have the means and resources to fix it. Existing drainage systems in many cities are outdated and incapable of handling the volume of rainfall experienced during the monsoon. They could be revamped or built afresh. Fragmented governance and lack of coordination between various municipal agencies hinder effective water management. Policies and plans are often implemented in a piecemeal manner, without addressing the root causes of flooding. But then what we learn from the past is that we don't learn anything from it!

PICTALK



Dark monsoon clouds hover above the Taj Mahal, in Agra

Regime change on cards in Nepal

The new alliance in Nepal aims to reshape the country's political landscape and introduce significant constitutional reforms to address the long-standing instability



ASHOK K. MEHTA

On Friday, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda will seek his fifth vote of confidence in the last 18 months which he will lose as former Prime Minister KP Oli's UML has withdrawn support to the Left alliance. A midnight 7-point deal last Monday between former Prime Minister's Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress (NC) and Oli's UML (the largest and second largest parties) will form the fourth government since December 2022 to end the king-maker role or CPN Maoists, the third largest party. A NC leader told me that the arrest one day before the deal of one Bechain Jha, linked to the Bhutanese refugee scandal whose trial marks lead to apex NC and UML leaders triggered the deal. Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane whom NC had been gunning and UML protecting in Parliament over the Pokhara Cooperative Bank case called the deal 'Oli and Deuba's bid to escape corruption cases'. Balen Shah, Mayor of Kathmandu, made snide remarks about GiriBanshu Tea Estate corruption case. Just ten days ago the government had announced eight new envoys including replacing its NC appointed Indian Ambassador, Shankar Sharma who survived an earlier attempt when Oli was Prachanda's senior coalition partner.

The 7-point deal is essentially about power-sharing during the remaining 40 months of Parliament with Deuba offering Oli the first PM as he wants to be premier before the 2027 elections. They have agreed over the number of ministries they will share with UML keeping finance and NC taking Home ministry. NC and UML are sworn enemies with differing ideologies. Both their leaders are widely experienced and have done stints in jail. While Deuba has been PM five times, Oli has led Nepal twice. Deuba is recognized as India's blue-eyed boy and is favoured by the West. Oli is coveted by China though he is not a red-blooded Communist but a democrat at heart.

Political instability has plagued Nepal since the first multi-party elections in 2008 under interim

constitution. 16 PMs have played musical chairs over 16 years, even after the federal, democratic republican constitution of 2015. The electoral system produces a hung parliament. Removing this malaise is ostensibly the aim of the national consensus government by altering the constitution with a two-thirds majority of 184 seats in a House of 275. It will propose deleting the Proportional Representation (PR) system for 110 seats, making changes in the Upper House, turning Nepal into a Hindu state and even removing the federal system. These modifications are emerging from the speculation-mill in Kathmandu. But one message is also clear: the two mainline parties do not intend to be sidelined by so-called king-makers with 20 to 30 law-makers.

Prachanda who led the 10-year long people's war and helped introduce transformative constitutional reforms is no greenhorn. He adores power and considers it the ultimate aphrodisiac. Even with his party's dwindling electoral scores, he has managed to capture the limelight. Despite the proposed Left-Centre alliance holding a sizeable majority of 167, Prachanda has refused to resign on moral grounds. He is expecting that since government formation was under Article 76 (2) of the constitu-



THE CHINESE WILL BE DISAPPOINTED WITH THE BRIEF LONGEVITY OF THE LEFT ALLIANCE, BLAMING INDIA FOR IT. THIS IS THE GRAPEVINE IN KATHMANDU EVEN THOUGH DELHI DOES NOT WANT OLI AS PM

tion President Ramchandra Koirala will invoke Article 76(3) to invite Deuba, leader of the single largest party to form a government which will deprive Oli of premiership. Both Prachanda and another former PM Madhav Nepal, formerly UML, despise Oli and would give their left arm to ensure he does not become PM again.

Senior NC leader Shashank Koirala has said NC-UML coalition will weaken opposition forces. Another NC top leader Shekhar Koirala noted that government formation may legally veer towards 76(3) not 76(2). This will wreck the midnight deal and ensure that Deuba is first PM with Prachanda ready to offer him PM for the entire remaining period. It will restore the democratic alliance of NC, CPN (M) and smaller parties that ruled for a year till March. As Paudyal is an NC appointee backed by CPN (M), he can be easily asked to follow 76(3) jinking 76(2). Many in NC are unhappy with the deal.

Neither China nor India has reacted to the impending fall of Prachanda-led government though news in the Kathmandu market is that India was not happy with the China-inspired Left alliance government. The Chinese Communist Party was keen to unite all Left parties under for-

mer President Bidya Devi Bhandari wife of late Madan Bhandari, UML's charismatic leader. But Oli rejected the idea. The Chinese will be disappointed with brief longevity of Left alliance, blaming India for it. This is the grapevine in Kathmandu even though Delhi does not want Oli as PM.

For a national consensus government securing a two-thirds majority will not be difficult. The NC and UML together have 167 lawmakers. 17 other lawmakers are needed for amending the constitution in order to bring political stability to Nepal. Already smaller parties are falling in line hoping for political stability. But key questions remain. What will become of the NC corruption crusade against Lamichhane who was being shielded by Oli and Prachanda? What about UML-driven change of NC-appointed envoys? Will Oli do to Deuba what he did to Prachanda in not honouring a power-sharing deal earlier? Can a government of opposite poles come falling in line collapse sooner than later?

(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

LIBERAL LEADERSHIP IN IRAN

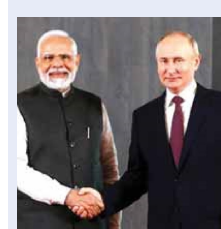
Madam — The outcome of the presidential elections in Iran has left political pundits spellbound. Unseating a hardliner who had dominated the Iranian political landscape for decades seemed improbable. However, the recent polls have upturned the expectations of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's victory, as reformist Masoud Pezeshkian won the presidential election by an impressive margin of 2.8 million votes. This result reflects widespread public unrest due to growing economic disparity, dictatorship, and international sanctions. The untimely death of Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash precipitated this crisis.

To counter the burgeoning inflation, which stands at 40% due to crippling sanctions, Pezeshkian faces the task of establishing amicable relations with dominant forces. While foreign policy remains under Khamenei's influence, areas like domestic affairs might see a sigh of relief from the former's ruthless regime. Hijab policing, internet crackdowns, and women's freedom of expression could witness dramatic changes. It remains to be seen how the junior commissioned officer (JCO), one hardliner, one naïf, and two reformers from the 22 Garhwal Rifles. As militants unleashed grenades and gunfire, security forces launched a search operation to neutralize the attackers. With ongoing encounters reported in nearby villages, the situation remains critical. This attack, the second in the Jammu region in two days and

RISING TERROR ATTACKS IN JAMMU

Madam — A year ago, the news "The arc of terror is complete: From Kashmir to Jammu, India bleeds" (July 9). In a deadly ambush, terrorists attacked an Indian Army vehicle in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua district, resulting in the tragic loss of five soldiers, including one junior commissioned officer (JCO), one havildar, one naïf, and two riflemen from the 22 Garhwal Rifles. As militants unleashed grenades and gunfire, security forces launched a search operation to neutralize the attackers. With ongoing encounters reported in nearby villages, the situation remains critical. This attack, the second in the Jammu region in two days and

PM Modi receives warm welcome in Russia



Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a grand welcome from the Russian government and the Indian diaspora during his two-day official visit to Russia. This visit is sig-

nificant given the long-term bilateral strategic partnerships and profound trust between Modi and President Putin. Despite pressure from European nations to end the ongoing conflict against Ukraine, the nations have stood the test of time since the Russia-Ukraine war began. Russia, initially underestimating Ukraine, now faces economic sanctions from European countries, threats of terrorism, and near bankruptcy due to the prolonged war backed by NATO nations. The recent 6th summit, highlighting deep trust and cooperation, initiated developments in bilateral trade, economic cooperation, and energy cooperation between the two countries. This will surely carve a niche for the two nations and improve the lasting chemistry between the popular leaders on the global platform. Janga Bahadur Sunuwar, Jajpauri

Janga Bahadur Sunuwar | Jajpauri

MAHAU'S CONTROVERSIAL REMARKS

Madam — TMC MP Mahua Moitra seems to have a penchant for being in the news, often for the wrong reasons. Delhi police have reportedly booked her for a derogatory social media post against National Commission for Women (NCW) chief Rekha Sharma. Moitra passed derogatory comments on a person holding an umbrella over Sharma's head during her visit to the Hathras stampede venue. Moitra allegedly blurted, "She is too busy holding up her boss's pajamas," and challenged the police to take action. Moitra's comments are seen as unbecoming of her stature, and the NCW has taken suo moto cognizance of the remarks. The depth to which politicians plunge is evident. Politicians are adept at creating controversies to stay in the news. They often engage in mud-slinging and stirring the hornet's nest, keeping the atmosphere vitiated.

KV Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

Send your feedback to: lettersstopioneer@gmail.com

The power of innovative workplace design

Strategic workplace design can unlock the full potential of collaboration, enhance organisational culture, and propel companies toward success



AKSHAY LAKHANPAL

In today's fast-paced and dynamic business landscape, the success of an organization depends on its ability to foster collaboration and innovation. It is no longer enough to have talented individuals working in silos; the true potential of a company lies in the synergy of a highly collaborative team. As businesses strive to create an environment that nurtures creativity and teamwork, the importance of innovative workplace design cannot be overlooked.

The Changing Nature of Work: With the advent of technology and globalization, the nature of work has undergone a paradigm shift. Traditional hierarchical structures are giving way to flatter, more flexible organizations. Remote work, distributed teams, and freelancing have become the norm, necessitating a rethinking of workplace design. Companies are recognizing that the physical environment profoundly impacts employees' productivity, engagement, and overall well-being.

Embracing Collaborative Spaces: To encourage collaboration, offices need to offer



a variety of spaces that cater to different workstyles and activities. Gone are the days of isolated cubicles; today's workplace design focuses on creating open, flexible, and collaborative environments. These spaces may include comfortable lounges for casual discussions, huddle rooms for quick brainstorming sessions, and dedicated project rooms for in-depth collaborations. Such spaces not only foster teamwork but also promote cross-functional communication, which is essential for innovation.

Designing for Well-Being: An innovative workplace design must also prioritize employee well-being. Comfortable ergonomic furniture, adequate natural light, indoor plants, and proper ventilation all contribute to a healthy and inspiring work

environment. Smart whiteboards, video conferencing facilities, and collaborative software platforms are now essential tools that facilitate seamless communication and idea-sharing, regardless of geographical barriers. By making these technologies readily accessible, companies can empower employees to collaborate effortlessly and bridge the gap between remote and in-office teams.

Conclusion: As the business landscape continues to evolve, organizations must adapt their workplace design to unlock the full potential of collaboration. A collaborative organizational culture is not only essential for staying competitive in the modern world but also for attracting and retaining top talent who seek an environment that encourages teamwork and empowers them to reach new heights.

Impact on Organizational Culture: Workplace design plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational culture. A collaborative and inviting physical environment signals to employees that their contributions are valued and fosters a sense of belonging. It breaks down barriers, encourages the exchange of diverse perspectives, and promotes a culture of trust and cooperation.

Conclusion: As the business landscape continues to evolve, organizations must adapt their workplace design to unlock the full potential of collaboration. A collaborative organizational culture is not only essential for staying competitive in the modern world but also for attracting and retaining top talent who seek an environment that encourages teamwork and empowers them to reach new heights.

(The writer is CEO of Space Matrix; views are personal)



A thought for today

We don't let animals suffer, so why humans?

STEPHEN HAWKING

Killing The Right To Die

Delhi HC erred gravely in its euthanasia decision. It showed no empathy, & paid no heed to SC ruling

A part from being insensitive, Delhi HC has doubly erred in the case of a family seeking a review by a medical board to gauge if their 30-year-old son in a vegetative state since 2011 was a case for passive euthanasia by the law. Doctors diagnosed the case as a point of no-return some years ago. Delhi HC, however, overruled the parents' plea as one for active euthanasia, which is illegal. The plea was for a medical panel review, which needs HC's nod. Delhi HC then overruled and threw out the plea. The case, per medical fraternity and lawyers, appears to tick the prerequisites set by Supreme Court in 2018, in a historic judgment that recognised the right to die with dignity as a fundamental right, and prescribed guidelines for terminally ill patients.

Judge & confused In 2018, while SC's order removed legal uncertainty about the right to refuse life-sustaining treatment, doctors at the time had observed that no specified timelines for advanced wills, and challenges of defining terminal illness, could prove to be confusing. Delay is an injustice. Six years on, Delhi HC is indeed confused. It bypassed the fact that SC's order clearly talks about "no plausible possibility of the person ever being able to come out of this stage", as a condition for a medical panel to review cases. **Where's the palliative care?** The parents' distress is evident. Not only have they watched their son decay in mind, body and spirit without any doctor providing a sliver of hope for his chances of recovery, but they are financially gutted. The judge didn't even suggest palliative care by the state - Delhi govt, GOI have near to zero capacity for palliative care. The nano slice of facilities that exist have mostly HIV and cancer patients in their care.

Cost of care The gap in govt-run palliative care coupled with no caps on prices of most medical devices means the burden of expenditure on chronically ill at home or hospital is entirely the family's. From catheters to urine bags, food pipes to stomach bags, physiotherapists and nurses, families run pillar to post to cope with the expenditure. The state is entirely missing.

Perhaps the judge could at least have sought govt relief for the parents when discarding their plea? Faulty reading of the law and false morality can be soul-destroying - watching a son in a vegetative state, fending for him, selling a home, ageing through the process is also suffering. The court added to that suffering. It showed no compassion, let alone empathy. But most troublingly, it seemed to pay no heed to SC's landmark ruling.

Ode To The Turtle

Whether with superglue or law, saving this ancient, singular creature is in our hands

Is an animal only an animal? To be human is to know that the answer is no. Whether as storytellers or as scientists, the richness of our living has come from being in a more-than-human world. This means recognising kinship and reciprocity with other species, trying to save them as we would save our own. Sometimes this needs advanced medicine. But as the experts at Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Bareilly, showed on Monday, with the right intent, sometimes even the common stuff from a household drawer, can deliver a tidy rescue. In this case, superglue and a couple of drops of oil saved the shattered shell of an endangered turtle that had been run over by a car.

Turtles help build healthy aquatic ecosystems. They clean up dead organic materials, diseased fish and weeds. But it's a hairy life they have these days. If it's not a highway, it's a dam or an oil spill, a threat is constantly looming over their habitats. Fishing nets are chasing them, pesticides are killing them, land erosion is taking away their breeding grounds. Plastic smells nice to them but then wrecks their digestion. As elsewhere, in India both the multilateral CITES treaty and national laws protect the vulnerable species. But illegal trade in turtle meat continues, sold in both local bazaars and to international traffickers.

Turtles lived on when dinosaurs couldn't. Why does saving them matter? Think about how their unique appearance and behaviour have won them esoteric, overlapping roles in mythologies across space and time. Maybe the world's best known one is from *Aesop's Fables*. The Native American concept of each creature resting on the back of a giant turtle, is echoed in the Hindu portrayal of a tortoise as a pivot for *samudra manthan*. These creation stories remind us we have never walked alone, we can't walk alone.

As the crore flies

Cash flows in for cricketers. What about our stars from other sports?

Bachi Karkaria



Sharm-ati hai to admit it, but my eyes aren't Kohli-lined. But, just because I'm not cricketer-cracked doesn't mean I didn't fist the SKY when India finally edged SA in the final. I still get a catch thinking of that jaw-dropping ball-dropping finish. So, I'm not belittling the beyond-boundary adulation of a billion Indians; or begrudging the lakhs-strong Mumbai welcome. It's the other millions that stump me. The ₹25cr BCCI reward on top of the roughly ₹2cr given by ICC, which seems measly by comparison but is the highest-ever T20 World Cup prize money. Then, as a follow-on to Friday's blockbuster, our CM Eknath Shinde announced an additional ₹1cr to Rohit & Co. State's in Maha-debt, but guess he can't take his eye off the electoral ball coming at Shivaji Akhkar speed.

Still, it's bit much, no, considering how much else pads up our A-team members' bank accounts? Or considering how much this XXXLargesse could have helped those lower down the batting order. Even in cricket, let alone other less lionised sports, Jaini and elder brother Bharatiya Nyaaya Sanhita's new section law, but here's what I imagine overbearing in different locker rooms.

Harmanpreet Kaur: Even half that cash prize would bowl us maidens over.
Rohan Bopanna: Sports mantri's mantra of 'Love All' is mere lip serve; tennis gets slammed, grandly.
PV Sindhu: I've been shutting from one trophy to another for just peanuts.
Manika Batra: No such T20 prize cash for ITT.
Mohun Bagan: Indian eyeballs are glued to Euro 24 but we're still kicked around.
Salima Tete: No crore-carrot for our stick-worshipping.
Praggs: National chess-chumping's fine, but Vishy I got more cashy.
Sakshi Malik: We only get prize money less than a cricket player's.
Dhishini Desinghe: Free style glory is fine, but sans money we'll just float.
Lovlina Borgohain: Not even Kom Baneji Chorepati.

Alec Smart said, "If the flood doesn't kill you, the pothole will."

PLAY IT LIKE YAMAHA

Spain's wonder kid, France's Mbappé, Netherlands' Gakpo, England's Saka: European football is teaching something vital to Europe's far-right-flirting politics

Rudranil Sengupta



In a thrilling Euro 2024 semi-final in Munich, a powerful French team was beaten by a resurgent Spain. Both the European footballing powerhouses featured star-studded squads, but there was no doubt about the player who shone brightest. Lamine Yamal, days away from his 17th birthday, the youngest player ever to play in a Euros semi, twisted and turned with the French defence massed around him, and unleashed a shot that rocketed into the top right corner of the French goal, dipping and curling as it went in.

With that, the boy from Barcelona's famed La Masia academy, who has drawn comparisons with Lionel Messi from the moment he made his Barcelona debut last year, announced himself on the big stage. His presence also heralded something new for Spain, one of the only major footballing nations in Europe that, till this Euro, has fielded largely monocultural teams. Yamal's father is an immigrant from Morocco. His mother is an immigrant from Equatorial Guinea. Yamal wears both flags, the ring flags of both countries (along with the Spanish flag). He is not alone in the squad.

On the other side of the pitch there's 21-year-old Nico Williams, whose electrifying pace has lit up the Euros. Williams' parents fled their native Ghana, walking barefoot for days across the Sahara before seeking asylum in Spain, where they were almost deported. Williams' older brother Inaki plays for the Ghana national team.

While European countries that ran major football camps have fostered multicultural football teams for a long time now (France and Portugal were among the first to cap black players back in the 1930s, the Netherlands debuted black players in the 1960s and England in the 1970s), Spain, with its history of economic collapses in the recent past, has been a country of emigration rather than immigration till only a decade ago.

Football is the great immigration success story of Europe. It's also a public theatre of race issues, a medium through which Europe's pro- and anti-immigrant narratives play out. No team embodies that more than the team that was on the receiving end of Yamal's sensational strike. No wonder then, that ahead of France's crucial quarter-finals encounter against Portugal last week, Kylian Mbappé, who may be the most recognisable French player in the world right now, warned that his country was in a "catastrophic" political situation.

Just days before, the French far-right party National Rally, led by the zealously anti-immigrant Marine Le Pen, had surged to strong gains in the first round of snap elections in the country. "I think now, more than ever, you need to get out to vote," Mbappé, who is of Cameroonian and Algerian descent, said. "It is an urgent juncture. We cannot let our country fall into the hands of these people."

A day later, France scraped through to the semi-finals, keeping their hopes alive for yet another major trophy. And two days later, Marine Le Pen's party crashed to a shock defeat, relegated to third position as France wrapped up its elections.

If France's remarkably multicultural team had managed to win the Euros they would have been heralded as a shining example, along with the election results, of how France defeated bigotry in favour of diversity. It wouldn't have been the first time. The French football team has been at odds with the country's far right for decades. In 1998, when an unfancied French team, led by Zinedine Zidane, the son of Algerian immigrants, went to the World Cup, they were acutely

aware of what the far right thought of them.

Back then, it was Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had vocally criticised the football team. But when the French won the World Cup, a nation erupted in delirium. More than a million people descended on the Champs-Élysées - the project of the Arc de Triomphe, against the backdrop of the French tricolour, were just two words, "Merci Zizou" - "thank you Zizou".

Overnight, the team became a shining symbol of a new, successful, multicultural France - "Black, Blanc, Beur" or "Black, White, Arab", a play on the tricolour of the French national flag.

The euphoria was short-lived. Four years later, Jean-Marie Le Pen stunned France by advancing to the second round of the presidential elections, showing how much popular support his anti-immigration stance enjoyed. That support has only grown over the decades. In 2017, Marine Le Pen garnered even more votes as she made it to the second round of the French elections. In 2018, France again won the World Cup, with a team that was even more racially diverse than the one in 1998, with Mbappé as its standout star.

Sporting success does not change courses, but one thing is certain - there is no better example of what a successful, well-integrated, multi-cultural society with immigrant success stories, can look like than a major European football team.

For France, it is the victory of the much-maligned suburbs of Paris and other major cities - the infamous "banlieues". From their goalkeeper Mike Maignan (Haitian father, Guadeloupean mother) to their spearhead Mbappé, via their indefatigable midfield maestro N'Golo Kanté (Malian parents), more than half the French squad has been drawn from the banlieues.

This is because the football ecosystem in Europe is perhaps the best example of a system that is truly free of privilege or discrimination - if you are a seven- or eight-year-old boy with a flair for the game and the desire to pursue it, you will get exactly the same opportunities and backing, no matter what race, colour, class, or economic background you come from.

At the Euros, the semi-final line-ups reflect this reality. England and the Netherlands, the other semi-finalists, also have highly diverse teams. For the Netherlands, Cody Gakpo (Ghanaian-Dutch) has led with goals, Tijjani Reijnders (Indonesian-Dutch) and Xavi Simons (Afro-Surinamese-Dutch) have orchestrated the midfield, and Virgil van Dijk (Afro-Surinamese-Dutch), their captain, has been a colossus in defence. Bukayo Saka, who scored England's only goal before a penalty shootout in the quarter-finals, is the son of first-generation Nigerian immigrants. As Europe tussles with its far right, its great football teams wear colours of multiculturalism proudly.

The writer is a sports journalist

Modi's Tightrope Walk On Russia-Ukraine

PM visited Russia as both he and Putin need each other. Problem is, until the thorny Ukraine issue is resolved, Delhi-Moscow ties will remain uncomfortable

Indrani Bagchi



What separates a multipolar world from a bipolar one, observed a Twitter expert, is the India-Russia relationship. In Russia for a bilateral summit, with Putin after five years, Modi's job was never going to be easy. It became particularly fraught as visuals of the Modi-Putin "hug" coincided with an unconceivable missile attack by Russia on a children's hospital in Ukraine, killing and injuring children, not to mention destroying essential healthcare facilities for the most vulnerable.

Modi chastised Putin over the attack in televised remarks ahead of the summit talks, saying that "when innocent children are killed, when we see innocent children dying, it is heart-wrenching."

Modi agreed to a summit in a week when the Nato summit was on the front pages in Washington. It was a big diplomatic bonus for Putin. Russia is not "isolated," Putin asserted, and its diplomatic offensive in the "non-west" world has been fairly successful. "Ours is a particularly privileged strategic partnership," Putin said, pocketing the diplomatic gift Modi offered.

Modi reiterated his now famous position of this not being an "era" of war. "Solutions will not be found on the battlefield," Modi went on to say, calling for dialogue to end the war. "Resolutions and peace talks don't succeed in the midst of bombs, guns and bullets." It may have been a swipe at Putin's indiscriminate bombing of Ukraine. Conversely, it could have also been a quiet reminder to Nato that only arming Ukraine wouldn't actually finish the job.

India attended the recent peace summit in Switzerland at the senior officials' level, correctly refrained from signing on to the communiqué and made a clear call for Russia to be at the table. This may happen if Trump returns to White House in Nov. India figured it would engage Putin on its terms. Modi also met Ukraine

president Zelenskyy and renewed ties with G7 days after he was sworn in for the third time. So, instead of ticking boxes, India has not taken a wrong step in this balancing act.

India's "Ukraine dilemma" has evolved - in 2022, it was best described as 3Fs and one C - fuel, food, fertiliser, and China. India has ridden out the energy crisis with Russia climbing to the top of the charts as an oil supplier, while the others have declined in urgency. But China has grown as a challenge for India. Interestingly, it has also grown as a challenge for Russia. It wasn't like



Beijing was celebrating when Putin hugged Kim Jong-un last month. So, Russia is making its own moves, and India is a big part of its game. India spurred China-dominated SCO last month. It may want to keep Bries from becoming a Chinese colony, and therefore help Russia out at the next summit in Oct. At a strategic level, Russia remains acutely aware that India provides its best bet against China.

India's current Ukraine dilemma is this - it wants

the war to stop, and a reasonable peace agreement. Russia, according to Indian strategists, may not be losing this war, but it has to be shepherded to the peace table. Can India do it? Modi and Putin had "frank" discussions on Ukraine, we just don't know what they were. Meanwhile, Nato is pledging to increase weapons production to keep arming Kyiv in the absence of peace. India is prioritising "interests", with limited success, but full domestic endorsement.

The old understanding that India keeps Russia close to prevent a "no limit" Russian embrace has only heightened. India wants to diversify its investments in Russia, find ways for Russia to repatriate its oil revenues without incurring sanctions.

India is devaluing down its investments in Russia's energy sector, particularly in the Far East. This is significant as Russia feels more and more nervous about losing those lands to persistent Chinese migration and encroachment. Russia has also rebuilt its military-industrial complex, cranking up a war economy by putting its industries to work.

Ukraine war is teaching countries like India and many in the global South that the chase for high-tech should also include a focus on domestic industries. India's mid-tech weapons, Russia is still building those, supplying to many countries in the non-western world. For India, seeking to build a homegrown defence industry, Russia remains accessible in terms of tech and production.

Nuclear energy is back on the bilateral agenda with Russia as part of India's energy transition plans. Russian cooperation and knowledge sharing aren't all joy as we have seen with Kudankulam. But it's the only one available at present. India's taking it.

This summit may have been all bilateral, but until Ukraine is resolved, it will always remain uncomfortable. Discomfort is a major attribute of the multipolar world.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre. Views are personal

Calvin & Hobbes

ATC HOO!



Mona Mehta

To illustrate what memory, or the lack of it, can do, Osho tells us the story of Hua Tzu, a man who was forever happy, feeling light and burden-free. But this state of mind came at a price - loss of memory. He had no problems with anyone because he would forget all their misdeeds in a short while. There was no anger, aggression, competition, comparison, jealousy or envy; no need to be clever, nor to be less, no regrets or guilt. If he remembered the people around him, He would receive a gift in the morning and forget about it by the evening; get a gift in the evening and forget about it by the morning. But Hua Tzu was not like this. He was only living in the present, no recollection of past problems and no future anxiety. Stationed far above

mental turbulence, forever sitting by the pool of joy. As that is our natural state when we are short of subconscious collection that includes our memories. One part of our memory comes from genes we inherit from our biological family. This ancestral property includes physical traits, colour of the eyes and skin, shape of our nose, and even diseases present from birth but lying dormant. Another type of memory that comes with birth is soliloquy memory, made up of social experiences, including historical events, facts, and stories deemed important by society. Social memory creates numerous perceptions of good and bad, such as the belief that tall and fair-skinned people are good and dark-skinned people are not. Similarly,

someone of a different religion might not have wronged you, but you might harbour resentment against them due to social memory.

As long as we are burdened by these memories, we cannot be free to live joyfully. Something similar happened to Hua Tzu. Worried about his forgetfulness, Hua Tzu's family sought the help of a wise physician and shamans, but nothing worked until a Confucian came along one day. He focused on reforming Hua Tzu's mind by changing his thoughts. And lo, overnight, Hua Tzu was back to being his old self, and he was livid. He chased out his wife and sons and the Confucian. All his old memories were back. He was once again burdened by his past pains and future anxieties. He was no longer happy and free.

Most of our spiritual practices are aimed at helping us break loose from the burdens of the past - old habits, perspectives and prejudices. Forgetting or destroying our memories may not be the best, but we can't do it without being unaffected by them, not allowing them to colour our present behaviour. This is true samanya. Meeting every moment with fresh gaze. Practices such as mantra japa, meditation and pranayama can centre us; writing a journal to pour out all that is on the mind can help release our subconscious collection. What can also help is accepting our situations without complaining, as they are meant to help us evolve, and sailing through them by giving our best, and as the Gita says, offering all our actions to the Divine. With this attitude, we feel light. Only when we are light can we go far.

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Sacred space

I have never said that there is no need for a guru. All depends on what you call guru. He need not be in a human form.

Ramana Maharshi