

## Targeting poverty

Govt must revamp social-safety programmes

Various estimates in recent years have indicated a significant decline in the level of poverty in India. The outcome would improve further if households falling into poverty were saved. In this regard, a new research paper published by the National Council of Applied Economic Research has drawn attention to redesigning the social-safety nets for citizens. Titled "Rethinking Social Safety Nets in a Changing Society", the paper notes a substantial decline in poverty levels from 21.2 per cent in 2011-12 to 8.5 per cent in 2022-24, based on the Tendulkar method. Drawing on the nationwide panel data from the three waves of the India Human Development Survey — 2004-05, 2011-12, and 2022-24 — the paper notes that of the 8.5 per cent of individuals identified as poor in 2022-24, 5.3 per cent have remained persistently impoverished since 2011-12, while 5.3 per cent have newly fallen into poverty.

The study highlights a decline in chronic poverty and the increasing prevalence of transient poverty — where households oscillate in and out of poverty over time. It categorises households that frequently experience such fluctuations as "vulnerable", situating them between the poverty line and up to 200 per cent above the poverty line. Several academic studies have provided empirical evidence identifying a range of factors that elevate the likelihood of vulnerability. For instance, having a large number of children or dependent individuals within a household, or the condition of landlessness, significantly increases the probability of vulnerability. Moreover, external shocks such as natural disasters, the death or illness of the primary breadwinner, and shifts in occupation-specific opportunities can push households into poverty at any given time. Further, it has been observed that households belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, or minority communities, face a markedly higher risk of vulnerability.

The research highlights the dynamic nature of poverty and emphasises the imperfections in the current system of targeting social-security measures. The existing system of targeting based on below-poverty-line (BPL) indicators has inherent limitations that hinder its effectiveness. First, there is significant evidence regarding the poverty line itself. Critics contend that the poverty line is defined at an arbitrarily low threshold, which only ensures bare subsistence. Although the recent release of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey numbers may address some aspects of this debate, it remains to be seen if it resolves the underlying issue. Secondly, given the dynamic nature of poverty, particularly among vulnerable groups, not having timely data affects outcomes.

Infrequent surveys fail to capture the real-time shifts and changes in the economic conditions of households, thereby rendering the targeting mechanism insufficient in addressing the evolving landscape of poverty. Additionally, various benefits are associated with holding a BPL card, regardless of whether the individual is truly poor, vulnerable, or relatively affluent, highlighting the systemic flaws and potential misallocation of resources in the current targeting system. India needs better systems to address the needs of vulnerable populations. This may require redesigning social-safety nets to be more inclusive. Steps should include gathering panel data on vulnerable groups, developing comprehensive monitoring strategies, and integrating risk insurance carefully. Flexibility in programme design can improve underperforming initiatives while creating employment opportunities remains essential. Evolving social-safety nets to match changing economic dynamics is crucial for India's pursuit of equitable and balanced development.

## Nato's China syndrome

From being a distant threat, Beijing takes centre stage

Three issues were expected to dominate the 75th anniversary summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) in Washington. They were US President Joe Biden's health, the war in Ukraine, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. But it was China that ended up dominating proceedings. This was reflected in the final communiqué with its unprecedented mention of China. The text approved by all 32 Nato members described China as a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war against Ukraine, urged Beijing to "cease" all material and political support to Russia's military, and highlighted China's "significant" military arsenal and offensive capabilities in space. The short point about this explicit language — a departure from bland references to the country in a 2019 statement — is that Nato has signalled a significant intensification of its commitment to Ukraine. As the summit began, the first batch of US-built F-16 "Fighting Falcon" fighter jets was transferred to Ukraine from Denmark and the Netherlands, and is expected to be in action later this summer — a major boost for Kyiv's abilities to stage off successful Russian aerial attacks in recent months. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke of a "clear and strong bridge for Ukraine's Nato membership". But this outcome is contingent on the cessation of hostilities first.

Behind the gala dinners curated by star chefs and banquets hosted by royals, Nato members are acutely aware that the future of the alliance (and Ukraine) is critically dependent on a known unknown: The outcome of the US presidential election in November. Ever since his tumultuous performance in the first presidential debate last month, Mr Biden's fitness for office has become an urgent concern. It is unclear if his ability to read his summit speech from a teleprompter without too many stumbles reassured his Nato allies; he does not appear to have allayed concern in his own party. Should Mr Biden choose to soldier on with his campaign, he will likely strengthen the chances of his Republican rival, Donald Trump, making it to the White House. In his first term, Mr Trump had criticised, not without justification, Nato allies' unwillingness to bear their share of expenditure. Though that asymmetry has changed since, with most member-nations exceeding or meeting their obligations to spend 2 per cent of gross domestic product on the alliance, Mr Trump's close ties with Mr Putin could add an unpredictable element to the Nato-Ukraine dynamic.

Beijing's own response to the Nato declaration is to describe the statement as "obvious lies and smears" and insist that trade flows between Russia and China did not target any third party. But the explicit language of the declaration has overtly reshaped the Russia-Ukraine war as a proxy Nato-China conflict. This takes place at a time when Nato members Hungary and Turkey maintain cordial ties with Moscow. So far, China's aid to Russia has been deep but just short of supplying weapons. But the Chinese military is now on Nato member Poland's borders, conducting joint military drills with Moscow's ally Belarus. Such joint drills have been held before, but this is the first exercise since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. How Nato handles the new paradigm of the conflict at a time of a critical leadership transition will be the toughest test of its unity and resilience yet.

## AI and tech colonialism

BOOK REVIEW  
DEVANGSHU DATTA

Everyone who's reading this has had some degree of engagement with artificial intelligence or AI, even if they don't know it. Apart from the integration of ChatGPT and other large language models into all sorts of applications, we've gotten used to Alexa, Google and Siri. We use Uber, play AI-run games and use neural net trading programs. You may also have been offered a credit card or a personal loan by AI.

The book's focus is the impact AI has on everyday life as it rapidly becomes part of normal existence. AI uses the data we all spew out, in unimaginable,

almost magical, ways often to our benefit, but also often not. This is ultimately about people — though the book looks at them through the lens of data — and the influence AI cranking that data has on their lives. The tech is dealt with in the context of the.

The advent of AI represents a new stage in "tech colonialism". Cheap labour in the Third World does the cutwork of labelling and annotating data, while large tech companies running the algorithms generate massive profits. One of Madhumita Murgia's points of reference, for example, is the Nigerian firm that does data-annotation for OpenAI and how its workers are treated.

One of the strengths and weaknesses of AI is that it does things its creators don't understand. This can result in fantastic breakthroughs where AI figures out intractable problems such as protein-folding, or learns to manage magnetic fields in nuclear fusion reactors. It can also translate into absurdities, where AI

finds ridiculous or outright harmful correlations. For example, an algorithm tasked to sift medical data about pneumonia and Covid-19 sorted only on the basis of age differences.

That "blackbox" quality makes AI a very dangerous tool when it comes to profiling people because AI isn't great at explaining how it reaches conclusions. Another of the cited examples is that of Prokild, an algorithmic profiling software, used by the Dutch police to predict "propensity to commit crime" based on data from previous contacts with the police, addresses, relationships and "roles as witness or victim". This flagged hundreds of innocent youngsters. Teenaged girls from low-income groups in Argentina were flagged into databases because AI believed they were at risk of pregnancy. Young boys of colour and immigrants are treated as criminals by AI profiling. Similarly, given credit score data, or scholastic data, AI can predict a person's personality, gender, race and caste inequalities.

There's a lot of new material cited here across various fields as well as feedback from interviews with affected people. The author met gig workers, tech workers, healthcare professionals, teachers and activists, including many from marginalised communities at the bottom end of the AI tech value-chain in places such as Nigeria, Bulgaria, Kenya and China. Non-technical writing about AI and its impacts can swing from the wildly optimistic to the apocalyptic. Yes, AI could trigger a nuclear holocaust, or enable genocide, or oppression on monstrous scales, as it has in Gaza, or in the Xinjiang Region of China, where it has been weaponised against the Uyghur community. It may also solve a lot of problems concerning climate change and healthcare.

But the daily impacts of AI are more mundane than a nuclear holocaust. Take the tectonic shifts it may cause in employment patterns. For instance, This book does readers a service by its

focus on the less spectacular, and while its tone is generally pessimistic, it is not all doom and gloom.

The chapter plan is designed to provide a broad-spectrum of narratives as headings like "Your Livelihood", "Your Body", "Your Health", and "Your Freedom", would indicate. While regulation is discussed, along with pathways to regulation, the presentation of the viewpoints of "victims" is also offered in a personal way.

The "anecdotes" is important in that it can evoke empathy in a way the data does not. Interviews with Uber drivers, doctors, researchers, teenagers, and mothers give us nuanced narratives about the harms AI can cause. Women have had their lives destroyed by pornographic deep fakes. Gig workers, delivery drivers, and similar platform workers are cheated at every turn, and their lives are wasted. Repressive regimes and wannabe

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## Banking sector continues to confound

It has shown remarkable resilience in the post-pandemic years despite challenges and warnings about instability

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



India's banking sector continues to astonish. Its performance in 2023-24, revealed in the Financial Stability Report (FSR) of June 2024, is as much of a pleasant surprise as its turnaround in the preceding years.

The sector entered the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020-21, with a non-performing asset (NPA) level of 8.5 per cent of advances. Analysts warned that the improvement seen in the previous two years was in jeopardy. The chances were that NPAs would shoot up instead of declining. Vast amounts would again be needed to recapitalise public sector banks (PSBs).

Later, as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced various restructuring schemes, we were warned of the perils of "kicking the can down the road". If you don't recognise NPAs now, be prepared for higher NPAs to show up later, analysts said. It was better, they argued, to "bite the bullet" now.

They were proved wrong. Out-of-the-box thinking enabled the RBI to nudge the banking sector back to normalcy in the post-pandemic years despite the Ukraine shock and the shocks emanating from banking instability in the US and Europe. By 2022-23, NPAs had fallen to 5.3 per cent.

Fair enough, the analysts said. However, sustaining the secular improvement in financial indicators of the previous years would be difficult in 2023-24. Banks would face a liquidity crunch, with deposits

falling to keep pace with growth in loans. The net interest margin would be squeezed and asset quality would suffer from the rapid build-up of loans. Returns were bound to fall.

Wrong again, it turns out. Yes, banks' liquidity at the margin was indeed stretched — the incremental credit-deposit ratio at all scheduled commercial banks was over 100 per cent, as the FSR points out. For private banks, the incremental credit-deposit ratio was nearly 120 per cent.

How did banks manage to maintain a high rate of growth in high-yielding retail products, such as credit cards, personal loans, loans against property, and auto loans. The growth rate in these products in the past two years is a good 7 to 14 percentage points above aggregate loan growth rate of 15.4 per cent and 16.3 per cent in the years 2022-23 and 2023-24, respectively.

In what was predicted to be a challenging year for banks, the return on assets for banks as a whole increased from 1.1 per cent to 1.3 per cent. Apart from NIM staying high, several factors contributed to the improvement: A higher rate of loan growth,

lower provisions, higher trading income, and higher fee income. The return on assets for PSBs is 0.9 per cent, pretty close to the figure of 1 per cent that is something of an international benchmark. We seem to be getting back to banking's heady days of the early 2000s.

Privatisation of PSBs, promised in successive budgets of the past, has been on hold. The privatisation of IDBI Bank, which was initiated in 2018, is yet to be completed. At a return on assets of 1 per cent, PSBs can generate enough capital through internal surpluses and from the market to sustain themselves. They will not pose large demands on the exchequer. The return to health of PSBs means that privatisation will likely lose its impetus.

Banks have increased the share of retail and service sectors in total credit over the last two decades. Sustained growth in these sectors has so far not told on asset quality. Gross NPAs in retail loans declined from a high of 2.1 per cent in June 2022 to 1.2 per cent in March 2024. Unsecured retail lending has long been seen as a vulnerable area in retail loans. However, asset quality of unsecured retail lending too is showing improvement, with gross NPA ratio at 1.5 per cent, compared to 1.6 per cent a year ago.

It's almost as if, after the infrastructure imbroglio of the early 2000s, banks can't put a foot wrong now. Tighter regulation and supervision, an improvement in risk management at the bank level and better selection of leaders at PSBs through the Financial Services Institutions Bureau have all contributed to the improvement.

Can Indian banking keep going the way it has in the past few years? On the face of it, there seems to be little reason why it can't. Banking is a play on the economy. The Indian economy looks set to grow at around 6.5 per cent over the long term. The FSR thinks credit growth of 16-18 per cent can happen without seriously impacting asset quality.

At the same time, competition for deposits will remain intense. Net financial saving, the FSR notes, has declined to 5.3 per cent of GDP during 2022-23 from an average of 8 per cent during 2013-2022. The RBI Annual Report shows that the share of deposits in gross financial savings has declined from a peak of 6.3 per cent in 2016-17 to 4 per cent in 2022-23.

The crucial question, then, is whether retail loans can continue to drive bank revenues and profits as they have in the recent past. The FSR sounds a note of caution. It points out that the household debt to GDP at 40 per cent in India is below that in emerging markets. However, in relation to GDP per capita, it is quite high. Nevertheless, the record of the past five years suggests that we are still some distance away from the point where banks' focus on retail loans may turn counterproductive.

Many have commented on the remarkable resilience the Indian economy has displayed in the post-Covid years in the face of lacklustre global growth. The banking sector's stability is a key factor underpinning that resilience. Our banking sector model deserves a healthy critique, but it is not clear that in the post-reform era, its remarkable success in recent years should silence critics.

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## Under the hood

The post-Covid macroeconomic fundamentals of the Indian economy are sound. Since financial year (FY) 2022, gross domestic product (GDP) growth has averaged 7.2 per cent. Consumer price inflation has oscillated between 5 and 6 per cent. The current account deficit is extremely comfortable, averaging between 1 and 2 per cent of GDP. The general government fiscal deficit is also under control at around 9 per cent of GDP in FY23, down from 13 per cent in FY21, and is expected to fall further this fiscal year. Tax revenue targets, though modest, are being met comfortably. Gross capital formation at 33 per cent of GDP and gross saving at around 31 per cent of GDP are adequate to support an average growth rate of 7 per cent.

Looking at the performance of the Indian economy as one would look at the performance of an automobile while seated in it, things appear to be going smoothly. However, under the hood, there are issues that merit close attention.

Private final consumption expenditure is growing slower than GDP, indicating a slowdown in aggregate demand. This could be due to an increase in investment, but private investment has been declining as a share of GDP, a trend observed since FY12 but now exacerbating. In FY24, fresh investments announced by the domestic private sector have fallen by 15 per cent; foreign investment in fixed capital formation has also declined. Historically, when growth rates rise, private consumption growth picks up, as new investments create jobs and earnings are lifted by increases in growth. But this is not happening.

Central government budgetary increases in capital expenditure have largely substituted for declines in investments by public enterprises. The positive effect of government investment on overall investment has been very small, and largely due to increased capital spending by the states.

Consumption increases when people earn money, for which they need to have paying jobs. Government claims that 47 million jobs were added in FY24. But most of these are in unpaid or low-paid self-employed work, and in agriculture. These are less "jobs" than low-paid activities. The contemporary Indian economy is one where:

- 45 per cent of the labour force works in agriculture.
- The share of manufacturing in GDP has fallen to 13 per cent.
- 800 million people need subsidised food.

- Over 100 million people between the ages of 18 and 35 are neither in education nor actively looking for employment.

Such an economy can support neither increased household consumption, nor saving. Household financial savings are at a recent low of 5.2 per cent of GDP, while household debt has risen to a peak of 40 per cent of GDP. Much of this is consumption debt.

India confronts stark regional imbalances in economic performance. The majority of the population lives in the North and East, with least developed countries (LDC) levels of per capita income and human development. Most growth and prosperity is concentrated in the South and West, where a minority of the population lives. The opposite is true in other large countries like the US, Japan, and China, where a minority lives in poor regions and the majority in rich regions. Hence, simple fixes like fiscal transfers, which work in these countries, do not work in India, except as palliatives.

Above the hood, a look at how growth is distributed between different factors of production provides a dashboard warning. The overall wage share is declining, and real rural wages are falling, as is

demand for investment credit. Hence returns to labour are low, as are returns to debt capital. However, the stock market is booming, as are asset valuations, hence returns to equity are high. This is leading to an unprecedented boom in demand for luxury and "high-end" consumption of expensive imported products, from cars to yachts, and from class travel to destination weddings.

This is not a new story in the history of development. It is, in fact, the default. From the Philippines to Thailand, from Egypt to Brazil, countries have experienced "prosperity failure" — a trap of their own making from which exit is near impossible. Even as they exited LDC levels, there was no diffusion of prosperity to the general populace. All the problems of poor countries — poverty, malnutrition, poor education, ill health, third-rate housing, difficult public transport, poor sanitation — persisted, even as the rich enjoyed globally opulent lifestyles.

These are failed economies, in contrast to the handful — Ireland, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China — where universal access to basic needs and prosperity became available to all as these countries grew richer. The failed economies exhibited the same "under the hood" changes on the technology that now mark the Indian economy. The successful ones did not.

India has only recently become a middle-income country. My hope has always been that India will join the minority of nations that will secure a successful development transformation. But looking under the hood, I see a warning that now mark the Indian economy. The successful ones did not.

There is still scope to remedy these matters, but this will require structural change. The Budget, I understand, will spell out a road map for development up to 2047. I fervently hope this road map will look under the hood to fix the very serious problems that beset India's development transformation.

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## Two Can Work Better Than Four-Wheelers

Bajaj's CNG bike may be the pragmatic way

India is taking an untrod path to energy transition for its vehicles. And it may just work out swell. The lack of battery-charging infrastructure makes for a roundabout route to low emissions. Japanese carmakers in this country have adopted a hybrid solution — cars that can run on petrol as well as compressed natural gas (CNG), which lowers operational costs and bumps up sales. Fitting a CNG tank to a petrol motor doesn't cost much extra, and rules in parts of the country requiring taxis to run on the combined fuel have made for good business for some automobile makers. Most Japanese carmakers no longer offer diesel engines after rules strangled demand in polluted Indian cities.

Homegrown motorcycle maker Bajaj has taken this logic further with the launch of the world's first CNG motorcycle, Freedom 125. Bajaj has extensive experience in producing CNG autorickshaws and is testing the market

in personal mobility, like the Japanese carmakers. Both face challenges over fuel supply. CNG-filling stations are few. However, the numbers are streets ahead of charging stations for EVs. If the experiment by Bajaj, known for its innovative approach to personal mobility, works, it would have created a market segment.

Yes, the risk is these innovations could delay India's switch to EVs. Already, hybrid cars with engines and motors that recharge on the go have become the go-to segment for budget- and environment-conscious buyers. This is aided by tariff protection to domestic electric cars on fears of dumping by Chinese EV makers. India has to take enormous strides in EV production before it becomes a mass market. Till then, automobile companies will have to tinker with their product portfolios to offer interim solutions. Arguments that imported natural gas is more efficient than imported crude oil are diversionary. They draw attention away from the goal of energy transition to renewable sources. That means a country-wide network of charging stations dispensing electricity generated from solar energy.

## Women's Right Over 'Rights' of Customs

A Supreme Court order on Wednesday finally ended the lack of clarity that has prevailed for four decades on the rights of illegally divorced Muslim women. The apex court asserted that any discrimination in matters of alimony under the country's secular laws would be regressive and against gender justice and equality. This is a much-needed, most welcome clarification. The court ruled that all Muslim women — including those who have been illegally divorced by the pronouncement of triple talaq, a cognisable offence under the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Ordinance 1986 — are entitled to seek maintenance from their husbands as per Section 125 of the CrPc.

The separate but concurring judgments in Mohd Abul Sumad v. The State of Telangana give firmer grounding to the 2010 order by Justice Alauddin Ahmad Ali of the Patna High Court, which stated that a divorced Muslim woman could not be debarred from seeking maintenance under Section 125. Both orders underline that religion-neutral provisions of the law must override personal or religious laws. Not doing so violates Article 13(1), which prevents the state from discriminating on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and allows a person's identity as a citizen to take precedence over primordial identities. The top court's ruling has implications for Article 44, which says that the state shall endeavour to secure a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.

While both orders vindicate the struggles of Shah Bano, they will not be enough. Other supporting structures, such as implementation of law, timely legal help and constant social support, will be necessary if the court orders are to deliver their intended impact effectively.

**JUST IN JEST**  
Generation Consta-Check are entering the workforce — don't linger responding

## Why Kids Stuck to Phones are Awright

Everyone over 20 seems to be bawling on these days about the perils of youngsters being addicted to their phones. A whole interventionist industry of concerned uncles and aunts has emerged, leading to some countries introducing, or planning to introduce, curbs to phone screen time for young people. Wesley hogwash to that. Kids glued to their phones will be the first to enter the workforce — some already have entered it — with the 'immediacy tech' hardwired in them. This means the constant need to check updates, messages, everything 'right now' will inculcate the virtue of responding ASAP to professional queries and attending to follow-ups.

This is the post-'life-work balance' generation for whom attending Burning Man doesn't mean checking the phone after attending 'revelry events' at the end of each day of the week-long festival, but while getting one's mind etc 'expanded'. No groans and moans about having to attend the boss' voice notes at 'odd' hours — it's part of a consta-checking culture. That's multitasking 24x7 on an octopus level that bypasses any 'wise words' from uncles with gravitas and a 70 hrs-a-week work fetish. So, look forward to Consta-Check Gen running operations with the calm, casual urgency of an Insta-scrapper junkie. It's the 'non-addicted' lot who'll have a lot of answering to do — without lingering.

India's LFPR is rising, but there's a mismatch between workforce skills and job market demands

## Wind the Gap, Then Fix It



Amit Kapoor

Recent discussions on employment generation have been spurred by Citigroup India's recent report, Employment in India, which says the country may face challenges in creating enough job opportunities despite its 7% GDP growth.

According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and BIR's ELEMS data, India created over 60 million jobs between 2017-18 and 2022-23, averaging more than 20 million new jobs per year. While these figures highlight progress, a broader narrative demands attention: India's strides towards achieving SDG 8, which emphasises decent work and economic growth, show promising trends.

► Unemployment rate has been steadily decreasing and is nearing the target of 3%.

► Labour force participation rate (LFPR) stood at 61.6% in 2022-23, with a goal of reaching 63.3% by 2030.

However, attaining the decent work conditions requires a nuanced understanding of how India is achieving its employment and LFPR targets. To unravel the complexities, we undertake a regular analysis of PLFS data, spanning 2017-18 to 2022-23. The approach dissects LFPR on educational attainment and skill levels, as codified in the National Classification of Occupations.

India's LFPR for those aged 15 and above has seen an uptick. This trend, over across the rural-urban divide, is captured through the 'Usual Status' metric — a holistic measure encompassing both usual principal activity and usual subsidiary economic activity of a person.

This data unveils the nuanced interplay between educational attainment and workforce engagement.

► The most notable increase has been in the 'not literate' category, with LFPR rising from 47.9% in 2017-18 to 56.7% in 2022-23.



Demanding a quality supply

2022-23, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Jharkhand, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, UP and Puducherry have spearheaded this growth, with each registering more than a 1% rise in LFPR.

► In contrast, LFPR for graduates in the PG category have recorded the highest growth rate.

A fascinating story, however, unfolds in rural India.

► LFPR for those aged 15 and above (Usual Status) shows a striking surge among 'diploma' (certificate or diploma) holders.

This group's LFPR jumped from 60.5% in 2017-18 to 73.8% in 2022-23. State-level data reveals a groundswell, with 25 out of 35 states and UTs riding this wave.

Arundel Pradesh, Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal boast of CAGR above 13%.

These figures highlight the increasing integration of diploma and certificate holders in the rural workforce.

Integration of diploma and certificate holders in the rural workforce, however, is a complex puzzle, as revealed by the latest PLFS data for 2022-23. While LFPR continues to grow, distribution of skills across the workforce shows imbalances.

The data reveals a stark concentration in lower skill levels, with 22.1% of workers classified under Skill Level 1 (low skilled) and a substantial 66.8% under Skill Level 2 (semi-skilled).

In contrast, only 2.5% fall under Skill Level 3 and 8.9% under Skill Level 4, both representing highly skilled categories.

This distribution indicates a shortage of highly skilled workers in the Indian labour market.

The state-level analysis further illuminates this complexity.

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Figures highlight increasing interest in diploma and certificate holders in the rural workforce, suggesting that targeted skill development initiatives will be crucial

West Bengal, Meghalaya, Bihar and Jharkhand, and UP and Haryana and Himachal Pradesh show workforce concentrations above 25%.

► Skill Level 2 Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipal, Sikkim, Nagaland, Rajasthan and UP not only have over 25% of their workforce in this bracket, but also show a CAGR above 15%.

This suggests a growing concentration of semi-skilled workers in these regions.

► The relatively lower percentages in Skill Levels 3 and 4 highlight the urgent need to refine our skill development strategies to address the mismatch between workforce capabilities and job market demands.

The challenge is twofold: equipping workers with skills that match current demand while preparing for future shifts in the nature of work.

While current PLFS data tells a story about employment, it also exposes challenges. To grasp the intricacies of India's labour landscape, we need to expand our analytical scope beyond conventional metrics like unemployment rates and LFPR.

A more comprehensive approach, particularly one that incorporates underemployment data in future PLFS iterations, would provide policymakers with a nuanced and holistic view of the workforce.

This multifaceted analysis is crucial for developing effective strategies that align with the country's vision for a thriving, sustainable growth, equitable prosperity and enhancing the quality of life of its citizens.

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► Skill Level 1 (low skilled) and a substantial 66.8% under Skill Level 2 (semi-skilled).

In contrast, only 2.5% fall under Skill Level 3 and 8.9% under Skill Level 4, both representing highly skilled categories.

This distribution indicates a shortage of highly skilled workers in the Indian labour market.

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## ChatGPT SHAIRO OF THE DAY

There once was a man named Joe, Who was told it was time to go.

'Step down, Joe, they all cried, But Joe, he replied,

'I'm staying for one last show!'

...

ad v. The State of Telangana give firmer grounding to the 2010 order by Justice Alauddin Ahmad Ali of the Patna High Court, which stated that a divorced Muslim woman could not be debarred from seeking maintenance under Section 125.

Both orders underline that religion-neutral provisions of the law must override personal or religious laws. Not doing so violates Article 13(1), which prevents the state from discriminating on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and allows a person's identity as a citizen to take precedence over primordial identities. The top court's ruling has implications for Article 44, which says that the state shall endeavour to secure a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.

While both orders vindicate the struggles of Shah Bano, they will not be enough. Other supporting structures, such as implementation of law, timely legal help and constant social support, will be necessary if the court orders are to deliver their intended impact effectively.

Just in Jest

Generation Consta-Check are entering the workforce — don't linger responding

Why Kids Stuck to Phones are Awright

Everyone over 20 seems to be bawling on these days about the perils of youngsters being addicted to their phones. A whole interventionist industry of concerned uncles and aunts has emerged, leading to some countries introducing, or planning to introduce, curbs to phone screen time for young people. Wesley hogwash to that. Kids glued to their phones will be the first to enter the workforce — some already have entered it — with the 'immediacy tech' hardwired in them. This means the constant need to check updates, messages, everything 'right now' will inculcate the virtue of responding ASAP to professional queries and attending to follow-ups.

This is the post-'life-work balance' generation for whom attending Burning Man doesn't mean checking the phone after attending 'revelry events' at the end of each day of the week-long festival, but while getting one's mind etc 'expanded'. No groans and moans about having to attend the boss' voice notes at 'odd' hours — it's part of a consta-checking culture. That's multitasking 24x7 on an octopus level that bypasses any 'wise words' from uncles with gravitas and a 70 hrs-a-week work fetish. So, look forward to Consta-Check Gen running operations with the calm, casual urgency of an Insta-scrapper junkie. It's the 'non-addicted' lot who'll have a lot of answering to do — without lingering.

India's LFPR is rising, but there's a mismatch between workforce skills and job market demands

Wind the Gap, Then Fix It

Figures highlight increasing interest in diploma and certificate holders in the rural workforce, suggesting that targeted skill development initiatives will be crucial

West Bengal, Meghalaya, Bihar and Jharkhand, and UP and Haryana and Himachal Pradesh show workforce concentrations above 25%.

Skill Level 2 Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipal, Sikkim, Nagaland, Rajasthan and UP not only have over 25% of their workforce in this bracket, but also show a CAGR above 15%.

This suggests a growing concentration of semi-skilled workers in these regions.

The relatively lower percentages in Skill Levels 3 and 4 highlight the urgent need to refine our skill development strategies to address the mismatch between workforce capabilities and job market demands.

The challenge is twofold: equipping workers with skills that match current demand while preparing for future shifts in the nature of work.

While current PLFS data tells a story about employment, it also exposes challenges. To grasp the intricacies of India's labour landscape, we need to expand our analytical scope beyond conventional metrics like unemployment rates and LFPR.

## Rising Millionaires Count

In 2023, millionaires accounted for 1.5% of the adult population, according to a report by Swiss bank UBS covering 56 markets representing 92% of the world's wealth. By 2028, the number of adults with wealth over USD one million will have risen in 52 of these markets.

Country	2023	2028*	% growth
US	21,951,319	25,425,792	15.8
China	6,013,282	6,525,669	8.2
UK	3,261,253	3,442,464	17.0
France	2,868,013	3,322,460	15.8
Japan	2,827,556	3,625,208	28.2
Germany	2,820,819	3,229,283	14.5
Canada	1,991,416	2,402,200	20.6
Australia	1,536,114	2,340,015	20.6
Italy	1,138,142	1,461,731	9.2
South Korea	1,295,674	1,643,799	26.3
Netherlands	1,231,625	1,179,328	-4.2
Spain	1,180,703	1,327,797	12.5
Switzerland	1,054,293	1,253,334	18.9
India	868,671	1,061,463	22.2
Taiwan	788,799	1,158,239	46.8

\*Forecast, \*Midland, \*Marked by 2023 numbers Source: UBS Global Wealth Report 2024

## Bel Curves

By R Prasad



I'm stuck in the market with some dud stocks. Can you use your influence to help me get out?

R Narayanan  
Noida/Mumbai

It is an irrefutable fact that banks have taken the class of depositors for granted and have been focusing on credit growth as the engine for higher revenues and margins. Hence, the deposits base has shrunk since the investors have higher risk appetite and are opting for greener pastures. Banks have always considered these depositors as the most conservative group targeting safe and assured returns. In addition, on the banking sector has also failed to forecast the credit growth pattern that is now scaling new heights. It is time they recognise the stark market realities and learn to walk with credit return and liquid funds by launching suitable schemes.

RAJASRI KUMAR  
Bengaluru

Peaceniks Must Block Peacenix

Appropos the Edit, This Age is Not of Disenfranchisement. On Jul 30, the heinous act stands starkly as a testament to the horrors that result from abandonment of the fundamental principles of peace and respect for human life. And, with its rich heritage of ahimsa (non-violence) dating back to the time of Bhagawan Mahatma Ghandi, and famously articulated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Gandhian legacy is a profound commitment to peaceful coexistence and resolution of conflicts through dialogue and mutual understanding, without the use of weapons. Let us stand together in solidarity with all those affected by conflict, and let us redouble our efforts to ensure that humanitarian principles prevail over the chaos of war.

VIVEK G. LAGHATE  
Pune

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editor@timesofindia.com

## How to Avoid MF Mishans

replacing the main population group. Liberalised and strengthened oversight and enforcement mechanisms to deter abusive practices.

Sebi has also implemented measures to curb these unethical practices. These steps focus on integrity, transparency and accountability. The regulatory body has laid down provisions under a code of conduct for AMCs, and fund managers and dealers (FMDs), who are also prohibited from indulging in unethical business activities or professional misconduct.

To instil a robust risk mitigation mechanism, MF regulations proposed:

► Establishing a structured institutional framework to identify and deter potential abuse.

► Enhancing the responsibility and accountability of AMC for implementing and overseeing this institutional mechanism.

► Fostering transparency through a whistleblowing policy.

Therapeutic oversight of unethical behaviour in MFs stems from misaligned incentives and information asymmetries. A multi-faceted approach is necessary to address these market abuse practices. Here are some suggestions:

► Rating system. Implement a robust rating system for MFs based on their performance and AUM, but also on their adherence to ethical standards and compliance history. This would give investors a more unambiguous indication of the

fund's integrity.

Penalties significant enough to weigh potential gains from such activities will be a strong deterrent. Encouraging and protecting intermediaries who report abusive practices through attractive incentive mechanisms and robust protection can also help uncover malpractices early.

► Tech monitor. AI and ML have enhanced regulators' ability to monitor trading patterns and detect anomalies. These tools can also identify more subtle, sophisticated forms of front running, such as trading in highly correlated securities that traditional surveillance systems might miss.

► Look within AMC's surveillance systems and internal control mechanisms should be regularly updated to adapt to evolving market practices.

► Eye in the sky. Setting up an independent oversight committee or hiring an external consultant to review order flow and compliance with best execution principles could help.

► Bond with the best. AMC can benchmark their execution quality against the market's standard or peer group, allowing them some room to identify areas for improvement in addition to having optimal execution outcomes, as is the case with the US SEC regarding best execution principles could help.

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# Opinion

FRIDAY, JULY 12, 2024

## Time-tested ties

India's restrained position on the Ukrainian conflict obviously stems from limited geopolitical options

**T**HE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR did cast a long shadow over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Russia and Austria. Unfortunately, the timing coincided with a Russian missile strike on a children's hospital in Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, and the US-hosted North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in which the ongoing war was a major focus of the deliberations, including efforts to bolster Ukraine's military capabilities to safeguard its territorial sovereignty. Modi signalled the West that he delivered a clear message to Russia's President Vladimir Putin that the killing of innocent children was "heart-wrenching and painful" while forcefully underscoring that "peace talks do not succeed amid bombs, guns and bullets", and no "solution to any conflict is possible in the battlefield". Modi reiterated this message in his meeting with Austria's Chancellor Karl Nehammer. India continues its delicate balancing act in not joining the chorus of western nations in condemning Russia's war in Ukraine while appealing for dialogue to end the conflict.

India's restrained position on the Ukrainian conflict obviously stems from its limited geopolitical options. If it joins the West, there is the risk of antagonising the time-tested, reliable relations with Russia at a time of Chinese aggression on our northern and northeastern borders. India's ties with Russia may not have the scope and depth of its alliance with the erstwhile Soviet Union, but it has been 24 years since both nations signed a historic declaration on a strategic partnership and 14 years since it was elevated to a special and privileged strategic partnership. At the 22nd annual summit between the leaders of both nations, they reaffirmed their commitment to the special and privileged strategic partnership to take forward a broad-based engagement on various areas of cooperation including political and strategic, economy, energy, military and security, science and technology, culture, and humanitarian cooperation. Both the leaders also issued a joint statement on the development of strategic areas of economic cooperation up to 2030.

Defence of course is a big-ticket item for bilateral cooperation as India extensively uses Russian weaponry, but the need for closer economic cooperation is being felt to make bilateral trade more balanced. No event has had more impact on the world economy than the war in Ukraine with energy prices skyrocketing and the prospect of a full-blown food crisis. India has benefited enormously from importing deeply discounted Russian oil — especially after the imposition of western sanctions — and fertilisers. Bilateral trade has boomed to \$65 billion with a surplus substantially in favour of Russia. To realise the target of \$100 billion by 2030, the summit deliberations were on how to make it more balanced and the need for a bilateral settlement system using national currencies. Both countries are to work towards the elimination of non-tariff barriers and promotion of investments. The joint statement on economic cooperation also mentioned connectivity initiatives like the north-south international transport corridor, the northern sea route, and the Chennai-Vladivostok sea line to facilitate cargo movements.

A significant pillar of the special and privileged strategic partnership is energy cooperation. An important showpiece of Russia's commitment to help India is in nuclear power generation as it's building the 6,000-megawatt project at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu, which will have six VVER-1000 nuclear reactors. Kudankulam 1 and 2 are operational, and 3 to 6 are in progress. Delhi's strategic engagement with Moscow thus is multifaceted and is bound to strengthen in the future.

## It's too early for a space race with China

**I**N LATE JUNE, China's space programme brought back the first rock and soil samples from the mysterious far side of the moon. It was a major triumph. Scientists worldwide are eager to use these samples to learn more about the origin of the moon and Earth.

At the same time, others are worried that China is on the way to winning a new space race for the first permanent base on the moon. China's mission makes it clear that the country sees the moon as a strategic asset rather than a site for purely scientific exploration.

So far, China's lunar ambitions are yielding valuable data that's benefitting the international scientific community and the US space programme, which has plans to land the first astronauts on this unexplored part of the moon. China's early success could spur US leaders to put more resources into lunar exploration.

China's craft, Chang'e-6, landed equipment that will bring back the moon's surface and scooped samples from a region known as the South Pole-Aitken Basin. The mission also put a communication satellite in the lunar orbit, which is necessary to send messages back and forth to any craft on the moon's far side.

Those who aren't cheering this as an advance for science are speculating that China might violate the global outer space treaty and hoard territory or resources. At a congressional hearing last spring, NASA administrator Bill Nelson expressed concern that China would claim key lunar territory and exclude everyone else.

The main resource scientists know about on the moon is frozen water lurking in the South Pole-Aitken Basin and other craters nearby — which is why Chang'e-6 landed there. And not coincidentally, the same region is also the target of the next crewed US mission to the moon — called Artemis — which is supposed to happen sometime this decade.

The water in this region has potential beyond supplying a moon base. Water can also be used as a source of hydrogen to fuel missions aimed further out. The moon, being smaller than Earth, exerts much less gravitational pull on spacecraft, making it a nice launch spot.

But it's too early to start fighting over the moon. We still don't know how much water is hidden near the lunar south pole, said James W Head, a planetary geologist who chose the sites for the Apollo missions and helped train the astronauts. He said he's eager to see what analyses of the chemistry and ages of the Chang'e-6 material will tell us.

"It's been a real mystery," said Head, who is now a professor at Brown University. Because the moon isn't influenced by erosion or plate tectonics, its surface holds a record of the impacts that dominated its early history and ours.

Going back to the moon, Head said, is an essential step for sending people to Mars. "Astronauts who've been to the moon will tell you that there's no way anybody's going to go to Mars without having field experience on the moon first."

The world recently got a reminder of the danger and difficulty of space flight when a helium leak and other problems were discovered in the Boeing Starliner during its first crewed mission. The two astronauts who had been aboard the craft have been delayed for weeks aboard the International Space Station. Boeing said last weekend that the astronauts are in no danger, and could be returned any time, but the company is doing some additional troubleshooting at the White Sands Test Facility in New Mexico, after a new problem emerged with additional helium leaks and the unexpected shutdown of some of the thrusters.

These malfunctions are scary, since they involve keeping people alive in space. Any problems would be more challenging on the moon, which is 1,000 times as far from home as the space station. It would be safer for everyone if China and the US could collaborate and nobody rushes into a dangerous mission.

Exploring the moon with astronauts is difficult and dangerous. Collaboration gives every nation the best shot. But the public often responds to rivalry, so ironically, it's the perception of a competition with China that could help garner enough public support to get things off the ground.

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**ENABLING NARI SHAKTI**

Vice President Jagdeep Shakti

Hand-holding is required for girls for two things. One, their education. And second, their skill development. If you empower a girl, you cannot imagine what you are doing. That will account for exponential, geometric growth of the society

## ● GEOPLITICAL JIGSAW

INDIA'S NEW ATTEMPTS TO CULTIVATE RUSSIA WON'T CONTAIN CHINA, COULD SPOIL TIES WITH THE US

# To Russia with love

**ANITA INDER SINGH**

Founding professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, New Delhi



the largest investor in Central Asia and the Russian Far East, where India, for geopolitical or economic reasons, wants to advance its interests.

Meanwhile, China happily sees Modi's visit throwing a spanner in the Western works to isolate Russia through sanctions because of its war in Ukraine. Russia has been working hard to show that it has Asian friends. China's President Xi Jinping met Vladimir Putin in Moscow in March 2023. In June, shortly before Modi visited Russia, nuclear-armed North Korea and non-aligned Vietnam invited him. To propagandise Putin's circle of well-wishers, Modi's visit was treated by Moscow as one from an old friend.

On the international front, there was no escaping the fallout from the Ukraine war, as Modi's visit coincided with the start of the NATO summit on June 9. Washington expressed its concern and hoped that Modi would impress on Putin the necessity of respecting international law and the territorial integrity of states. This statement came at a time when Washington had expressed hope of strengthening cooperation with India. Moscow alleged that this concern was motivated by jealousy.

At another level, even as Modi made

his way to Moscow, Russia bombed a children's hospital in Kyiv, killing dozens of patients. Given Russia's scorched-earth campaign in Ukraine for more than two years, the sympathy voiced by Modi for the dead children didn't carry much weight.

As for persuading Putin to negotiate for peace in Ukraine, many countries have failed to do that and will fail again, since Putin sees himself as a 20th-century

emperor. The Great. He has equated Russia's invasion of Ukraine with Peter's expansionist wars three centuries ago. Putin has thus acknowledged that his war in Ukraine is a huge land grab, intended to re-establish Russia's 17th-century empire.

India's pragmatic strategic concern is Russia's "no-limits" ties with

China. But there is very little that New Delhi can do to drive a wedge between China and Russia. China is the bigger economy, has openly provided diplomatic cover to Russia during the Ukraine war, and has helped sustain the Russian economy and its military-industrial capacities through dual-use items that can be used for both civilian and military applications such as technology, satellites, or drones. Beijing has therefore acquired considerable lever-

age over Moscow, something that Delhi cannot emulate.

Moreover, as long as President Xi Jinping is in charge, India-China relations won't improve. Xi's politics within the Chinese Communist Party makes him adhere to an expansionist hard nationalist line, which has parallels with Russia's in Ukraine. So, Xi and Putin understand each other pretty well.

Delhi's talk of an FTA with the EAEU and all-weather friendship with Russia should not overlook Russia's regional and global interests in having a strong strategic partnership with a territorially revisionist as well as an economically and militarily powerful China. They are united by their hostility towards America's global primacy. China's economy, nearing \$18 trillion, presents it with a better chance of becoming a global power than Russia or India, whose economies are valued at \$2.02 trillion and \$3.54 trillion respectively. India can do nothing to change Russia's lower-ranking role in the Sino-Russian ties or their aversion to America's pre-eminence.

Russia is neutral on the Sino-Indian conflict and is not "for India against China". It has counselled India to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, which India views as a unilateral push to advance China's interests and a threat to India's sovereignty which it cuts across disputed turf in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The US, which is hoping to strengthen cooperation in sensitive high tech with India, will doubtless mull over the nature of Modi's visit to Russia. Back home, many Indians will be pleased that Russia conferred its highest civilian honour on the PM. However, that is unlikely to bring peace to Ukraine, contain China, improve Indo-American relations or the global standing of either India or Russia.

# Exam debate betrays future leaders

**DEEPANSHU MOHAN**

Professor of economics, dean, IDEAS, Office of Interdisciplinary Studies, and director, Centre for New Economic Studies (CNES), OP Jindal Global University



**THE NATIONAL ELIGIBILITY** cum Entrance Test (NET) is a national level exam that has emerged as an enormous breach of trust and appears to have caused irreparable harm to the Modi government's social and political contract with its citizenry, particularly aspiring youth.

The rhetorical pitch for an alternative development model in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2014 electoral pitch, away from cycles of corruption, administrative incompetence, and policy inertia, was supposed to offer hope and faith among India's young people in participating (and constructing) India's growth story. It has done quite the opposite.

Their untidied faith, hope in being able to contribute towards nation-building, and serving in its best interests is credibly damaged when the nation's main elected government — year after year — fails to effectively ensure a corruption-free, centralised examination system, or stop paper leaks that have by now become a systemic norm in most states, from Gujarat to Uttar Pradesh to Bihar.

If the civil services exam competitive system collapses, for example, this may very well result in the actual collapse of the elected state machinery and sever its competency. That's where the current breakdown in trust between young people and the Indian state seems to be heading.

There is a deeper systemic rot that goes far beyond seeing this crisis as an episodic event embedded in the NEET scandal.

**Psychological damage**

What it does is cause immense damage to the psychological state of India's younger generation, who sit exams, putting all their hopes in one basket, in search for a better, more progressive

future. As the former vice chancellor of Ashoka University and columnist Pratap Bhanu Mehta remarked, "Beyond the immediate crisis, this (NET) scandal poses large questions for India's democracy and the governance of India's institutions...The Indian Republic runs on two procedural legitimating devices: Elections and exams...In reality, both can be distorted by the operations of power and money. But both are, all things considered, the fairest forms of procedural legitimisation, at least compared to any other institution in society. They are the only two sites where fairness can at least be demanded. Both also produce enough churn and mobility, again compared to any other institutional setting, to be the source of hopes and dreams."

The Modi government's overall record on investing (or spending) towards the education sector has also been quite dismal to say the least.

**Spending falls**

In the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 2014 manifesto, it promised to raise public spending on education to around 6% of the GDP. From 2014 to 2024, the Union government allocated an average of only 0.44% of the annual GDP to education each year (the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance had allocated an average of 0.61% during 2004-2014).

The last decade has also seen the largest scale of student-led protests across the country, which may only intensify the NEET scandal.

Students have protested on issues like

deeper privatisation, waning academic freedom, cancellation of fellowships, delays in disbursement of stipends, cuts for research fundings, apart from infrastructural issues and campus-saferisation activities (pursued under BJP rule).

All of these have only further accentuated a crisis of legitimacy in the state-youth trust contract.

The "surprise" election verdict in the state of Uttar Pradesh had the issue of "paper leaks" acted as a critical wedge against the BJP. Its anti-corruption image, "Na khaunga, na khane dunga" (Will neither partake nor let anyone partake in corrupt practice) slogan by Modi has also sprung hollow among young people.

The inability to conduct centralised exams fairly also provides a deeper crisis of legitimacy within the Indian state to effectively harness, adopt, use, and upgrade its existing technological know-how and capacity.

No edu-tech system, even a more accessible, competent exam process, unless the government ensures a better environment for competitive exams to be scheduled and carried out across states in a systematic manner.

Exams, in this way, then have a functional role in legitimising collective state action in an otherwise deeply unequal system where educational opportunity and macro learning outcomes remained plagued by a deeper divide in access to decent educational resources, further marked by growing spatial concerns (rural-urban context) and identity-based characteristics (gender, caste, ethnicity,

class, etc).

Worse, the current government has been consciously ignoring most of these structural issues for almost a decade (engaging in partisan blame game). Simultaneously, it has silently pursued a practice of ideological control (through greater saferisation of academic campuses) in and across education institutions.

**A deeper issue**

The growing scale of administrative incompetence in the overall management of the education system is also contributing to greater functional illiteracy amongst Indians, when observed in the larger ambit of global competitiveness space. This has serious costs for the youth's employability as well.

On the more specific concern of fairly conducting exams, the government has proposed new law(s) with stricter punishments and deterrence for those convicted. Several states are also proposing a greater decentralisation of the process of conducting exams, which can help minimise instances of paper leaks or lapses in centralised systems.

In what is one of the lowest points in India's federal polity and the Centre-state relationship, to what extent these measures are acknowledged, or adopted, or may help restore the broken trust between the aspiring youth and the Indian state, remains to be seen.

In the meantime, a more disillusioned youth, especially those coming from humble socio-economic backgrounds (with no option to travel abroad or pursue other greener pastures), stands to lose the most.

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made a clear call for Russia to be at the table. Modi also met Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and renewed ties with 67 days after he was sworn in for the third time. So India has not taken a wrong step in this balancing act. The Russia summit may have been bilateral, but it will remain uncomfortable until the Ukraine crisis is resolved.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com







**The Indian EXPRESS**

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## One for the team

As player and as coach, Rahul Dravid has tried to be the change he wished to see in Indian cricket



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

## PROMISE UNDERLINED

By upholding Muslim women's right to maintenance, SC reaffirms that constitutional protection of equality includes all

THE SUPREME COURT on Wednesday ruled that a Muslim woman's right to claim maintenance under criminal law cannot be extinguished even if she has claimed her rights in personal law. This has been the lawful position for over two decades following the 2001 landmark ruling, *Daniel Latifi versus Union of India*. Yet there has been some concern on whether special legislation — the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 — could override the Code of Criminal Procedure, a general legislation. Now the bench headed by Justice BV Nagarathna has held that a parallel remedy in law that applies universally cannot be taken away by religious custom despite the latter being codified as legislation. This is a welcome underlining by the court that the spirit of the Constitution and its promise of equality cuts across religious and other identities and divides.

Muslim women's right to maintenance has been a fraught issue. While the 1986 Act requires that maintenance is paid to a Muslim woman by her former husband within the *iddat* period (three lunar months after the divorce) by her former husband, Section 125 of the CrPc is a penal provision that requires a man to pay maintenance to his wife or former wife who is "unable to maintain herself." From the 1985 *Shah Bano* case to the Daniel Latifi ruling in 2001, the Supreme Court has maintained that a Muslim man's limited obligation under personal law cannot override Section 125 of the CrPc, despite resistance to the rulings both politically and from within the community. The latest ruling, while scrupulously following the precedents, also marks a remarkable shift in its framing of the right to seek maintenance. It highlights that maintenance must not be viewed "as a mere charity" and is a matter of "parity and rights, essential for women." "This Court would not countenance unjust or Faustian bargains being imposed on women. The emphasis is on sufficient maintenance, not minimal amount. After all, maintenance is a facet of gender parity and enabler of equality, not charity. It follows that a destitute Muslim woman has the right to seek maintenance under Section 125 of the CrPc despite the enactment of the 1986 Act," it says.

The apex Court also shows wisdom in framing the issue of gender justice not as antagonistic to freedom of religion. It sees both as complementing the rights secured under the Constitution. This framing is especially resonant given the Constitution's high visibility as a symbol and motif in the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections. It is also a timely reminder for other battles pending in court — from temple entry to the right to excommunicate. The Constitution should be the guiding principle for all, even for personal law.

## A TIMELY WARNING

Blood test developed at AIIMS to detect Alzheimer's early can reduce trauma of patients, ease caregivers' predicaments

FOR MORE THAN A century since it was discovered by German neuroscientist Alois Alzheimer, the disease named after him has bogged the scientific community. Global life expectancy at the time of the discovery was less than 35 years. With the average lifespan increasing to more than 70 today, Alzheimer's afflicts many more times the number of people today than when it was discovered. More than 55 million people worldwide over the age of 60 today suffer cognitive impairments and 60-70 per cent of them go on to develop the most corrosive form of dementia. Though research over the years has identified the characteristics of the disease, and in recent years, drug development has made some headway, questions remain about how best to treat Alzheimer's. In most parts of the world, including India, tests to diagnose the disease are undertaken only after the onset of symptoms. However, there is growing unanimity amongst scientists that the precursors to Alzheimer's begin to accumulate in the brain at least 10 years before the symptoms show up. That's why a blood test developed by researchers at AIIMS, Delhi, could be a significant breakthrough in Alzheimer's management.

The AIIMS researchers tested 90 people on six blood markers, the levels of which can indicate an early onset of Alzheimer's. The test can detect the biomarkers of the disease 10-15 years before it becomes full-blown. Alzheimer's develops over 15-20 years. An early diagnosis can help clinicians manage symptoms better — medicines that promise a cure for the milder form of the disease have not yet entered the treatment protocols in most parts of the world. Dementia screenings are particularly relevant for India where cognitive impairments are often confused with "natural" signs of ageing. Though diagnostic rates are improving, the disease remains poorly understood, even amongst sections of the medical community, and many patients live with symptoms that their near ones find difficult to understand. If it is successful in larger trials, the blood test developed by the AIIMS researchers could be a step towards easing the predicaments of the caregivers and giving patients a life of dignity.

Last year, another study by AIIMS Delhi researchers in collaboration with 18 other institutes in the country and the University of South California estimated that 7.4 per cent of senior citizens in India suffer from dementia. With the population of the elderly growing in the next decade, the disease could affect close to 1.7 crore Indians by 2035, the study warned. India needs a healthcare strategy for its elderly. The blood test developed by AIIMS researchers could be a key part of it.

## BARCELONA MISFIRE

Anti-tourism protests should set their sights, instead, on authorities who fail to prioritise locals' needs

BARCELONA. MIGUEL DE CERVANTES' archives of courtesy, shelter of the foreigners, has changed in the four centuries since he wrote that memorable description in *Don Quixote*. Recently, the city of Antonio Gaudi, Pablo Picasso and one of the world's best-known football clubs showcased a unique — and troubling — response to the overwhelming number of visitors it gets every year: At a massive rally last weekend, organising to draw attention to the problem of over-tourism, several protestors chanting "tourists go home" used squirt guns to drench unsuspecting diners at al fresco restaurants.

Poorly conceived as this particular form of protest was, it also had the wrong target in its crosshairs. For years — since before the pandemic, in fact — Barcelona residents have complained about their beautiful city becoming unlivable due to overcrowding, skyrocketing rents and the soaring cost of living. These are serious issues, but are tourists — who contribute up to 14 per cent of the city's GDP and on whom about 1,50,000 local jobs are dependent — really to blame for this? If squirt guns are to be used as tools of protest, they are better aimed at local authorities who, through poor or no regulation and laws that prioritise tourists over locals, have contributed to stoking resentment.

Around the world, tourist hotspots, from Venice and Athens to Kyoto and Bali, are finding ways to keep visitors from disrupting local life, including raising tourist fees and setting daily limits on the number of visitors to a particular spot. If the tourists in Barcelona who got sprayed in the face while having a drink or a churro stay away in the future, as do those who are unsettled by the treatment meted out by angry locals, the protestors would have achieved their objective. It would, however, come at the cost of tarnishing the city's reputation and ultimately hobbling its economy.

NOT TOO LONG ago, late one night, on the eve of a Test match, the then-Team India computer analyst got a call. On the line was a star batsman from north India, who, in a brusque tone, ordered him to rush to his room. The SOS wasn't about some vital data on a rival bowler, as the support staff member had guessed. It was to download a movie. Arranging Bollywood hits for Indian cricketers at unearthly hours, by the way, has never been part of any IT professional's BCCI contract.

Another time, in the distant past, one Indian team manager, seated with a couple of reporters at the stadium cafe, had barked at a support staff member to fetch tea and snacks. "I got him a race recently," he would say, justifying the obnoxious behaviour. Waiting tables, too, wasn't part of the job requirement for those hired to help cricketers at net sessions. Indian cricket, despite its giant strides towards modernity, hasn't yet fully shaken off its Raj-era habits. Respect, and also rewards, still depend on your rank. But not on coach Rahul Dravid's watch. In the dugout, he is always seen in the coaching corner and, at nets, he is almost apologetic in his instructions to his non-playing team.

And now, typically of the man, he has silently and subtly set an example not by words but through action. Dravid has laid the first brick of a utopian dressing room of equals that has a sliver of economic heterogeneity and where the distribution of wealth isn't ridiculously uneven. First, as the coach of the World Cup-winning India under-19 team and now, after the T20 World Cup title, Dravid has insisted on pay parity with his assistants. Of the Rs 125 crore BCCI windfall to the team, the head coach was to get Rs 5 crore but Dravid reportedly wanted exactly what other coaches were getting — Rs 2.5 crore.

Regardless of his riches, a father of two sons yet to go to college, refusing a cheque with seven zeros because of his belief in the meritocracy in these materialistic times. And in these months of appraisals, with money on most minds, it's a jaw-dropping renunciation. But that's Dravid — the painfully modest, spotlight-

phobic compassionate cricketing great. Back in 2012, on his retirement, Dravid's wife Vijeta wrote a piece that gave a glimpse of the man who had fiercely protected his personal life. Though there were no surprises, it had interesting details. As the world had perceived, the legend who wore his greatness lightly was a man of few needs and necessities. His pursuit was runs, the race to otherworldly possessions was for lesser mortals and less successful cricketers.

Vijeta wrote how her husband "doesn't care for gadgets, and barely registers brands — of watches, cologne or cars". But his bat weighed a gram less, he would notice in an instant. "I know if I packed only two sets of informal clothes, he would rotate them through an entire tour... He has used one type of moisturising cream for 20 years," she would write.

His mother is an architect and his father worked for the company that produced Kissan jam. Dravid's life was dictated by classic middle-class morals and values. He rose to lofty heights but stayed grounded. He continued to stay in the locality — Indiranagar in Bengaluru — where he grew up, despite gaining celebrity status. Unlike other stars, there are no page 3 stories of him buying mansions or having a garage full of supercars. The other day, he drove to the polling booth in Bengaluru in a regular-sized car, wearing the most common colour combination preferred by unadventurous middle-aged Indian men — a navy blue T-shirt and lighter shade three-fourth pants. Dravid has tried his best to debunk the "pampered superstars" image that Indian cricketers carry over the years. It was a noble battle but India's greatest No. 3, like always, made an earnest attempt. In his stunning Bradman Oration speech in 2011, he argued the case for Indian cricket: "The caricature often made of Indian cricket is that of... overpaid, underworked players, treated like a cross between royalty and rock stars... It is why we make it point to always try and conduct ourselves with composure and dignity... We don't attack fans or do drugs or get into drunken theatrics."

And at home, despite what some of you may have heard, we don't live in mansions with swimming pools. It would have sounded true had Dravid spoken just for himself.

The one-of-a-kind cricketer was an outlier in most teams he was associated with. The man who valued the history of the game once opened the innings with Virender Sehwag, a rustic boy from Delhi NCR's wild west, Najafgarh. They were in to break the record set by Vinoo Mankad and Pankaj Roy but Sehwag would get out. Later, he would say that he wasn't aware of the mark or the two past greats.

As the captain of his diverse flock, Dravid tried to understand everyone and was sensitive to the team's needs. Till coach Greg Chappell spread mistrust in the dressing room, he had a close bond with players from Indian cricket's outposts. He mentored them, gave them batting tips and also took them to a musical in London. Even when the Sourav Ganguly-Chappell battle was dividing the team, he tried to bridge the divide. When his toddler sons would travel with the team, he would book a room that was not on the same floor as his teammates. He didn't want them to be disturbed by the wails of his children.

Dravid might have his flaws as a captain or coach but he has still managed a decent leadership legacy. He was accommodative and a peace-maker. Unlike those who not even half his body of work, he wasn't pompous. Actually, he regularly takes pains to call himself a boring batsman who puts people to sleep but miserably fails.

His conversations are rarely about him, it's about others around him. Dravid isn't the kind who will cut a deal for himself and sell others down the river. Dravid is a true believer in the sporting brotherhood. He has never been a rebel, blasphemous or a moaning complainer. He is someone who cares about others. Dravid also tried to be the change he wished to see in Indian cricket. Not everyone has the heart to put Rs 2,50,00,000 where the mouth is.

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ZAKIA SOMAN

IN A LANDMARK judgment, the Supreme Court has ruled that a divorced Muslim woman can seek alimony from her husband under section 125 of the Code of Criminal Code (CrPc). We have travelled a significant distance from the Shah Bano case in 1985 to this verdict by the bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and A G Masih. It dismissed the husband's petition challenging a Telangana High Court direction to pay his wife monthly maintenance of Rs 20,000 after divorce. This is a progressive step towards the inclusion of vulnerable minority women citizens. Muslim women have suffered legal discrimination in matters of marriage and family in the absence of reformed and codified personal laws.

Why are we celebrating this judgment? Section 125 has existed since 1973. Upholding pluralism is important in a secular democracy. This includes a diversity of personal laws. But we must not confuse diversity with unjust patriarchal practices. There is nothing laudatory or "personal" about the subjugation of women and violation of their rights. The Quran emphasises maintenance to be provided to the wife after divorce. However, husbands often continue to look for loopholes. This happened in the case of Shah Bano. Her husband refused to pay the maintenance granted by the court.

The conservative clergy and other leaders jumped on the bandwagon to defend personal laws and against the imposition of secular laws on Muslims. They called it interference in Shariah and thereby, a violation of minority rights. The Rajiv Gandhi-led government came under pressure and overturned through legislation the ruling that granted maintenance to Shah Bano. A separate Shariah-com-

## RIGHTING A WRONG

SC verdict on alimony for Muslim women enables larger fight for equality, justice

We live in an era of religious polarisation. The condition of Muslim women is used to portray the community negatively. On the other hand, many Muslims are living under a sense of fear and insecurity. The silver lining is that there are a large number of people within the community who welcome this judgment. There is a greater consciousness about rights not just amongst women themselves but their families too.

pliant law was hastily enacted to provide maintenance to divorced Muslim women. The BJP began to accuse Congress of Muslim appeasement. In a sense, the Shah Bano episode kickstarted the politics of religious division.

In seven decades since independence, no government felt obliged to enable Muslim women to attain legal parity with their Hindu and Christian counterparts who enjoy the protection of reformed personal laws enacted by Parliament. No government felt the need to fulfil its constitutional obligation of upholding gender justice. As though granting legal rights to Muslim women would go against the principles of secularism!

Indian Muslims are governed by Shariah Application Act, 1937. This law is archaic. It merely states that Shariah will decide all personal law matters for Muslims. While Muslims are ostensibly governed by Shariah, reality, unjust and unfair practices based on arbitrary interpretations prevail. Several important issues lack legal clarity. Patriarchal interpretations decide matters such as age of marriage, divorce, maintenance, polygamy, *halala*, custody and guardianship of children, share in property and inheritance and *muta* marriages. Islamic concepts of consent and *mahr* are diluted in practice.

Muslim marriage is a contract. But most women don't possess a copy of their *nikah-nama* and are unaware of their rights. There is a sense prevalent of the husband being superior in marital relationships.

The dominant conservative clergy have resisted reform. "Islam gave rights to women 1,400 years ago," they say. But are these rights available to women? Anyone who raises such

questions is demonised. Calls for reform are dismissed as the handwork of those serving Western ways of thinking or these days, Hindutva. In this scenario, Muslim women continue to be denied their Quranic rights as well as constitutional rights.

We live in an era of religious polarisation. The condition of Muslim women is used to portray the community negatively. On the other hand, many Muslims are living with a sense of fear and insecurity. They are hardly in a position to appreciate this progressive verdict. The orthodoxy would club it with the ongoing onslaught on Muslim identity and dismiss it as unwarranted. The silver lining is that a large number of people within the community also welcome this judgment. There is a greater consciousness about rights amongst women and their families. The movement against instant triple talaq received support from the community after it was highlighted that it does not enjoy Quranic sanction.

I am not suggesting that patriarchy has been eradicated from the lives of women who enjoy legal protections vis-a-vis marriage and family. Social attitudes matter. But an enabling legal framework can support a woman who wishes to fight for justice. The Supreme Court outlawed instant triple talaq in 2017. This judgment is another step towards legal equality for Muslim women. Justice Nagarathna emphasises that maintenance must not be viewed as charity but as a fundamental right. It is a right that transcends religious boundaries.

The writer is a founding member of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan



## JULY 12, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### J&K TURMOIL

FOUR NON-CONGRESS CHIEF ministers and leaders of 19 opposition parties met on July 10 to condemn the undemocratic dismissal of former J&K CM Farooq Abdullah. They also demanded the immediate removal of J&K governor Jagmohan and G Shah's "defector government". The dissolution of the state assembly and fresh elections are also being called for.

### PAKISTAN DENIES ROLE

IN AN INTERVIEW with the *Wall Street Journal*, Pakistan prime minister Zia-ul-Haq denies the

role of Pakistan in training or arming any Sikh terrorists in Punjab. He also added that it was unfair to hold Pakistan accountable for India's internal issues and chided Indira Gandhi for treating India's neighbouring states as members of the union. He said, "My effort is to impress upon her that countries don't interfere in each other's relations."

### PM ON IA HIJACKERS

INDIRA GANDHI in an interview said that she was unhappy with Islamabad's decision to not return the hijackers of the Indian Airlines Airbus nor put them on trial. She also added that no Indian representatives were allowed to

speak directly with the hijackers. Gandhi said that India had rejected all demands of the hijackers and was unclear as to what assurances they had been given by Pakistan.

### NO ENTRY FOR JATHAS

THE GOVERNMENT WILL not permit entry of the shaaheed jathas of the Akalis into the Golden Temple complex. Security forces have been stationed to intercept the movement of the jathas at their places of origin. The state governor, K T Satarwala, and his advisors will be having a meeting to discuss a plan of action for the Akali threat — the jathas are sent to "liberate" the Golden Temple from the Army.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## Don't blame the Opposition

Legislative institutions do not belong only to government, Opposition is an equal stakeholder. And disruption is not Parliament's biggest problem



MANISH TEWARI

I HAVE GREAT personal respect for Harivansh, the Deputy Chairperson of the Council of States, but I beg to disagree and differ with his piece entitled 'A Mockery of Parliament?' (IE, July 10).

The endemic problems that plague Parliament are far more serious and deep-rooted than just the issue of disruptions that he has attempted to flag and the regrettably specious attempt to lay the blame entirely at the door of the Opposition.

The fundamental question that presiding officers and senior members of both the Houses need to address themselves to is the accelerated devaluation of our legislative institutions, including Parliament, and their intensifying irrelevance to the national discourse. Disruptions alone are not the cause of this.

The first Lok Sabha met for 135 days in a year and the Rajya Sabha in the decade of the 1950s convened for 93 days. In the next decade and a half, Parliament met for an average of 120 days in a year. This number came down to 70 days in a year from 1971 onwards. The 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024) met for only 55 days in a year. Does this decline in the number of sitting days not warrant the attention of the respective presiding officers and other senior members of both Houses? Is it that there is less legislative business to be transacted today than when the first Lok Sabha sat, or is it that the government finds it inconvenient to have Parliament meet for four and a half months a year?

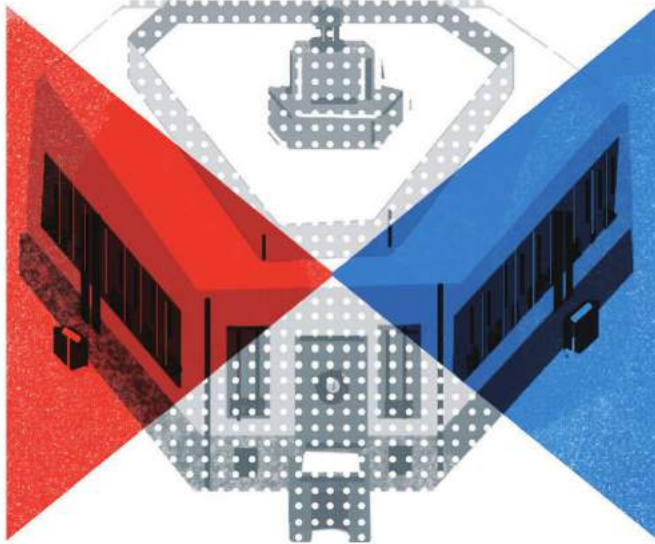
The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, colloquially called the Anti-Defection Law, has completely failed in its intended objective, that is, to stop defections. All that has done is to transform defections from a retail activity into a wholesale business. Nothing demonstrates this more eloquently than the manner in which successive state governments have been toppled in the past decade with impunity.

At the same time, the Anti-Defection Law has sucked democracy out of the legislative institutions. It is axiomatic that while MPs to the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha are elected by their respective electors it is the ubiquitous "whip" that runs their legislative lives.

Not longer are parliamentarians and legislators free to exercise their voting preferences according to their conscience, constituency and common sense, as is the case in every legislative democracy of consequence in the world.

The essence of the argument is that the elusive "golden mean" has to be discovered between the freedom of expression, that includes the right to vote freely in legislative institutions as guaranteed by Article 105(1) of the Constitution of India, and the stability of governments that are dependent on having a majority in their respective legislatures. Is this not an issue germane enough to occupy the collective mind space of the presiding officers of Parliament and various legislatures across the country, including other states who at frequent intervals, have moved two Private Members' Bills in the 15th & 17th Lok Sabhas, respectively, on this question.

In 1993 Parliamentary Standing Committees were instituted to aid Parliament in its legislative and financial re-



CR Sasikumar

mit. In the 16th & 17th Lok Sabhas the number of bills that were referred to the Standing Committees for examination has declined considerably. Some independent researchers put the bills referred to the Standing Committee at a figure of 45 per cent of the total bills introduced in Parliament in the past two decades. Is this diminution in the role of Parliamentary Standing Committees not an issue that should collectively concern the presiding officers and other senior members of both the Houses of Parliament?

It would be worth recalling that the current ruling dispensation, when they were in the Opposition, did not allow former prime minister Manmohan Singh to speak even on the vote of confidence moved by him in the July of 2008. They waved currency notes in the Lok Sabha, plunging the dignity of the House to a new nadir. The former prime minister had to lay his speech on the table of the Lok Sabha.

The 15th Lok Sabha (2009-14) saw two whole sessions wiped out by the current ruling dispensation when they were in the Opposition, the first being the winter session of 2010 on the "illusory" CAG report on allotment of 2G telecom licenses and spectrum, and the second being the monsoon session of 2012. The Janata Dal (United) was for a substantive part of that time an alliance partner of the BJP that orchestrated and perpetuated these parliamentary disruptions.

If my memory serves me correctly, wasn't it the Leader of Opposition (LoP) in the Rajya Sabha, late Arun Jaitley, who coined and gave currency to the doctrine

It would be worth recalling that the current ruling dispensation, when they were in the Opposition, did not allow Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to speak even on the vote of confidence moved by him in the July of 2008. They waved currency notes in the Lok Sabha, plunging the dignity of the House to a new nadir. The former prime minister had to lay his speech on the table of the Lok Sabha.

"Parliamentary obstructionism is a part of legitimate parliamentary tactics..." He further went on to say, "When Parliament is used to ignore issues then obstruction of Parliament is in the favour of democracy". His colleague, LoP in the Lok Sabha, late Sushma Swaraj, was even more voluble. On September 12, 2012, she said: "Not allowing Parliament to function is a form of democracy like any other form..." It begs a question: What was good for the goose for 10 years is not good for the gander subsequently?

To lay the blame for disruptions in the Lok Sabha at the door of the Leader of Opposition, especially when his maiden speech was interrupted repeatedly by senior ministers of the government, given the past conduct of the ruling dispensation when they were in the Opposition, is a bit rich, to put it very mildly.

Finally, is it appropriate for presiding officers to raise polarising issues that attained quietus and closure decades ago? I leave it to their wisdom and sagacity to decide. Does it facilitate the smooth functioning of Parliament, is something they should reflect upon.

Legislative institutions do not belong to the government. The Opposition is an equal stakeholder. It has to be provided space to articulate its concerns and there are mechanisms to do so, as I had suggested to the presiding officer in an informal conversation.

Disruption of Parliament is eminently avoidable but it is the responsibility of the government to run the House efficiently by agreeing to debate issues that may be inconvenient for the government. The continuing transgression by China across the LAC for four years running and the situation in Manipur are just two current examples.

The writer is a lawyer, Congress MP & former I&B minister

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"This is no longer the time for radical posturing. Given the current political balance of power, neither the left nor the right have the means to fundamentally transform French society." — LE MONDE, FRANCE

## For I&K, better days lie ahead

From abrogation of Article 370 to Pakistan's diminishing geopolitical importance, five reasons why violence is declining in the state



M N SABHARWAL AND MANISH SABHARWAL

POET FAIZ AHMAD Faiz's lines, "Qatal gahon se chun kar hamara ale-alam, Aur nikalenga ushaak ke quafle" (the caravan of patriots will march collecting the flags from the hands of martyrs on the battlefield), remind us that the most valuable tribute to the 1,608 J&K Police, 511 CRPF officers and thousands of other bravehearts martyred fighting terrorists since 1989 is the massive decline in Valley terrorism since 2019. As the fifth anniversary of Article 370's abrogation approaches, let's honour their memory — and that of the army jawans killed in Jammu region this week — by remembering the five reasons for better prospects for peace (*Annan ki Alama*) in J&K:

This Mahabharata's advice of *Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitah* (the system protects those who protect the system) was ignored by J&K's politicians because special constitutional status allowed a divergence between what they said and did. The abrogation of Article 370 answers the 1950s call in Parliament by Syama Prasad Mookerjee of "Ek desh me do vidhan, do pradhan, do nis-han nahin chahenge" (One nation cannot accept two constitutions, two heads of state and two flags).

This Article greatly contributed to keeping J&K's politics oligopolistic, dynastic, and stale. We remember the hopes that filled our hearts with the 1996, 2002, 2008, and 2014 election victories, but we were left disappointed. Future J&K elections will be held under the Indian Constitution and have new electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and context. This abrogation helps new politicians and parties who use the "civilised civil war" of democracy to convert conflicts into trade-offs through a new state of ideas that blunt passions, create interests and forge compromise.

The Pakistan military believed cross-border military strikes by India were an impossibility after it tested nuclear bombs. But the US and Pakistan responses answered the decades-old prayers of the security leadership in J&K for the hot and cold pursuit of terrorists. Those prayers weren't war-mongering but a recognition that Pakistan's terror factory wouldn't back down without new calculations. The consequences for their J&K Assembly attack in 2001 led to bigger attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008.

These strikes undermined Pakistan's military promise of a gravity-free world. They embodied Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling's book, *Strategies of Conflict* which highlighted the usefulness of the promise of future pain. India's surgical strikes signal new rules and consequences on internal security strategy.

The false narrative of "jihad" was useful for America in drafting the plan to fight the USSR in Afghanistan. But clearly, the CIA hadn't heard of the myth of Basmasur, the demon you create that turns on you. It was only a matter of time before radical Islamists and Wahabists turned their attention to the West. There were early signs; a 1990s US

National Intelligence Council report about Islamic terrorism lamented decisive action against them felt unviable till a "domestic Pearl Harbour".

Our warnings about terrorist plans to attack the US on home ground were dismissed as self-interest and their ignorance about the terror infrastructure and Pakistan's intentions was negligent. Sadly, it took the 9/11 attacks on America to recognise the dangers of radical Islam and galvanise action on global financing, training, propaganda, and weapons trade fuelling terrorism. India's position on cross-border terrorism is no longer lonely or unique. This makes Pakistan's strategy and actions untenable.

Pakistan's geopolitical importance — 1960s Cold War defence treaties, 1970s brokering of US-China reconciliation, and 1980s Afghan Mujahideen support — greatly diminished with the 9/11 US terrorist attacks, Osama Bin Laden's role, and US-China rivalry. Internal anger is also rising against Pakistan's economically incompetent garison state weaponising Islam and sabotaging mass prosperity. Its per capita GDP is lower than Bangladesh and total GDP is lower than Maharashtra.

The garison state's political and social control tools are formidable — including imprisoning poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz for many years — but Article 370 abrogation strengthens the case for Pakistan's own choosing *itihad* (friendship) over military-sponsored "jihad".

The path to a more normal democracy in Pakistan is unclear, but its rising internal and external weakness diminishes its ability to get away with murder. Every country is an *antahpariksha*, a riddle in which the answer lies within the riddle — and Pakistan's *awam* must send its military back to the barracks.

India created the world's largest democracy after 1947 but failed to deliver mass prosperity. This is changing.

A massive renovation of India's intellectual, security, financial, diplomatic, investment, welfare and economic infrastructure is underway. India is now the third-largest economy and will soon be third after China and America. In recent years, we have exported more software than Saudi Arabia did; this gives our military a massive edge in a digital world where the distinction between military and civilian technology is eroding.

The most significant change is a new political tone. We don't have to be Western to be modern, we have zero tolerance for terrorism, and India@100 must be a developed country. India's soft and hard power are changing Pakistan's *niyat* (intentions), calculations, and options.

Historian Herodotus warned us thousands of years ago, "In peace, sons bury their fathers. In war, fathers bury their sons." The Kashmiri expression "Saadi saet lughin ya laetmitch" (start of seven and a half) is rooted in the myth of "Budhishevaar" (a journey in 700 years for seven and half years) that occurs a maximum of three times in one life.

In recent decades, too many parents of uniformed bravehearts and civilians in J&K have needlessly buried their children. The recent decline in Valley violence represents the possibilities of what is called *Saadat Set* (inner peace, irrespective of religion). Better days lie ahead. *Annan Ki Alama*.

M N Sabharwal is former Director General of J&K Police and CRPF. Manish Sabharwal is an entrepreneur. Their forthcoming book is Kashmir Under 370



AJAY VIR JAKHARA

## Note to Krishi Bhawan

Design of new agri policy must sidestep past errors, be mindful of challenge of change

THE TENURE OF the new Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmer Welfare, Shri Raj Singh Choudhan, starts from a place of policy paralysis. He can neither shrug off the decisions taken by his predecessors or the legacy he inherits at Krishi Bhawan. His primary challenge is to regain the trust of the farmer. The manner in which the three farm laws were rolled out and how the establishment engaged with the agitators has left a bitter aftertaste. It will need sensitive handling that should begin with the scrapping of the infamous MSP committee formed in the aftermath of the farm laws.

India has not had an agriculture policy for decades unlike the US, the EU and China, who change their policy at frequent intervals. The commissioning of a new policy is in order and, during that process, the minister will gain time to get a grip on things. The policy will have to change tack on multiple fronts, beginning with pragmatically designing for "strategic autonomy" rather than targeting "self-sufficiency" in agricultural production. It must be appreciated that when it comes to Indian agriculture, what is true for the whole is rarely true for its parts. Some of

this is attributed to the diverse agro-climatic regions in the country and the federal structure under which policy works.

One can neither overstate nor realise that central government policy is restricted by the fact that agriculture and land are in the domain of the states; animal husbandry and fisheries where real growth is visible are separate ministries; the budgetary allocations are controlled by the Ministry of Finance; and an outdated inflation policy is dictated by the RBI. The gods have been kind to the Narendra Modi government as India has not faced a major drought in the last 10 years, but the odds of one in the next five years cannot be ruled out. Choudhan's task might not be easy.

The other big challenge for the minister is to convince the government and the RBI to change their methodology of targeting inflation. In developed countries, where central banks use the consumer price index to measure and control inflation, food constitutes a small portion of the expenditure basket, while wages impact it far more. But, in developing nations like India, food constitutes about 40 per cent of the basket.

In trying to protect the consumer, RBI's actions are constantly putting explicit and implicit pressure on the government to act on food prices, which leads to a spiral of lower farmgate prices.

How does this impact 42 per cent of India's population, dependent on agriculture for its livelihoods? Consider government actions around non-essential commodities like onion, which expose its convoluted policies and why the idea of improving farmer livelihoods by doubling their incomes is difficult. A family of four consumes about 15 kg of onion a month. If the price spikes by Rs 20 per kg, the monthly budget of the family rises by only Rs 300 per month. While artificially subsidising (through stock-holding limit, export restrictions etc.) farmgate prices by Rs 20 per kg leads to a loss of Rs 2,00,00,000 per acre for every farmer growing onions (assuming the yield to be 100 quintals/acre). Considering an average of one onion farmer cultivates about two acres of land, the order of magnitude is astounding.

It is neither the responsibility of the farmer to provide cheap food nor is it justified for the RBI to sacrifice farmers at the altar of

inflation targeting. The government should roll out a mechanism to compensate farmers when its policies depress farmgate prices. Additionally, with the RBI, it can devise methods of softening the impact of rise in the price of food by direct benefit transfers (DBT) or coupons and other such for consumers. DBT has its share of issues, but is not uncommon.

The history of the ministries that impact farmer livelihoods is replete with a spate of unforged policy errors and missed opportunities. Policymakers balk at documenting policy failures and fight back against changes that seek to improve regulation, enforcement, governance, transparency and accountability. Refusal to document failures means sowing the seeds of yet other policy missteps.

Policy makers should pay heed to the lessons learnt from the farm: There are no perfect solutions, there never were any. For the ministry, the big question is: What is the level of imperfection the Union Minister is willing to settle for?

The writer is chairman, Bharat Krishak Samaj

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CURIOUS TIMING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Message to Moscow' (IE, July 11). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Russia visit was particularly upsetting because of its timing, which coincided with a missile attack by Russia on a children's hospital in Ukraine, destroying essential healthcare facilities for the most vulnerable. India attended the recent peace summit in Switzerland, refrained from signing the non-nuclear pact and made a clear call for Russia to be at the table. PM Modi also met Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and renewed ties with G7. Some image management is overdue.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### TO COOL DOWN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'It's heating up' (IE, July 11). The impact of climate change is climbing by the day. The worst affected are the poor and migrant workers. Mitigating climate change will take time and effort. The government should try to inculcate adaptation strategies like climate-resilient infrastructure and the construction of cool warehouses for infomation to reduce heat stress. We need climate-conscious infrastructure.

Sharita Rao, Hyderabad

### THE NEW COACH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Coach Gambhir' (IE, July 11). During Coach Gambhir's three-and-a-half-years' tenure, India will take part in three ICC trophies, the 2025 Champions Trophy, the 2026 T20 World Cup and the 2027 ODI World Cup. Gambhir is the youngest coach in the history of Indian cricket. He is known to support players in expressing themselves, which is critical. His first goal should be to win over the dressing room and gain their confidence.

Bal Govind, Noida

### RIGHT PRECEDENT

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Muslim women can seek maintenance from husband under CrP: SC' (IE, July 11). The verdict underscored the principle that maintenance is not a form of charity but a fundamental 'right of all married women, irrespective of religion'. The Court has taken a significant step towards gender justice and equality in India. This ruling not only upholds constitutional principles but also strengthens the social and economic security of Muslim women setting a precedent for future cases.

SS Paul, Noida



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Going strong @75

The 2024 NATO summit concluded with pledges to support Ukraine and strengthen defence preparedness

Seventy-five years ago, 12 nations gathered in Washington, DC to sign the North Atlantic Treaty, better known as NATO aiming to safeguard their collective defence amid the rise of communism under Soviet Union. This year, 32 NATO Allies convened once more in Washington, DC to make critical decisions on ensuring the protection of the member countries. In these 75 years a lot has changed. The Soviet Union does not exist and the Warsaw Pact has been disbanded. But NATO is alive and taking on new challenges in the emerging world order. The 2024 NATO Summit concluded after three days of high-level discussions and strategic deliberations among the member states. Basically, a product of cold war era, NATO has been pivotal in addressing pressing global security challenges, reaffirming commitments to collective defence, and exploring new avenues of cooperation among the member states. One of the primary focuses of the summit was of course reinforcing NATO's collective defence posture. In response to escalating tensions and conflicts in various parts of the world, NATO leaders agreed to bolster their military capabilities and readiness. This includes increased defence spending by member states, the deployment of additional troops to Eastern Europe, and the enhancement of cyber defence mechanisms. NATO members reaffirmed their commitment to expanding partnerships beyond its traditional geographical boundaries.



The summit saw increased engagement with non-member countries, emphasising the importance of global security cooperation. Key partners, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, participated in discussions on shared security concerns and collaborative initiatives. In the new world order China and Russia have emerged a formidable player in the world arena. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine remained a critical issue at the summit. NATO reiterated its unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. NATO has remained steadfast in its support to Ukraine and has supported Ukraine's war efforts but just about avoiding direct confrontation with Russia and widening the scope of war. India so far has maintained a safe distance with NATO. It has charted its own nonaligned path steering clear of either of the two blocs NATO and now defunct, The Warsaw Pact. India, though not a NATO member, has been closely monitoring the developments of the summit. As a major player on the global stage, the outcomes of the NATO summit have several implications for India's strategic interests and foreign policy. India has been increasingly engaging with NATO members on various fronts, including defence and security cooperation. The emphasis on collective defence and partnerships at the summit opens avenues for India to deepen its strategic ties with NATO countries. Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defence technology collaborations could see a significant boost, enhancing India's defence capabilities.

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Anganwadi workers conduct inspection of stored water to curb the spread of dengue during monsoon

## The synergy between culture and economy

Culture and economy are deeply intertwined, each influencing and enhancing the other. This can lead to sustainable economic progress

Culture and economy are deeply intertwined, each influencing and enhancing the other in multiple ways. This synergy can be observed through various lenses, from local community impacts to global economic trends. Cultural assets such as traditions, arts, and heritage sites can drive economic growth. Cities with rich cultural histories often attract tourism, which stimulates local businesses and generates revenue. For example, the cultural heritage of cities like Paris and Rome makes them top tourist destinations, contributing significantly to their economies. The creative sector, including music, film, fashion, and design, is a major economic driver. These industries not only create jobs and generate income but also foster innovation and attract investments. The global success of Hollywood and the fashion industry in Milan and New York are prime examples of how culture fuels economic activity. Governments often implement cultural policies to boost economic development. By investing in cultural infra-



structure such as museums, theatres, and festivals, they create vibrant communities that attract residents, businesses, and tourists. These investments can lead to urban regeneration and increased property values. A culturally diverse workforce brings various perspectives and skills, fostering creativity and problem-solving. This diversity can enhance a company's ability to innovate and adapt to changing markets, making economies more resilient to shocks. Globalisation has increased cultural exchange, leading to the spread of ideas, goods, and services across borders. This cultural exchange can open new markets for businesses and create opportunities for economic development. For instance, the glob-

ality popularity of K-pop and Japanese anime has created vast economic opportunities for South Korea and Japan. Cultural education enhances human capital by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. These qualities are essential in the modern economy, where knowledge and innovation are key drivers of success. Investing in cultural education can thus contribute to a more skilled and adaptable workforce. Maitreya Dadashi, the force behind the summit also shared this vision, "The synergy between culture and economy forms the foundation of sustainable development. We envision a future where spiritual and economic prosperity evolve hand in hand," he said. Countries and cities often use culture to brand themselves and build soft power. Cultural diplomacy, through international cultural events, exchanges, and collaborations, can enhance a nation's global image and influence, attracting foreign investment and tourism. Law and Justice Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal echoed this senti-

ment at the Maitri Cultural Economy Summit 2024. "The Modi government has been dedicated to nurturing culture to harness its economic potential," he said. He emphasised that India's cultural economy is deeply rooted in the ancient wisdom of the Vedas and Puranas, making it an intrinsic part of the nation's identity. Cultural tourism in cities like Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Puri, along with major events such as the Kumbh Mela, play a significant role in contributing to the GDP. In conclusion, the synergy between culture and economy is a powerful combo that drives both societal and economic progress. By recognising and fostering this relationship, policymakers, businesses, and communities can harness cultural assets to achieve sustainable economic growth and development. This was aptly summed up by Union Minister Nitin Gadkari when he said that importance of cultural economic governance must be the cornerstone of our policies. (The writer is a social activist and business consultant; views are personal)

PRABHA GUPTA

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## Will Democrats nominate Joe Biden

As the Democratic Party prepares to nominate him, questions linger about Biden's ability to lead, the party's strategy and potential challengers



KALYANI SHANKAR

U.S. President Joe Biden's underwhelming performance in the 2024 presidential debate last week raised concerns due to his apparent fatigue, forgetfulness, and confusion. This has caused uncertainty among supporters despite Biden's attempts to reassure them in the post-debate period. Even last week, during a speech in Madison, Wisconsin, he initially said he would "beat Donald Trump again in 2020" before correcting himself to "2024," which added to the uncertainty. According to the Spanish newspaper El Pais, Biden has defended himself about three things. First, his support stayed pretty much the same after the debate. Secondly, most party voters want him to continue. The last point is that other options are not better. President Biden has demonstrated resilience in the face of pressure to step down. He confidently declared at a rally in Madison that he would run and win again, which cheered his supporters and reassured sceptics. President Biden's improved performance in his public appearances post-debate has the potential to significantly reshape his chances in the upcoming election and the prospects of the Democratic Party.

This shift in dynamics could bring a sense of hope and anticipation to the party. Next month, the Democratic Party will nominate President Biden as its 2024 Presidential candidate in a virtual convention. This event will officially confirm Biden's candidacy and establish the party's campaign strategy. If Biden stays in the race, it will be tough for any other candidate to win the Democratic nomination. This is because the party rules give Biden a big advantage. These rules include specific guidelines for delegate allocation and superdelegate influence. If Biden were to resign, who would take his place? With only four months before the 2024 election, finding the right person takes a lot of work. This shows how serious the situation is. Kamala Harris, the current Vice President and Joe Biden's running mate is the top contender for the

upcoming presidential election. Many believe that she has the advantage. However, her lack of popularity could be a significant challenge, as 49% of Americans disapprove of her according to polling averages. Republicans hope Harris will become the Democratic presidential nominee, believing it will benefit Trump's campaign. The Trump campaign has launched an ad with the slogan: "This November, vote Republican. Stop Kamala." A recent poll by Reuters/Ipsos showed that Michelle Obama could win against Trump in November. However, Michelle has repeatedly said she does not aspire to be President, so it's doubtful she will run. Several names are being floated to replace President Biden. This includes at least six governors: Gavin Newsom from California, Gretchen Whitmer from Michigan, Josh Shapiro from Pennsylvania, J. B. Pritzker from Illinois, and Ro Khanna, a representative from California. Each of these potential candidates has their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, Gavin Newsom is the current Vice favourite. Their potential to run for office would have dif-

ferent effects on the Democratic Party and the upcoming election. After the debate, polls from CNN, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal showed that Biden is six points behind Trump in the country. Biden is also trailing in the most crucial states he won in 2020. Furthermore, other states he won—Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Virginia—now seem uncertain. In 2020, four months before the election, Biden was 9 points ahead in the polls. However, he eventually won the election with 51.25% of the popular vote, compared to Trump's 46.8%. This data suggests Biden may face a more challenging race in 2024 than 2020. When asked whether he could run the country for another term, he told ABC in a recent interview, "I believe so, I wouldn't be running if I didn't think I could. Look, I'm running again because I believe I understand best what has to be done to take this nation to a completely new level. We're on our way. Polls reveal that voters are more concerned about whether the 81-year-old President could manage another four years in the

White House than his 77-year-old predecessor. Biden needs to be more competent to win in November. Biden was confident when he said, "If the Lord Almighty came down and said, 'Joe, get out of the race,' I'd get out of the race," but added, "The Lord Almighty's not coming down." So, it is up to God Almighty to go down and ask him to keep out of the race. Trump quietly observes Biden's challenging position. India has had a good rapport with both Trump and Biden. There is also bipartisan support there. Therefore, it is unlikely that their South Asia and India policies will change, given the growing economic influence of India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also has a good rapport with both of them. Biden is facing challenges as he moves toward November. Trump has raised a lot of money and still has support from his party despite some court decisions going against him. Both candidates are trying to harm each other's reputation. Elections are unpredictable, especially with four months to go. Anything could happen.

The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Upgrade teaching standards in new technology



During the IT industry boom, many engineering colleges in India emerged without updated curricula, industry linkages,

or adequate student-faculty ratios. Except for IITs, some NITs, and a few private colleges, these institutions have failed to produce job-ready graduates. A survey by Aspiring Minds revealed that 86% of engineers are unemployable in the knowledge economy. Most private engineering colleges now focus on AI, ML, DS, and IoT, but 90% of their teachers lack fundamental knowledge in these fields. Teachers need continuous professional development through refresher courses and orientation programs to stay current. Teaching AI and Data Science requires a different approach than programming them. Addressing the gaps in teaching standards, particularly in emerging technologies, is crucial for preparing future engineers and maintaining the quality of education in India.

M Suresh Babu | Hyderabad

pose alternatives, and facilitate smooth functioning of the House. Gandhi's recent actions have portrayed him as a proactive leader, but he must be mindful of his conduct. The UK's National Service is working with Google to deploy AI in healthcare. Digital transformation empowers patients to manage their treatment independently and ensures that medical histories are readily accessible in emergencies, eliminating the need for physical files. Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

Yash Pal Raihan | Jalandhar

### ADDRESS MOB LYNCHING IN UP

Madam — In 2023, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced a provision for the death penalty for mob lynching under new criminal law. However, this commitment seems hollow in practice. In Shamli district, Uttar Pradesh, scrap dealer Firoz Qureshi was lynched by a mob, yet local authorities downplayed the incident as a mutual dispute. When journalists Zakir Ali Tyagi and Wasim Akram Tyagi reported on the

lynching, they faced FIRs for allegedly disturbing communal harmony. The Press Club of India has rightly called for the cancellation of these FIRs, emphasising that reporting publicly available information is a cornerstone of authentic journalism. The arbitrary use of laws to intimidate journalists violates Article 19(1)(A) of the Constitution. Upholding journalistic freedom is essential to maintaining a democratic society. Mob lynching must not be tolerated because it represents a severe breakdown of the rule of law and undermines the foundations of a civilized society. It fosters a climate of fear and impunity, where individuals take the law into their own hands, leading to tragic and often fatal outcomes. Such acts of violence erode trust in legal institutions, perpetuate communal hatred, and jeopardize the safety and rights of individuals.   
Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamshedpur

Send your feedback to: [letterstopioneer@gmail.com](mailto:letterstopioneer@gmail.com)



# The Statesman

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## Balanced Diplomacy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interaction with Russian President Vladimir Putin has captured global attention, underscoring the complexities of international diplomacy in times of conflict. Mr Modi's emotive reference to the tragic deaths of children in Ukraine, occurring during his visit to Moscow, reveals a significant and nuanced stance from India, balancing its strategic interests with a moral appeal for peace. Mr Modi's remarks are striking, not only because of their timing but also due to the context in which they were made. By expressing deep sorrow over the deaths of innocent children, the Prime Minister delivered an implicit rebuke to Mr Putin, a rare move for a leader of a nation that Russia considers a friend. This moment highlights the intricate dance of diplomacy, where words are carefully chosen to convey a message with a moral appeal for peace. Mr Modi's relationship with Russia is a testament to the enduring complexities of geopolitics. Historically, India has maintained a neutral stance, refraining from condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and opting instead to leverage opportunities like discounted oil amid Western sanctions on Moscow. This pragmatism has drawn criticism, particularly from Western nations, yet it reflects India's strategic calculations to secure its energy needs and bolster its economy. However, Mr Modi's recent comments signify a subtle yet important shift. By articulating his sorrow over the loss of innocent lives, Prime Minister Modi aligned himself with the global humanitarian discourse, subtly reminding Russia of the broader human costs of its actions. This move not only aims to project India as a credible mediator but also seeks to restore the international community's faith in India's commitment to peace and the principles of the United Nations.

For Russia, the deepening ties with India are crucial as it faces increasing isolation from the West. The emphasis on economic collaboration, from nuclear energy to space exploration, underscores Russia's strategic pivot towards Asia, seeking reliable partners to mitigate the impacts of Western sanctions. Mr Modi's visit, thus, serves as a reaffirmation of this partnership, even as it introduces an element of moral scrutiny. The broader implications of Mr Modi's remarks are significant. They highlight the potential role India could play in mediating the Ukraine conflict. As a major global player with longstanding ties to both Russia and the West, India is uniquely positioned to advocate for peaceful resolutions. Mr Modi's statement, suggesting that solutions cannot be found on the battlefield, but only through dialogue, reinforces this potential. Moreover, the timing of Mr Modi's remarks, juxtaposed with his visible camaraderie with Mr Putin, adds a layer of diplomatic sensitivity. It sends a message that while India values its partnership with Russia, it does not condone actions that result in the loss of innocent lives. This delicate balance of affirming strategic ties while advocating for humanitarian considerations is a hallmark of nuanced diplomacy. This nuanced stance not only reaffirms India's moral position but also enhances its credibility on the global stage.

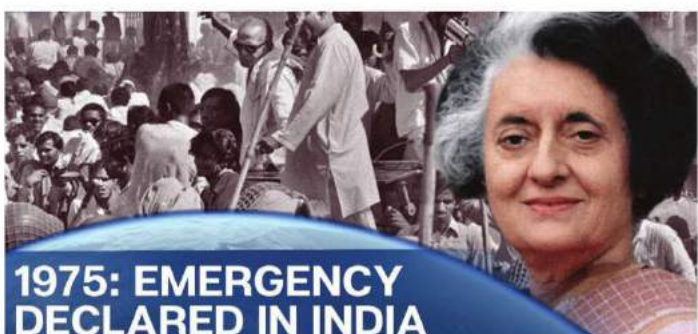
## Jobs Illusion

India's employment data presents a rosy picture at first glance, with substantial growth reported year on year. However, a deeper dive into these numbers reveals a more complex and troubling scenario. The distinction between employment and meaningful employment is critical, and it is here that India faces a significant challenge. Much of the reported job growth stems from self-employment, unpaid family labour, and temporary agricultural work. These roles, while technically counting as employment, do not provide the stability, income, or benefits associated with formal sector jobs. This discrepancy raises questions about the real health of the Indian labour market and the effectiveness of current employment policies. Self-employment and unpaid family work on farms or home-based production often signify a lack of better opportunities rather than a genuine choice. This discrepancy turns to these options out of necessity. In rural areas, where formal job opportunities are scarce, families rely on agriculture and other informal sectors to make ends meet. This kind of employment does not foster economic security or upward mobility. Instead, it perpetuates a cycle of poverty and uncertainty. The surge in agricultural employment is particularly concerning. Despite India's progress in various sectors, the economy remains heavily reliant on agriculture, which employs a large portion of the workforce but contributes a shrinking share to the GDP. This reliance on agriculture indicates regression rather than progress. Moving workers from agriculture to more productive and lucrative sectors is a key development goal that India is struggling to achieve. The quality of jobs is another crucial aspect. Formal jobs with regular wages and benefits are essential for economic stability and growth. They ensure workers have a steady income, access to healthcare, and other social protections. Unfortunately, only a small fraction of the Indian workforce enjoys these benefits. The majority are left to navigate the uncertainties of informal employment, which offers little in terms of job security or future prospects. Economic indicators further underscore the problem. Despite reported employment growth, consumption remains weak. This discrepancy suggests that the new jobs being created are not generating sufficient income to drive spending. For an economy to thrive, job growth must translate into increased consumption, which fuels demand and stimulates further economic activity. The current situation in India, where consumption growth lags behind GDP growth, highlights the disconnect between employment statistics and economic reality. The government's ambitious promises of job creation, while fully materialised, leading to growing discontent among the population. Investment in infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, and green energy sectors, as outlined in political manifestos, is essential. However, these investments must translate into quality jobs that provide stable incomes and improve living standards. Without this focus, employment growth figures will continue to mask deeper economic issues. India's employment challenge requires a multifaceted approach. Policymakers must prioritise the creation of formal sector jobs, invest in education and skills training to prepare the workforce for future opportunities, and ensure that economic growth benefits all segments of society.

Why didn't the organisers seek police help in managing the streaming crowd? How dare the volunteers refuse to cooperate

# Unfinished business

If the government of the day that rejoices 25th June as a black day every year is truly committed to undo the damages of the Emergency and not repeat its grave errors, it must notify the amendments made in Article 22 (4) to (7) by 44th Constitutional Amendment Act which are intrinsically related to the personal liberty of a citizen



## 1975: EMERGENCY DECLARED IN INDIA

The traumatic episode of emergency must act as a reminder of the responsibility of democratic institutions in always safeguarding the freedoms and rights of citizens. On 25 June 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi advised Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the then President of India, to declare a state of National Emergency under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution. This marked the beginning of a 21-month period that remains one of the most controversial and dark chapters in the post-independence political history of India.

The suspension of civil liberties and free speech, the arbitrariness in government actions, and the indiscriminate arrests of opposition leaders and dissenters under draconian preventive detention laws, among other measures, continue to haunt us even today.

The 1975-77 Emergency also witnessed embattled amendments which dented the spirit of constitutionalism. Citizens expected the apex court to intervene during this dark time but it instead capitulated to Indira Gandhi's autocratic tendencies. The court in A.D.M. Jabalpur v. Shivakant Shukla (1977) SC 1207, a severely criticized case, held that certain fundamental rights, including the right to liberty, did not survive the executive's proclamation of emergency. That decision only served to erode further the apex court's esteem.

Taking lessons from this hostile experience, the newly constituted Parliament on 30 April 1979 in exercise of its power under Article 368 of the Constitution passed the 44th Amendment.

The amendment was a major constitutional overhaul, passed by the Janata Party government to undo the regressive constitutional changes made during the Emergency of 1975-77 through the 42nd Amendment and to bring in safeguards against similar abuses of power by future governments.

The amendment restored the original position by ensuring that rights under Article 21

could not be suspended even during an Emergency.

Given the mass detentions of opposition leaders during the emergency, significant safeguards were added to Article 22 of the Constitution to tackle the evil of preventive detention (Section 3 of the Constitution 44th Amendment Act, 1978).

The vital features of the said section were: first, period of detention under any preventive detention act was reduced from three months to two months; second, the advisory board must give its opinion for extension of detention period beyond two months before the expiry of

two months; and third, the composition of the advisory board was specified so as to ensure the rule of law for the detenu in actual practice, so that justice is not only done but seen to be done in case of preventive detention.

The Board consists of a service judge of the appropriate High Court as the Chairman and two retired or serving High Court judges as members.

However, Section 1(2) provided that the provisions of the Constitution 44th Amendment Act 1978 shall come into force on such date as the Central Government may by notification in the official gazette provide and different dates may be appointed for different provisions of this Act.

Parliament conferred on the Union Government the discretion as to when it would bring the amendment into force by notification.

All the constitutional changes brought through the 44th Amendment were enforced by the then Janata Party government except the one that deals with improving and humanizing the preventive detention framework under the Constitution (Sections 1(2) and 3 of the amendment).

Two years later, Indira Gan-

dhi once again returned to power and enacted a new preventive detention law i.e. the National Security Act (NSA), 1980 which remains in effect till present.

The NSA authorizes the central government and the state governments to utilize preventive detention in certain cases. The central and state governments, as well as district magistrates and police commissioners, are empowered to detain any individual "with a view to preventing him from acting in any manner prejudicial to" various state objectives including national security and public order (section 3(1) (a)).

Any detention made under NSA has to be referred to an Advisory Board within three weeks from the date of detention (section 10). The board has to submit its report within seven weeks from the date of detention.

The Advisory Board is constituted by judges of the High Court or persons qualified to be appointed as judges of the High Court. But the person detained does not have the right to be legally represented.

Sometimes when governments fail, people get hope from the judiciary, especially the Supreme Court which has been entrusted with the guardianship of civil liberties in India.

The post-Emergency period saw serious efforts by the Supreme Court to recapture its legitimacy which was eroded during the emergency. In the Maneka Gandhi case (AIR 1978 SC 597) the Supreme Court squarely echoed that Articles 14, 19 and 21 offer a composite test for any legislative or executive action rather than examining it in silos.

It also enthusiastically supplemented "procedure established by law" in Article 21, with "due process" despite the extensive debates in the Constituent Assembly pointing to the contrary.

Yet, the attitude of the Supreme Court with respect to the preventive detention law did not change.

In this context, the SC got an opportunity to examine the constitutional validity of the National Security Act in A.K. Roy v. Union of India (AIR 1982 SC 719). The court not only upheld the validity of the NSA but also declined to ask the government to implement the amendments made in Article 22 (4) to (7) by 44th Constitutional Amendment Act.

However, in their dissenting note, Justices A.C. Gupta and V.D. Tulzapurkar reasoned that Parliament only gave the executive limited discretion to notify the provision within a "reasonable" time frame.

They also observed that the executive clearly was in a position to implement the amendment as a preventive detention law with similar safeguards had been passed initially, but these safeguards were removed from subsequent iterations of the law.

Even the majority in A.K. Roy observed that "Parliament could not have intended that the central government may exercise a kind of veto over its constituent will by not ever bringing the Amendment or some of its provisions into force." Forty-six years later, one wonders whether successive central governments have indeed effectively vetoed Parliament.

Since all other amendments of the various Acts under the same Constitution Amendment Act, 1978 have already been notified by the Government of India, this is nothing but hostile discrimination as far as personal liberty of a person detained under any preventive detention law is concerned. It is a fraud on the constitution.

If the government of the day that rejoices 25th June as a black day every year is truly committed to undo the damages of the Emergency and not repeat its grave errors, it must notify the amendments made in Article 22 (4) to (7) by 44th Constitutional Amendment Act which are intrinsically related to the personal liberty of a citizen.

## ASIAN VOICES

## China, Bangladesh always cooperate toward a better future

At the invitation of Premier Li Qiang, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is paying an official visit to China from Monday to Wednesday. This is Sheikh Hasina's fifth visit to China and her first in five years.

This visit is of historic significance, as it will enable the two sides to build on the past achievements and forge bilateral relations in the future. During the visit, Sheikh Hasina will hold meetings with Chinese leaders. The visit, therefore, will inject vibrant impetus into bilateral relations and cooperation in various fields, and help make new achievements in the China-Bangladesh strategic partnership of cooperation and elevate bilateral ties to new heights.

A modern town built by a Chinese company on a plot of barren land in Khulna, Bangladesh, aims to provide support for a large power plant. [Photo by Ma Rui/For chinadaily.com.cn]

The friendship between China and Bangladesh was founded and nurtured by the older generation of leaders of both countries. In the 49 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, China and Bangladesh have always respected and treated each other as equals, pursued mutual benefit and win-win results, supported each other on issues concerning each other's core interests, and worked together on the basis of equality and their respective development and revitalization.

CHINADAILY tion, thus setting a shining example of friendly coexistence and win-win cooperation.

The amicable cooperation between China and Bangladesh exhibits strong vitality, dynamism and growth potential, is not targeted at any third party, and is welcomed and supported by people of both countries, contributing to regional and international peace and stability, as well as fostering development and prosperity.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reiterated that China is Bangladesh's most trustworthy development partner and most reliable friend. This is the most vivid portrayal of the relationship between the two countries.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations 49 years ago, China and Bangladesh have made remarkable achievements in their respective national construction, economic development and modernization drive. China has become the world's second-largest economy, won the biggest poverty-alleviation battle in history, built a moderately prosperous society in all respects on schedule, and advanced the great cause of building China into a strong country and achieving national rejuvenation through Chinese modernization.

Bangladesh seeks to be self-reliant in feeding nearly 180 million Bangladeshis people, and to maintain long-term political stability and realize rapid economic development. The country's average annual GDP growth rate in the past decade has exceeded 6 percent, and its GDP is more than \$450 billion and per capita GDP nearly \$2,000. Its economic strength has risen to the second place in South Asia. Bangladesh has transformed from one of the poorest countries into one of the fastest growing economies in the world, leading South Asian countries in terms of life expectancy, literacy, and female labour force participation rate, performing what is popularly called the "Bay of Bengal Miracle" and becoming one of the leaders in the Global South.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

## Dera culture

SIR, The tragic Hathras stampede during a religious congregation that claimed over a hundred lives and left several injured has once again caused serious nationwide concern about public safety as noted in your editorial, "Tragedy in Hathras", 4 July.

The mayhem has also brought the role of the political executive, the bureaucracy and the organisers who violated the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)'s guidelines on managing crowds at events and venues of mass gatherings under a scanner and raised questions that need solid answers.

Why did the local administration allow the gathering of devotees beyond the permissible limit on the basis of false information? Why was not spot inspection about the security arrangement carried out? Why was the police arrangement inadequate? Why didn't the organisers seek police help in managing the streaming crowd? How dare the volunteers refuse to cooperate

their tariffs. The focus now is on Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman who could give some respite to the common man by reducing the price of essential commodities.

It seems strange that before she could address these genuine issues, coalition partners of the

BJP, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu have demanded special grants of Rs 50,000 crore each for their states.

Over the last ten years, the better days had never come for the people of this country, despite

ROCKY FUTURE SIR, Please refer to today's report "Initiate action against wrong beneficiaries: SC". The way ahead for 24 lakh medical aspirants looks rocky. Deliberations on entrance test NEET's question paper leak are shipping into a maze. The Supreme Court said that a retest is a non-starter. Measures taken so far have been drops in the ocean of overhaul required.

Ninety-three candidates have been debarred, and an SC-directed re-test was conducted to correct NTA's very own grace-marks fiddle. In the uncertainty, counselling, the next step of allotting colleges, has been indefinitely delayed.

That means 13 lakh candidates who qualified have been left high and dry. The academic calendar indefinitely delayed, it's clear that NEET, introduced as a reform, has plunged medical education into chaos. What is unfolding this year with NEET-UG - there's no end in sight for students' anxiety is making it more than evident that centralisation of tests can derail an entire academic year, and future of students. That conversation must also be renewed.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 10 July.

Mrs Sitharaman who is heading the finance ministry for the third time, bring in radical changes and reforms or will she surrender to the wishes of coalition partners?

Yours, etc., Janga Bahadur Sunuwar, Bagrakote, 9 July.





## Secular remedy

**Muslim women's right to maintenance under secular laws is well established**

holding that a divorced Muslim woman is not barred from invoking the secular remedy of seeking maintenance under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), the Supreme Court of India has done well to clarify an important question concerning the impact of a 1986 law that appeared to restrict their relief to what is allowed in Muslim personal law alone. The enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, was a watershed moment that is seen as having undermined the country's secular ethos by seeking to nullify a Court judgment in the Shah Bano case (1985), which allowed a divorced Muslim woman to apply for maintenance from a magistrate under Section 125 of the CrPC. Subsequently, the 1986 law was upheld by a Constitutional Bench in 2001 after coming close to declaring its provisions unconstitutional for discriminating against Muslim women. The Act was declared valid after the Bench read it down in such a way as not to foreclose the secular remedy for Muslim women. Several High Court judgments took different views on whether Muslim women should avail of Section 3 of the 1986 Act or Section 125 of CrPC. The latest verdict by a Bench of Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice Augustine George Masih settles this question by holding that the codification of a Muslim woman's rights in the 1986 Act — including the right to maintenance during the *iddat* period, provision for a dignified life until she remarries, and return of *mahr* and dowry — was only in addition to and not in derogation of her right to seek maintenance like a woman of any other religion.

Justice Masih, in his main opinion, concludes that both the personal law provision and the secular remedy for seeking maintenance ought to exist in parallel in their distinct domains. While the CrPC may be invoked by a woman if she was unable to maintain herself, the 1986 Act makes it a Muslim husband's obligation to provide for his divorced wife and her children up to a certain point. Justice Nagarathna, in her concurring opinion, looks at the social purpose behind the provision for maintenance in the CrPC, namely that it aims to prevent vagrancy among women by compelling the husband to support his wife. The 1986 Act codified the right available to a Muslim woman in personal law. This right is in addition to, and not at the cost of, the rights available in existing law. The verdict is a great example of the Court using harmonious interpretation to expand the scope of rights as well as to secularise access to remedies. In the process, the Court has also neutralised the perception that the right of Muslim women to seek maintenance under secular provisions stood extinguished since 1986.

## Can of worms

**The government must ensure greater transparency in NEET**

Trust can be everything, in governance. The can of worms that split open with the publication of results of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-UG-2024 has elevated the entrance examination for medical (and dental) seats to a metaphor for distrust in the system, among the people. This year, dogged by accusations of paper leak, malpractices, and technical failures, besides the grant of grace marks to some students, NEET, which was conceived to homogenise selection on merit, has now morphed into a beast that is far removed from its original idea. The Supreme Court of India, on Thursday, rescheduled the NEET-UG hearing to July 19, to address complaints regarding irregularities and malpractices during the exam conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA). A CBI investigation into the charges is ongoing. Meanwhile, the Centre has leaned heavily on a report, a data analysis, submitted by IIT Madras, examining the results to see if malpractices have occurred. The report's executive summary claimed that there was no abnormality that was discovered in a centre and city-wise analysis that was done for two years. The analysis was carried out for the top 1.4 lakh ranks in the country. It further stated that there was no evidence of either mass malpractice or a localised set of candidates benefiting. The overall increase of marks among students, a charge that was laid out initially, is attributed to the 25% reduction in syllabus, and it confirms that this occurred across multiple cities. However, outrage among student applicants on social media continues.

While NEET is no stranger to controversy, with States opposing it, the charges that have been levelled against it this year have had the effect of invoking distrust against the test among a larger subset of chary students across the country. The only way to move forward from here is to ensure that the issue is debated transparently on public platforms and all doubt is removed, instead of trying to sweep the worms that have spilled out under the carpet. Loud denials of malpractice should be matched with the willingness to engage with those affected in a public forum and provide clarifications. Where errors have taken place, as is possible in an exercise of this scale, it behoves a proper acknowledgement and apology. When trust is violated, the reparation for it should sometimes be utter honesty. For the longer term, the government must introduce greater limpidity in the examination process, and make sure that the NTA and its line agencies remain committed to maintaining transparency. It might also be the opportunity to set right other issues raised about the conduct of the examination itself, including security checks on students.

# Reading the tea leaves ahead of China's Third Plenum



M.K. Narayanan

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

Commentators in the West have been stating for some time that it was time to move beyond the rosy vision of a post-Cold War world, as, according to them, Moscow and Beijing (and certain other states aligned with them) could no longer be expected to become responsible stakeholders within a rules-based international order. Against this backdrop, considerable attention is being devoted to the Third Plenum of China's 20th Party Congress for signs of a possible thaw. There is a lingering hope that the plenum, scheduled to be held from July 15-18, might signify a shift in policy and a change in direction, at least as far as China is concerned. Pessimism is, nevertheless, rife in the West that China would ever subscribe to the idea that the security of every country is intimately linked to the security of the other. Yet, China is well known to spring surprises.

Meantime, a belief exists in the West that China had 'peaked' economically following its disastrous 'Zero COVID' policy. Also, that China's economy is still in terminal decline. Hence, the plenum might well pave the way for a change in direction, unlikely though it might look as of now. There is, thus, considerable interest, all around, about the eventual outcome of the plenum.

### Economic reforms, issues

The fact that the date of the Third Plenum has been advanced this time — it normally takes place in October or November of the year following the standard Five Year Party Congress interval — has spurred this speculation that China is contemplating sweeping reforms to ensure China's rapid progress in the period ahead. Third Plenums typically set the economic strategy for the next five to 10 years, and are generally viewed as the most crucial Plenum in the Central Committee's five-year cycle. Across the world, many still recall that it was at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Party Congress in December 1978 that Deng Xiaoping unveiled a whole new range of economic reforms that set China on the path of economic resurgence.

That China has economic problems is not denied: an ageing population, shrinking workforce, high levels of debt, and an economy that is still facing problems, notwithstanding the measures that have been put in place. This has given rise to a great deal of pessimism within China itself about its future. Hopes are high that the Plenum will come out with certain new guidelines that would at least convey an impression to the people and the world outside that China's economy is in good shape.

It has been a long time since any meeting devoted almost entirely to economic reforms has

been programmed by the leaders of China's Communist Party. Most outside experts, however, are uncertain whether the plenum would indeed provide China an opportunity to experiment with new ideas. Further, that the current leadership would do so. Understandably, China's 'Maximum Leader', Xi Jinping, is hardly in a position to repeat what Deng Xiaoping said at the plenum in 1978 (which was held after Mao's demise), that China had been 30% wrong, though 70% right. This would amount to an admission of failure on Mr. Xi's part, which could impact his future.

### The view about China's 'intentions'

The West's drumbeat of allegations against China is, meanwhile, set to continue. Notwithstanding the outcome of the plenum deliberations, they will convince themselves that China's 'gray zone coercion' tactics are likely to continue. Activities such as 'disinformation' campaigns, interference in elections in democracies, military provocations in the seas around China, within and outside the First and Second Island Chains, the threat to Taiwan and countries in the South and East China Seas will, they claim, remain. Taiwan would also continue to remain the centrepiece of China's military and propaganda offensive.

Countries in Asia in particular, may, therefore, need to contend specifically with the threat posed by a mix of Chinese values, cultural expansionism, and national security paranoia. China's Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) well encompass many of China's beliefs, leaving little scope for any adjustment. Having elevated the issue of national security to the highest level, Mr. Xi in turn sees danger everywhere. And this increases the paranoia about China's intentions in Asia, as also elsewhere.

China's approach is, thus, likely to add a great deal of 'flux' to an already difficult regional and global situation. It could also pose a dilemma for India's policymakers. For many years now, and more so since 2020, India's relations with China have remained under deep strain. This is not solely due to the tense situation prevailing on the China-India border, but has been the catalyst. As far as the border is concerned, the Chinese still demonstrate little 'give', despite India indicating a willingness to show more flexibility.

The result of all this is that both China and India appear to be hardening their attitudes. Already, reams are being written in India about the size of Beijing's growing missile and nuclear inventory. China's approach to the deployment of dual capability missiles is being adversely commented upon. Members from India's

strategic community also continue to draw attention to the danger posed by China's Rocket Force (which oversees its nuclear and conventional missiles), and about the advances made by China in space and electronic warfare. The broad hint is that India should prepare for the worst, and take adequate steps in the event of a confrontation.

The issue, therefore, is whether a confrontation is inevitable, or whether an attempt could be made to deflect China's 'evil intentions' through diplomacy and other means. This has no relationship to the relative difference in China's and India's force structure, and is intended, at best, to avoid any misadventure through wrong signalling. There is no hint forthcoming, that China would respond positively to such overtures, given China's hard line stance and its aggressive intent. This is, however, as good a time as any for any experimentation, given that the economic and the strategic consequences of a conflict would be grim for both countries.

### Where India stands

Today, India is far better positioned than China to take such an initiative. It is on the cusp of becoming a 'major' from a 'middle level' power. Its economic parameters are among the best in the world at present. It has a strong and focused leadership and has friends across the spectrum in all corners of the world. An initiative on India's part at this time would not be seen as a sign of weakness; it would be tantamount to a major initiative in favour of world peace. In the long history of China-India rivalry and conflict, from the early 1960s till date, there have been many periods when India has taken the initiative, and on occasions with spectacular outcomes. In the realm of diplomacy, place names such as Sumdorong Chu and Wangdang still reverberate. In terms of grand initiatives, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's path-breaking visit to China in 1988 and his discussions with Deng Xiaoping at the time, ensured almost three decades of peace for India and the world.

The situation today is again less tense than during many periods in the past. 'Peace is not at hand', but India today holds a stronger card, vis-à-vis China, than at any time in modern history. Mr. Xi invoking a relevance to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (Panchsheel by India) in Beijing (to mark the 70th anniversary of the Panchsheel) could well provide the opportunity for India to embark on a grand new initiative. It is India's choice to do so or not. What is certain is that to have a successful result would be highly beneficial for India and China, Asia and the world.

# Breaking the taboo around men's reproductive health



Dr. Priyanka Parke

Scientist F, Indian Council of Medical Research, National Institute for Research in Reproductive and Child Health (ICMR-NIRRH)

exposure to certain infections. External factors such as environmental pollution and an indiscriminate use of pesticides on crops, plastics, and plasticisers can also affect fertility and influence the epigenetic makeup. Lifestyle factors such as diets, sleep patterns, work schedules, and consumption of alcohol and tobacco also play a major role. Adding to these factors is a growing preference for late marriages among youth, creating challenges due to declining sperm quality with age.

While the challenges listed above may appear daunting, male reproductive health can be safeguarded through various lifestyle interventions. First and foremost, it is imperative to be aware of reproductive and sexual health and the factors that influence it, particularly during the formative period from secondary school to junior college. Here, parents, particularly fathers, play a critical role and must educate their sons on the issue. At an individual level, young men should proactively adopt good lifestyle practices, ensuring healthy eating, regular sleep patterns, and eliminating the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other intoxicants. While mobile phones and laptops have become occupational hazards in most fields, their excessive use, in proximity to the body, should be avoided. Stress is a major deterrent to reproductive health, and regular exercise, yoga, and meditation can go a long way in reducing its adverse effects on well-being. Couples together must also adopt such healthy lifestyle practices to safeguard their reproductive health and enhance their well-being.

### Treatment options

While lifestyle interventions play a critical preventative role, it is also important to discuss

treatments available for those grappling with infertility. Treatment options are varied, and their efficacy depends on the cause and the form of infertility. It is important to seek help from a medical professional to identify and treat the issue. The medical professional will guide the person to undergo a routine semen analysis, conducted after a two to seven day period of sexual abstinence (WHO recommended). If the issue is physical or anatomical such as blocked sperm flow, undescended testicles, or an abnormal urethral opening, these can be fixed with surgery. If the issue is an absence of sperm, then treatments such as intra cytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) should be undertaken. Alternatively, couples facing this issue can also opt for donor sperm insemination or adoption. In cases where the sperm count is very low, there is a chance for the couple to conceive naturally if sperm motility is very good. However, if both sperm count and motility are low, intrauterine insemination (IUI), in vitro fertilisation (IVF), or ICSI are advocated. In cases of male infertility due to gene mutations, genetic counselling is of utmost importance before seeking the support of assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF and ICSI.

With millions of couples in India facing infertility issues, there is an urgent need for open and informed discussions on reproductive health. It is time to recognise and address the significant issue of male reproductive health. Awareness building, sex education, and timely medical interventions are key to supporting couples on their journey to parenthood. By breaking the taboo surrounding male infertility and fostering a more informed and supportive environment, we can help many couples realise their dream of having children.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Court on maintenance

The Supreme Court of India's verdict (Page 1, "Divorced Muslim women entitled to secular remedy: SC," July 11) will truly empower them financially and socially. This is just another landmark judgment by the apex Court after *Mary Roy vs The State Of Kerala* (1986) that gave equal rights to Syrian Christian women as their male siblings in matters of inheritance.

N.A. Joseph, Elnamoor, Kottayam, Kerala

The Court ruling is not only the need of the times but

would also go a long way in empowering divorced Muslim women. It will protect their individuality and enhance their self-respect. C.G. Kuriaose, Kothamangalam, Kerala

### Judge on the homemaker

Justice B.V. Nagarathna of the Supreme Court of India has hit the mark in her comments on a lack of emotional and financial security that many Indian women homemakers face (inside pages, July 11).

Financial empowerment is only the second stage in the journey towards financial

independence. The first step is financial awareness. In most Indian homes, all financial decisions are taken by the man without even consulting his wife, even in those cases where the wife contributes to the household income. Every Indian woman should be aware of the state of the household balance sheet. This alone will enable her to help make the right monetary decisions. It will also relieve some of the burden on the husband who is expected to know everything about finance.

Sharada Sivaram, Ernakulam, Kerala

As patriarchy is deeply entrenched in our society, men cannot be expected to heed the advice of Justice Nagarathna and do "justice" by sharing their income with their wives. The passing of a law that makes working men to share a percentage of their income, say 10%, with their wives to meet their personal needs, over and

above the amount being given towards household expenses, may be the solution. Such a law would definitely help in increasing awareness about the necessity for the financial independence of homemaker housewives and, eventually, a change in the mindset of men. Kosaraju Chandramouli, Hyderabad

### Corrections & Clarifications

In a report, "Ahead of Congress leader's visit, firing reported in Jiribat" (inside pages, July 8, 2024), a sentence in the third paragraph read, "The houses were occupied, the police said." It should have been "Neither of the houses were occupied, the police said."

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**U.S. presidential race**  
U.S. President Joe Biden should end his reelection bid. This would not only be in the interests of the United States and the Democrats but also in his own best interest. (World page, July 11). By doing so, he would escape defeat at the hands of Donald Trump and also preserve the legacy of his long and illustrious career. Such a step would also provide the Democrats with an option to field an energetic and fresh face who can take on Mr. Trump. Rajadev Mahanta, Guwahati, Assam





## CONTRAPUNTO

Love is grand. Divorce is a hundred grand.

—SHINICHI SUZUKI

## Cross Vote On Mind

Today's MLC election in Maharashtra is a trailer to the potboiler that the state's assembly polls will be

It's match time again in Maharashtra. If the Lok Sabha election was considered a semifinal to Oct 5's high-stakes assembly poll, the vote today to elect 11 legislative council members is no less significant. Maharashtra, one of six states with a legislative council, has 78 members, 30 of whom are elected by MLAs. All eyes are on the 274 MLAs expected to cast their vote today to elect these 11 members from 12 candidates.

**Cross currents** | If all goes to plan—and safe to say no one expects it to—Mahayuti is set to win 9. BJP has 5 nominees, Shinde Sena 2 and Aji Pawar 2. MVA has fielded 3, though it can win two, given its numbers in the lower house. Then there's the Uddhav Thackeray's swing. "We wouldn't have fielded a third nominee had we not been confident." It's crunch time.

**Simply cross** | Flashback to June 2023's MLC election has parties jittery. Matters started unravelling for then CM Uddhav's MVA govt.

with cross-voting in that MLC election. MVA legislators cross-voted, resulting in Congress losing one of its two allotted seats, which came as a shock right after a Rajya Sabha loss. At the time, Fadnis had explained the cross-vote as fallout of a "lot of anger in MVA". It was soon followed by Eknath Shinde's claim on the party and walkout with MLAs.

**Fingers crossed** | With 29 of 48 LS seats now in its kitty, MVA is banking on cross-votes mostly from Shinde Sena and Aji Pawar's NCP. That's why Mahayuti and UBT Sena corralled their MLAs into luxury safe-houses, Mumbai's five-star hotels.

An MLC winner needs 23 first-preference votes. BJP has 103 MLAs, Shinde Sena 38, Aji Pawar NCP 42, Congress 37, UBT Sena 15 and Sharad Pawar NCP 10. Prakash Ambedkar's BVA has 3 and he has fallen out with MVA. SP has 2, AIMM 2, PJP 2 and 7 parties have a each. There are 10 independent MLAs. There's plenty on to ensure MLAs stay in place, and to snag the "non-aligned" MLAs votes.

**Lines crossed** | In a right-earliest fight are the two Senas and two NCPs. It is here that loyalty lines blur. Aji Pawar, especially, finds himself putting out videos in self-praise even as uncle Sharad Pawar says his arms, and doors, are open to MLAs who followed the nephew to Mahayuti. Mahayuti is also hawk-eyed on UBT's surprise nominee, Milind Narvekar—with cross-party influence and camaraderie. It's jittery all around.

## In Poor Test

That UGC-NET may have been cancelled over a false alarm shows how broken the system is

If more proof were needed of the way the exam system is run in this country, we have it through news reports about UGC-NET being cancelled on the basis of non-credible evidence. CBI, investigating the UGC-NET "paper leak", has apparently found a screenshot of question paper on Telegram on the day of exam was posted AFTER it was conducted.

**From one extreme to other** | Talk of a knee-jerk reaction. It tests credibility that authorities made a momentous decision impacting more than 9L students without a thorough investigation. This must be contrasted with the extreme reluctance shown by NTA to acknowledge irregularities in NEET-UG held earlier, for which there was good evidence. The latest revelation is also bound to raise questions if there was sufficient reason to postpone the safer CBT-based CSIR-NET. There is more to this year's UGC-NET that is baffling. It was held in pen-and-paper mode after years of offline computer exams. UGC was behind the switch and it went ahead without a full-strength commission being in place and minus any committee's recommendations. Clearly, no questions were asked.

**Acting in haste** | What these events highlight is that ad hocism, rather than due deliberation, is behind such decisions. And saving face when things go wrong overrides the objective of fixing the exam system. This is more than evident in the official stance before SC in NEET-UG case. To SC's queries over a retest, education ministry & NTA continue to insist, despite evidence to the contrary, that the leak was localised and the overall exam was not compromised. Such an approach might bail them out this time, but there is no guarantee we won't face the same situation in the future—unless the high-powered committee looking into exam reforms goes for a thorough overhaul of the system.

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## Fed up with London

The capital city of Britain serves up the whole wide world on a plate

Jug Surajya



Over the past few weeks, Bunny and I have eaten in Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, China, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Jamaica, Argentina and Brazil.

And we've been to all these places, food-wise, without moving out of Central London. When we first came to London in 1972, Britain was the butt of much snarky humour because of its wet, gloomy weather and its stodgy food.

In the years since then, there's been a sea change in Britain, and in London in particular, which has become a multicultural and multi-culinary society, thanks to successive waves of immigration from far-flung corners of the globe.

While the weather and large remnants as determinedly damp and downcast as ever, contemporary London is an amalgam of international cuisine to rival that of NYC, famed for its gastronomic cosmopolitanism.

During our first week in London's Camden Town we had steaks in Argentina, which transported us to distant Buenos Aires, City of Beautiful Breezes, magically relocated to a diner 15-minute stroll from our apartment.

The next day we strolled another 15 minutes to Vietnam to savour pho, a delicately flavoured noodle soup that the country is justly famed for.

A short bus and Tube ride gets us to Brazil, transported to Brixton Market via our friend Lee whose cafe specialises in savoury crepes with a South American flair inspired by the biquinhos, small red peppers, that give a tang of tropical sun to London's leaden skies.

Pedro and his Mum, Elizabeth, welcome us to Lisbon in their Camden restaurant, which does several tempting takes on bacalhau, the mainstay of Portuguese menus.

Chief Roger's kitchen, two minutes from us, carries us to the Caribbean with its curry goat and plantain fritters. Andy's always crowded taverna opens a gateway to Greece, with its kleftiko, and in an eatery named after a Batak (Uncle) named Don, we visit Malaysia through an irresistible Nasi Goreng.

London, which serves up the planet on a plate, has us, as the saying goes, totally fed up and fulfilled.

## Aimony &amp; Ghost Of Shah Bano

Muslim women cannot be left destitute by misinterpreting the 1986 law, SC has said. What this also implies is that every Indian is free to live their life under secular law if they choose

Mikira Sood



This week saw 90s revivalism from an unlikely quarter—the Supreme Court once again ruled that a Muslim woman is entitled to seek maintenance under secular law, and her rights are not restricted to the provisions of Muslim personal law. The impact of its similar ruling nearly 40 years ago can hardly be overstated.

**Shah Bano case** | In 1978, a woman named Shah Bano sought maintenance from her husband under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code for herself and their five children. They had been married for 43 years when he remarried and threw her out of the house.

The MP high court ordered a monthly payment of ₹750 against Shah Bano's husband, and, a lawyer, filed an appeal in SC arguing that as per Muslim law, he was only required to pay her during the *iddat* period—the three months after divorce during which she is not permitted to remarry.

It was then Chief Justice of India YV Chandrachud who headed the bench in 1983 that accepted her plea. The court recognised her circumstances, and held that limiting the rights of a woman in this manner would be unjust, and that secular law applies to all, irrespective of religion.

**1986 Act** | The political fallout of this decision drove the Rajiv Gandhi govt to pass the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act, 1986, effectively nullifying the Shah Bano ruling by establishing itself as a comprehensive code for Muslim women. It provided for a "reasonable and fair" maintenance during the *iddat* period for a wife, and for children up to the age of 2 years.

If she was unable to maintain herself or her children after this period, responsibility would fall not on her ex-husband, but any relatives who stood to inherit from her, falling which the Waqf Board would have to

provide for her. Under secular law, maintenance may be payable for life or until the woman remarries, and for children till the age of majority.

**Subsequent cases** | A slew of petitions was filed challenging the constitutionality of the 1986 law, notably by Daniel Latifi, who had been Shah Bano's lawyer. He argued that the provision for maintenance was illusory and menacing, and not extending secular law to Muslims was discriminatory. The court held that if a Muslim woman was placed in

**The present case** | This was the reasoning adopted in the present case of Mohd Abdul Samad vs State of Telangana as well. If a husband opposes a claim being made under Section 125, it can only be if he has already made adequate payments and the wife is capable of maintaining herself. Personal law was not in derogation of secular law, but in addition to it.

The ruling also relied on the principle that laws should not be interpreted to achieve an absurd outcome, and deliberately leaving a woman destitute would be the kind of absurdity that could not have been Parliament's intent.

Importantly, the judgment recognised the social reality that women, regardless of their economic class or education level, tend to shoulder the responsibility of managing the home, looking after children and family elders, leaving them financially unequal to, and dependent on, men. Homemakers who have sacrificed career opportunities for the sake of the family are equally entitled to the standard of living that they enjoyed previously. Maintenance is therefore not a question of charity or unfairly favouring women, but a necessary part of furthering gender equality and ensuring that women can live with dignity.

What the court did not say, but is a welcome outcome of the ruling, is the recognition that a person can belong to a particular community and still choose to live their life under secular law. Communities are not monoliths, and their leaders do not always speak for the smallest minorities within them—individuals, and especially women.

That is why the idea of a Uniform Civil Code that was raised in Shah Bano case as well, it was supported by many liberals and feminists till the political journey of the 1980s and early 90s (impacted in no small measure by the fallout of the Shah Bano ruling) lent it a communal colour. Today, that project has started to unravel and only hope it is guided by ideals of secularism and gender equality as envisaged by the courts, and not religious majoritarianism.

The writer is a lawyer and scholar in the field of women's rights.

## Whistle Of Felix, Foot Of Kane &amp; Hand Of God

Bad refereeing has crucial impact on sport. Penalty awarded to England in Euro semis is latest example. It also shows using tech in sport isn't foolproof. But English can stop cribbing about Maradona &amp; 1986

Siddharth Saxena @timesofindia.com



Each year on June 22, devotees of the Church of Maradona pay homage to that one act of the man, which they believe was his greatest miracle. This year, the 38th anniversary of the Hand of God goal fell during the Euros and Copa America football tournaments, giving it a newer meaning.

Nothing like current-day top-drawer football to whip up trauma of an old robbery.

In his retirement days, notoriously wild ones, Maradona wined and dined with the Tunisian referee Ali Benneuer, who famously turned a blind eye to what is arguably the most polarising moment in world football. If you belonged to the North and Europe, this was the greatest act of cheating. If you came from the Global South, he was revered as God. Maradona would later obliquely admit that he did cheat, saying some years ago that the goal would never have happened had video technology been available then. "I would have been arrested," the Argentinean cheekily declared.

**Lucky break** | In Munich at the Euros the other evening, England, who had been at the receiving end of Maradona's sleight of hand in 1986, this time found technology coming to their aid. It was in the semifinal against the Netherlands, and it came in such a way, perhaps, that it was a gift that kept on giving.

The last German left in their home competition—referee Felix Zwayer, who was once banned for six months in 2006 for match-fixing in the Bundesliga—

awarded England a penalty midway through the first half. Nothing, the Harry Kane duly converted in near-perfect fashion, "the impossible save" as penalty spotters would exclaim. The equaliser would completely change the balance of the high-stakes semifinals in the world's second most watched football tournament, shifting the momentum favourably towards England and pushing on to the backfoot, the Dutch who had taken an early lead thanks to a terrific strike by their prodigious Kai Havertz.

**Unlucky tech** | What happened really? This modern-day Foot of Kane has immediately caused so much turmoil among fans the world over, delecting the invasion of technology to arbitrate in sport, the rigid interpretations of the rules and crucially whether the human element is slowly being made to leave the scene.

**Ominous review** | Zwayer initially seemed to do nothing, but the Kane attempt that ballooned over the Dutch goal and the immediate whistling on the floor clutching his right foot that followed, after Dutch defender Denzel Dumfries' extended foot caught the England captain's in mid-flight. Ball back in play, the referee blew for a Dutch goal-kick to resume hostilities till he got a call on his earpiece summoning him to the side-line TV—a visit to the in-stadium ATM, as the Germans old joke.

But in this case, given that the German

assumed had once been on the take, it resurfaced ominous overtones.

**Cold VAR bosses** | TV replays showed that Dumfries' was a reaction attempt to block the shot, as any defender's job description is, and was in no way a tackle on Kane. But the call from the VAR room probably meant to invoke cold latter of the law, rather than personal interpretation. VAR bosses deemed Dumfries' intent as currying favour, even if contact was made after Kane had got his shot.

Perhaps, the minority of the situation got to the German referees, somewhere seeking to correct his previously tarnished image, and this was perhaps a perfect opportunity to make amends.

**Football's not cricket** | In cricket, the arbiter of technology to decide leg-before appeals, caught before and run-outs—even VZS1000 deciding catches, as happened on the Bridgetown ropes the other day—has kind of saved the on-field umpire from crucial decision making, and thus, you could argue, relieve him of any moral

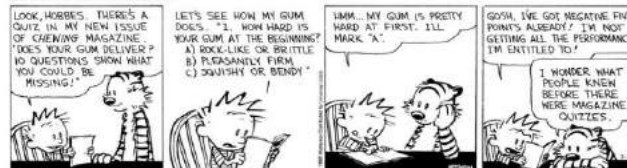
dilemma and responsibility in case of an error. But the one thing that they have retained so far is the umpire's call, which gives the man at the stumps the onus to change or stick to his original decision.

In football, with the stakes riding so high, a visit to the TV usually means a reversal of the referee's original decision, which as a moral obligation. Yet, in the Spain-Germany quarterfinal, England referee Anthony Taylor—who gave out 15 yellow and one red card—was firm in his interpretation of Spanish defender Marc Cucurella's handball as being not deliberate.

**Foggy French** | Another counter to last night's penalty goal, could be the recent French Open tennis final between Alexander Zverev and Carlos Alcaraz. On a crucial point in the deciding fifth set, a disputed line call went in favour of the Spaniard. Replays later clearly showed it was out, but at the traditionalist Open, where calls are decided by the ball marking on the clay, the chair umpire insisted that it was in. The German Zverev lost the final, and later said the absence of electronic line calling at the day court Major. The French Open will introduce the technology from next year onwards, but for the record, Zverev would have been deprived of a great chance. "It is what it is," he would philosophically say later.

**Burying the ghost** | "It is what it is," is probably what the Dutch would be telling themselves as they head home, and also what Kane and Co would be beginning to understand. That finally, after years of cynicism, and years of feeling robbed by Maradona in 1986, the shoe is on the other foot—the Foot of Kane.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## The Yogi Identifies And Accepts His Distractions

Soham Bhaduri

In seeking the sought, the seeker denies that the sought is already there and acknowledges that what is already there isn't what is sought.

Raj Yogi follows an elaborate regimen to steer clear of bodily and mental distractions before he can expect to attain his goal of union with the absolute, the Brahman. The stages set through the practice of the five yamas and niyamas. Specific asanas help achieve a posture that is neither forceful nor unbearable. Breathing techniques help slow and harmonise breathing so the rushing air doesn't constitute a distraction. The senses are closed, and concentration is focused on an object to restrain the ever-tossing and turning mind. Only when there are met can the yogi experience the pure, undifferentiated Brahman. But

what about the multitudes who falter along the difficult road? What about those who fail to distil the undifferentiated Brahman from the differential maya?

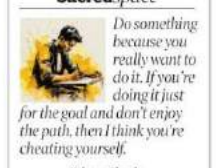
We naturally tend towards and oppose the things that we desire and that we do not. This resistance often leads to frustration, making things worse. Opposing and resisting is not the union we're striving for. Feelings only make them stronger. What is the way out? It goes by a simple mantra: "Control what you do, accept what you feel."

Anxious thoughts have just one goal: perpetuating anxiety and making you even more anxious. Negative thoughts aim to instil in you despair and pessimism. Acceptance defangs them, leaving them no choice but to starve and succumb. The accepting mind lets

thoughts and feelings come as they do and lets them be.

Acceptance is the most powerful arrow in the faltering yogi's quiver. How do we practice acceptance? By recognising and clinging to the thread of consciousness that binds everything, to the omnipresent beingness that straddles all that is and isn't. The voice that never betrays and that endures no matter how long it takes to believe, in true sense, that their distractions are alien to Brahman. That maya, being limited, is an unethical to Brahman. Or that Brahman is reached by distilling off the differential maya. For what becomes of Brahman if there's anything apart from Brahman? What is Brahman if it's not consciousness, the ultimate reality, and what becomes of the ultimate reality if there's anything other than itself? What

## Sacred space



## The Yogi Identifies And Accepts His Distractions

limits the limited is nothing but Brahman, as is what lies beyond the limited, and the limited itself. Brahman is as much what is distilled off as the distillate itself, as much what the yogi rejects as what he seeks.

Brahman isn't "not this, not that" but "this, as well as that." Brahman is both the differential and the undifferentiated. What the yogi seeks is not different from what is already there, including that which he avoids. By clinging to the thread of all-perceiving consciousness, the yogi identifies and accepts his distractions as nothing but forms of the same Brahman that he seeks. In them, the yogi sees, nothing but Brahman, out and out, and stops resisting them. And thus, the yogi, encouraged by the distractions, is disempowered them and carves a smooth, and single-minded path to his goal.

The writer is a physician.



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## NATO at it again

US, allies must avoid belligerent rhetoric

THROWING their weight behind Ukraine, NATO members have affirmed their commitment to supporting the war-torn country in 'building a force capable of defeating Russian aggression today and deterring it in the future'. The US and its allies have announced that they intend to provide a minimum baseline funding of 40 billion euros in military aid within the next year, adding that their alliance will continue to back Ukraine on its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership. The pledge is part of the declaration issued on Wednesday at the NATO summit in Washington.

It is apparent that the Western bloc has no qualms about provoking Russia and prolonging the Ukraine war, which began in February 2022 and has caused the deaths of thousands of civilians. The push for Ukraine's NATO membership was the flashpoint that prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade the neighbour. The irony is not lost on anyone: NATO is adopting a bolder-than-thou approach by solely blaming Russia for the war. Amid increasing domestic pressure on President Joe Biden to drop his re-election bid, the US has declared that it will start deploying longer-range missiles in Germany in 2026 in a bid to counter the 'growing threat' Russia poses to Europe. This makes it clear that the West is unwilling to bring Russia to the negotiating table, a stark reality that was laid bare by Moscow's absence from the Ukraine peace summit hosted by Switzerland last month.

The US-led NATO has also not stopped short of riling China, calling it a 'decisive enabler' of Russia's war in Ukraine. Reacting sharply, Beijing has urged NATO to 'reflect on the root cause of the crisis and take concrete action to de-escalate rather than shift the blame'. Indeed, NATO would do well to introspect and shun belligerent rhetoric; otherwise, this can worsen the situation in eastern Europe and bring the world to the brink of a catastrophic conflagration.

## Shambhu barricades

Order to open border a win for public, protesters

THE Punjab and Haryana High Court's order to remove barricades at the Shambhu border marks a significant moment in the ongoing protests by farmers. For over five months, the blockade, set up by the Haryana Government, has caused severe inconvenience to commuters, disrupted local businesses and ignited widespread public frustration. This court order represents a critical step towards restoring normalcy and addressing the grievances of both the protesting farmers and the affected residents. The ruling underscores the importance of balancing the right to peaceful protest with the need to maintaining public order and accessibility. The blockade, which began as a measure to prevent farmers from advancing towards Delhi, had escalated into a roadblock for ordinary citizens. The HC directive to Punjab and Haryana to coordinate the removal of the barriers highlights a judicial acknowledgment of the hardship imposed on the public.

For the protesting farmers, this ruling is a validation of their stance. As one farmer leader pointed out, the order reveals that the barricades were a state-imposed restriction. This distinction is crucial for altering public perception and countering the narrative that farmers were responsible for the blockade. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha's plan to discuss their next move shows a continued commitment to peaceful advocacy of their demands.

As the barricades come down and normal traffic resumes, traders in Ambala, who faced losses due to reduced customer flow, hope for a turn towards economic recovery. Even as both state governments must facilitate a smooth transition, the farmers should ensure that their next steps do not lead to further escalation. This episode highlights the delicate balance required in handling public protests and the need for solutions that respect both civil liberties and public welfare. Dialogue remains the most effective path to resolution.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JULY 12, 1924

## The Press Act in Mysore

MYSORE is one of the foremost Indian States. A popular Representative Assembly was established in the State as early as in 1881 and it now has a Legislative Council also with a majority of non-official members. Unfortunately, the Press Law of the State has, for some time past, been very drastic. The people have repeatedly requested the Government to remove the unreasonable restrictions imposed on the Press, but to no avail. Not that the State authorities have been entirely unmoved by these requests. On the contrary, late Sir Vishveswaraiah and Sir Kantabangura have recognised the obsolete character of the Press Law. In their addresses to the Representative Assembly at the annual sessions, successive Deans have expressed their readiness to amend the law reasonably and some have frankly admitted that it is very drastic. No steps, however, had until recently been taken towards removing the grievances of the people. This inaction was due to the claim advanced by the authorities that they had not actually enforced the Act so as to restrain legitimate criticism. This, however, was a matter of opinion; and the advocates of a free Press could not be expected to share the views of the executive Government which is on the whole bureaucratic and claims certain privileges and even immunity from criticism. Within the last few months, a proposal has been made to remove some of the restrictions on the Press without restoring the freedom which the Press enjoyed before 1908. This decision has given no satisfaction to the people, who rightly claim that they are entitled to enjoy a free Press and urge that the law that has been in force during the last 10 years has had a very injurious effect on the State.

## What Modi can learn from Sunak

Former UK PM graciously accepted responsibility for the defeat of Conservative Party

TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

RISHI Sunak and his Conservative Party badly lost the parliamentary elections in the UK last week. He was gracious in defeat. 'I can hear your anger. I take responsibility for the loss to the many good, hardworking candidates', he said. He resigned as the Prime Minister immediately after the expected verdict was announced. The next day, he resigned as the leader of the Conservative Party, leaving the field open to ambitious politicians to vie for the top job in the party.

Sunak's stature in my eyes, at least, and I am sure in the eyes of Indians who think and feel, went up by several notches. I compared his reaction to the defeat to that of our own popular Prime Minister when the BJP lost 60 seats in the Lok Sabha compared to its 2019 tally of 303.

Narendra Modi had set his sights on winning 300 seats this time. He had launched several infrastructure projects, traversed the length and breadth of the country in his penpal-to-penpal tour, and inaugurated the Ram Jannabhoon temple in Ayodhya all by himself. All his efforts were in vain. His party lost ground in Uttar Pradesh and, wonder of wonders, the BJP lost the Ayodhya seat to Aditya Yadav's Samajwadi Party.

But our Prime Minister is made of sterner stuff than our former colonial master's ex-PM. Modi did not mention defeat even once. He claimed victory for the NDA. His pre-political trip with Chandrababu Naidu's TDP and the mercurial Nishu Kumar's JD(U) took the BJP-led alliance past the halfway mark.



HUMBLE: Sunak's reaction to a setback in his career was diametrically opposite to that of Modi, writes

Modi began his cherished third term without batting an eyelid. For him, it was business as usual. He showed no discomfiture at the BJP's below-par show in the Lok Sabha elections and did not think it necessary to offer any explanation to his party members for what can only be described as his personal failure as the BJP fought the elections in his name. Sunak is of Indian origin. His family has its roots in Punjab. His wife, Akshata Murthy, is the daughter of Nandan Murthy, the founder of Infosys. Her roots are in Karnataka. They hail from the same stock as Modi and millions of Indians. Yet, Sunak's reaction to a setback in his career was diametrically opposite to that of Modi.

Sunak is a practising Hindu. It is obvious that he follows the essence of his religion. He was humble and penitent. He accepted responsibility for the defeat. The RSS should comment on this as part of his personality and behaviour like it commented on Modi's without naming him. After all, the core teachings of the great religions in the world are similar. They all teach humil-

Considering that only 36.56 per cent of the voters supported the BJP this time, he should listen to the voices of those who voted against his party.

ity and reject arrogance. They disapprove of lies. They preach compassion and service without expectation of reward.

Then, why do our desi politicians differ from our brethren who have migrated to other countries and achieved unbelievable recognition? Sunak became the Prime Minister of the country that ruled over us for two centuries or more. Kamala Harris, whose mother's family migrated to the US from Tamil Nadu, is the Vice-President of the world's most powerful country.

Besides Indians seeking a bet-

ter quality of life in the West, there are Indian-origin citizens of smaller countries in the world. Their ancestors had been recruited as indentured labour to work in the cotton and sugarcane fields in British-ruled colonies in the West Indies, Mauritius and Fiji. Starting with Sir Sivaswami Ramgoolam, the Prime Ministers of Mauritius have been of Indian origin.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Nair, whose origins are in a Dalit family from a village in Uttar Pradesh, is acknowledged as one of the greatest writers in the English language. His family was transhipped to the West Indies two or more centuries ago. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his writings, including *A House for Mr Biswas*, *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wound of Civilisation*. Indians are proud of his achievements like they are of many other PIOs (persons of Indian origin) whom our PM reveres whenever he travels to their adopted countries.

Here in India, Modi is secretly installed in power till 2029. Should he rule in the same manner as he did from 2014 to

2024? Considering that only 36.56 per cent of the voters supported his party this time, he should listen to the voices of the 63.44 per cent who voted against him. Should he not change course imperceptibly to begin with but with greater momentum in the third year onwards or even from the second year if his alliance loses Maharashtra, as seems likely at present?

To begin with, he should discard Islamophobia, which is breeding disunity in the country, a sure recipe for disaster, especially if China sends its dragon teeth more often than it does at present. Of course, the US is now on our side, but even then a fifth column within the country may prove fatal.

He should curb the enthusiasm of Central investigating agencies like the ED and the CBI to pursue only Opposition politicians and critics of his regime. The influx of Opposition legislators into the BJP will then become a trickle instead of a stream. It will erode his stature in men's eyes in more positive terms. Presently, it has become a source of talk and banter. The preponderance of questionable politicians in his party with skeletons in their cupboards is alarming. Unless it is corrected quickly, Modi's image will suffer, first nationally and then internationally.

Thirdly, even if the laws he introduces are good and beneficial to the people at large, he should not announce them dramatically for effect but should share his thoughts with the stakeholders in a graded manner and prepare for the after-effects. He should ruminate at the blow he suffered with the farm laws, which many said were good but not properly explained to the farmers' unions.

If Modi wants to be remembered positively, he should at least listen to the voices of the RSS *Sangharshchakra*, even if he deigns to direct the voices of ordinary Indians who did not vote for him.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility. — Rabindranath Tagore

## The magic and dread of the monsoon

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA

HAVING grown up in the 1970s in the north Indian town of Dharamsala, one of the rainiest places in the country at the time, I came to love the monsoon. The dark greyish clouds with their weird shapes hanging precariously over Himalayan peaks ready to shed their load of water on the valley below, fascinated me. My grandmother's tales about mysterious monsters living in huge castles inside those clouds added to the mystique, though they were also meant to coax me into finishing my homework.

My childhood abode was a beautiful old house built of mud and clay bricks, covered by a high roof made of locally mined slates. The rhythmic pattering of raindrops on the rocky roof produced soothing music. With the constant drizzle lasting for days and no access to television in our hill town, I snuggled into bed to read wondrous fairy tales set in faraway lands or gripping mysteries by Erle Dwyer. I could hear water gushing with roaring fury in the mighty streams, which have now sadly been reduced to narrow channels due to incessant construction work and encroachments.

The monsoon coincided with the ripening of locally grown varieties of mangoes in my native village, about 60 km away. The family members would gather around huge buckets full of mangoes, feasting on the delicious fruit and exchanging humorous tales about relatives and friends. The Internet and mobile phones were still decades away; so, communication meant sitting face-to-face.

There was also a practical reason for my love of the rains. An overnight downpour sometimes washed away one of the several bridges on the way to school, resulting in holidays until it was repaired. This gave me time to romp around with friends in puddles and float paper boats, a thrill immortalised by singer Jagjit Singh in his song *Konkari ki kadi*. My mothers, however, were horrified upon seeing our squalid uniform, calling us 'bloodsucking little devils' for making their lives miserable.

Driving a car or travelling by bus during the monsoon on narrow winding hill roads built by the British half a century previously was a joyful experience. Watching small waterfalls flowing down hill-sides, hearing the feverish chirping of house sparrows and robins and occasionally seeing a minnow were highlights of a road trip. Hill-sides were covered with vegetation, and with roots firmly gripping the soil, there were no landslides even in torrential rain.

However, the monsoon now poses unprecedented challenges. It pours down so heavily that our bridges, houses and, sometimes, entire hill-sides get washed away. No place seems safe from nature's wrath. Perhaps, people should consider living high up in the mountains in caves with modern plumbing to escape unpredictable cloudbursts that lead to mudslides and flooding. The monsoon no longer holds much charm; it has become a cause for dread.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## India's diplomacy shines through

PM Narendra Modi's visit to Moscow underscores India's resilient diplomacy amid the Ukraine conflict. Strengthening Delhi-Moscow relations across various sectors, Modi's engagement signals a firm stand on bilateral cooperation despite global tensions. His poignant reminder to President Vladimir Putin about the futility of war, especially after a missile strike on a children's hospital in Kyiv, highlights India's role as a responsible global player. This visit also conveys a clear message to the US-led Western bloc: India's strategic partnership with Russia remains steadfast, even under the shadow of sanctions. Modi's emphasis on dialogue and diplomacy reiterates India's pragmatic stance, ensuring it remains a crucial, independent voice in global affairs. New Delhi's nuanced approach solidifies its position, making it indispensable to both Western and Russian interests.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

## Maintenance a right of women

The Supreme Court ruling affirming maintenance rights for Muslim women under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure is a momentous step towards gender justice. Justices BV Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih have rightly underscored that maintenance is not charity but a fundamental right of married women, regardless of their faith. This verdict echoes the historic Shah Bano ruling, in which the apex court had upheld a divorced Muslim woman's right to maintenance. Despite subsequent legislation, the court's decision reinforces the enduring applicability of Section 125. By ensuring Muslim women's entitlement, the court champions equality and strengthens their social and economic security. This ruling sets a precedent — one that will ensure progress and inclusivity. Let us celebrate this stride towards a more just and equitable society.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

## Shed bias to get House in order

Refer to the article 'Presiding officers must run Parliament sans bias'; the writer has rightly observed that India's parliamentary traditions are being trampled upon by the presiding officers at the behest of their party. It would be naive of us to expect the presiding officers of Parliament. — Lok Sabha Speaker Om B-

## Big relief for Punjab's farmers

The sterner-than-expected meted out by the Haryana Government to the rest of the nation is beyond the pale. From intentionally disrupting the water supply to Delhi to installing barricades at the Shambhu border, the steps taken by the state government have spelt trouble for local industrialists, residents, farmers and commuters. In this backdrop, the Punjab and Haryana High Court's decision to the state to remove the barriers from the border is welcome.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LAHORE

## S-4 policy will ease parking woes

The Haryana Government's fresh approval for the construction of six-plus-four (S+4) floors in residential areas will generate much-needed car parking space, easing the woes of the residents. As a result, the lanes in those localities will no longer remain congested. Besides, the policy will also help address the need for proper housing. But it is imperative that comprehensive construction norms are put in place to safeguard the interests of all residents.

JAKIR HUSSAIN, KANPUR

## Pause and pray for the departed

The middle Death doesn't move, as anyone rightly noted that most of us remain unmoved when someone passes away. Attending ceremonies, last rites or *biog* ceremonies of the deceased has been reduced to a mere formality. Values like empathy and concern for our fellow human beings have been lost in the mad rush to the top. We must not become so hardened that the demise of a fellow citizen does not faze us anymore. Remember, we are never too busy to pause and say our prayers for the departed soul.

TARZAN SHARMA, BARNALA

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BEANT SINGH, BY MAIL