

## OUR VIEW



## Bank deposit shortage: Could a role shift work?

*As lenders fall short of money to on-lend, tax incentives may help, but a radical response would be to restructure banks as pure lenders while our deposits are centralized with RBI*

Indian regulators and policymakers have amplified their call for banks to become innovative in raising deposits. This low-cost source of funds is trailing the pace of bank lending, and if credit-deposit gaps persist, lenders would either need to rely more on costlier sources or go slow on credit, which could drag the growth of our economy back. Over the weekend, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman exhorted banks to preempt such a scenario. A similar appeal was made by Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das. The *Economic Survey* has also flagged the problem. In 2023, credit grew by almost 16%, while deposits went up around 13%. In previous years, the gap was larger, except for a pandemic blip of depositors piling up money in their accounts while loans got disrupted. In 2022, for example, credit grew nearly 15%, but deposits rose by less than 10%. This trend can partly be blamed on the repressively low rates of interest that depositors got for an extended stretch, even as the concept of 'real' returns—after taking inflation into account—gained traction at the retail level. Frustrated households had no qualms shifting their savings to capital markets, nudged along by a stock-market bull run and easy-swipe apps for share trading on mobile handsets. Today, hikes in deposit rates by banks look too tiny to lure depositors back.

Another deterrent was a tax regime that favoured debt funds over bank deposits by offering the former not just indexation benefits, but also a light burden on long-term capital gains. That anomaly, however, has been fixed: indexation was axed in 2023 and their earnings are now taxed at one's income-tax slab rate, as with bank deposits. This may have levelled the field, but no fiscal effort has been made to make

deposits more attractive. An idea worthy of consideration might be to relieve bank deposits of the tax currently levied on interest earnings. This would incentivize savers to save the classic old way, by keeping money with banks for fixed periods (or instant withdrawal). Combined with more generous paybacks on people's savings, this may work better than relying on marketing gimmicks and flashy ads to attract deposits.

But what if India's deposit slump reflects a bigger problem? At one level, analysts worry that while relatively savvy savers are turning into yield-seeking investors as they ascend the risk-return curve of finance, our base of first-time savers is not expanding fast enough to feed banks. At another level, the role of banks as financial intermediaries might have begun to diminish. Instead of lenders using our deposits to on-lend at higher rates, thriving capital markets allow easy money to be raised directly via bond and share issues. We can't have lenders wilt, though. They're valuable to our economy for what they specialize in: an ability to assess risks and price loans profitably. As this is why we need banks, a radical idea suggests itself. Why not centralize public deposits with the central bank to let lenders focus on their job of risk pricing and lending? Modern technology and a digital rupee could enable a gradual rejig. Depositors could park money online with RBI, which would maintain e-rupee ledgers and pay slightly lower interest for the extra safety of these funds, which lenders could then access for long periods at a special RBI rate to offer loans. An enlarged RBI role would push it to work out how best to mobilize deposits, even as it watches banks closely to ensure they stay solvent. With banking in flux, this seems like a good time to grapple with such novel ideas.

## GUEST VIEW

## Close the credit gap MSMEs face to create jobs and drive growth

*Better use of credit data and Digital India platforms can boost formal lending to small businesses*



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India's 60 million micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) employ over 110 million people, contribute nearly 30% of gross domestic product (GDP) and account for about 50% of exports.

They could be even bigger drivers of growth and jobs if their large and persistent credit gap of over 60% could be bridged. This gap stems from multiple challenges across the MSME lifecycle. The underwriting scorecards for most financial institutions are built on limited data sources. For example, they do not fully leverage information about the seasonal or real-time cash flows that allow for accurately assessing a borrower's creditworthiness, while documentation collection and customer management processes are often cumbersome and costly. MSME borrowers need credit to overcome working capital cycle mismatches and gain the scale necessary to boost productivity. In the absence of sufficient formal funding, over half these enterprises turn to informal and more expensive sources of credit. Even those that do qualify for loans don't get products appropriate for their cash flow and payment cycles, which vary in predictable ways across sectors such as dairy, food processing, construction and logistics.

Fortunately, change is underway, with much more granular and timely data and documents available through

various Digital India initiatives, such as FASTag, Digilocker, GeM and ONDC. Lenders can now access high-quality and high-frequency customer data that has predictive power for transaction patterns, cash flows, procurement practices and more. Standards and protocols such as the Account Aggregator system facilitate the consent-based exchange of customer data for faster and more reliable banking processes.

The Union Budget 2024 adds tailwinds for financial institutions with a number of actions to help accelerate lending to MSMEs. The new credit guarantee scheme facilitates liquidity for manufacturing MSMEs without requiring collateral or third-party guarantees. Banks have been asked to go beyond traditional evaluations based on MSME assets or turnover, and instead develop in-house credit assessments using digital footprint scoring. This will help include MSMEs that lack formal accounting systems. The budget has doubled the limit for 'Tarun' Mudra loans (from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh), thus helping entrepreneurs with a successful repayment record to secure larger funds to grow their business. Plus, it has halved the turnover threshold for buyers on the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TreDS) platform from ₹500 crore to ₹250 crore, enabling more participation.

In this supportive environment, how can financial institutions lend responsibly and grow profitably? McKinsey's work with leading financial institutions globally and in India points to three distinctive capabilities that have proven impact: data-driven, informed decision making, enhanced SME-specific propositions leveraging digital public infrastructure, and greater inclusion of MSMEs using the full capabilities of government programmes.

In our experience, these capabilities can increase frontline productivity by around 20-25%, unlocking scope for business growth, reduce credit risk by 15-20%, double auto-renewal rates, improve turnaround times by 50%, and

double growth in the value of transactions through supply-chain solutions. However, too few institutions have built and driven these capabilities to scale, and as a result, the system is not at full potential. In this context, we would urge all financial institutions, large and small across the private and public sector, to adopt three practices.

Use transaction data to build stronger credit underwriting capabilities for automated decision making and higher approval rates. Along with traditional credit bureau scores and GST information, they can also tap alternate sources such as FASTag and utility bills to accurately assess creditworthiness.

Develop a new and better 'digital SME proposition', with seamless customer journeys. This can be built by using the Account Aggregator framework for consent-based data that looks at cashflow-based lending and alternate data, particularly for customers with a low or nascent footprint with credit bureaus. Developing a standard set of protocols and application programming interfaces could allow seamless data sharing among financial institutions and government departments, enabling quick and accurate inputs. Omnibus consent mechanisms could shorten turnaround times for credit decisions, simplifying the borrower's experience.

Expand the borrower base by tapping the full capabilities of government programmes. The adoption of TreDS and credit guarantee schemes as well as innovations in receivables-financing could help extend credit to many more MSMEs and unlock their potential.

These actions will avoid the boom-bust cycles of typical lending programmes and act as a sustainable driver of growth and value for the financial system. Most importantly, these capabilities will help deserving MSMEs get the credit they need to create a multiplier effect for growth and jobs in our country.

*Prachi Shah and Anurag Chadha have contributed to this article.*

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

A bank is a place that will lend you money if you can prove that you don't need it.

BOB HOPE

## THEIR VIEW

## Economic Survey criticism misses the forest for the trees

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Edward Said recounted how, when he critiqued Western scholars for biased depictions of the East, a prominent scholar dismissed his arguments by attacking his credibility rather than engaging with their substance. He noted how old prejudices clouded discussions about the Orient. This offers a parallel with today's climate change discourse, where pointing out the West's historical pollution often leads to accusations of nationalism instead of addressing substantive issues. Criticism from developing countries of the West's disproportionate contribution to global warming is often dismissed, shifting focus from the message to the messenger.

On 6 August, an op-ed in *Mint* argued that India's *Economic Survey* "has wide gaps and odd arguments" on climate change. This critique also claimed that the survey adopted a "defensive tone and overlooked deep vulnerabilities related to nationalism and climate change." While the survey aims to be comprehensive, there's only so much ground a single chapter can cover. However,

the critique seems to operate on the peculiar assumption that if something isn't explicitly mentioned in a chapter on climate change, the government must not be addressing it at all. Regardless, seven issues can be flagged.

First, the charge that the survey adopts a defensive tone and fails to address India's vulnerabilities overlooks its nuanced focus on India's unique position in balancing development with climate action. The survey acknowledges this challenge and critiques the overconsumption-driven solutions of the developed world while emphasizing India's sustainable practices. This tone counters the global narrative that labels India as a major polluter, ignoring its significant achievements, such as reducing emission intensity by 33% between 2005 and 2019, beating its target ahead of schedule. Meanwhile, developed countries, responsible for over 75% of historical emissions, continue to impose stringent mandates on developing nations despite their high per capita emissions. Highlighting this disparity is not defensiveness, but a necessary critique of global inequities. Ironically, the op-ed also claims the survey "appears to condone relative inaction by developed countries." The thrust of the whole chapter is on a Western bias in the world's climate agenda.

Second, it dismisses the debate on livestock feed as "irrelevant." This misses a crucial aspect of climate discussions. Livestock consume 6 billion tonnes of feed annually, including one-third of global cereal production, with 86% of this feed being inedible for humans. Research by Mottet *et al* (2017) shows that producing 1kg of boneless meat requires 2.8-3.2kg of human-edible feed, depending on the system. Ignoring this is short-sighted.

Third, the survey considers land consolidation a pivotal strategy for boosting agricultural productivity in India, where 86.2% of operational holdings are less than 2 hectares. This fragmentation hinders the adoption of modern farming techniques and efficient resource use. The critique's assertion that discussing land consolidation "without addressing the resultant incremental need for livelihood opportunities..." rings hollow. This view disregards the survey's comprehensive strategy that links land consolidation to broader goals of agricul-

tural modernization, economic growth and job creation. By such logic, one could similarly argue against energy transition policies due to potential job losses in coal-mining states. One should read the survey's chapter on employment, which rightly emphasises creating jobs in farm-allied activities. Also, the critique says there is no discussion of land degradation. However, while the government has been working on land degradation, there is ample literature that suggests land consolidation projects "can help significantly to mitigate land degradation."

Fourth, the op-ed suggests that the survey should have emphasized water storage and efficiency more. But the survey does highlight the value of sustainable water management, advocating a blend of traditional and modern practices. It dedicates three boxes to water, stressing the urgency of its efficient use (our per capita availability has dropped from 5,177 cubic metres in 1951 to less than 1,500 projected for 2025) and recommends various strategies.

Fifth, the critique claims that the survey highlights "our complete lack of preparedness and foresight" on India's dependence on a small set of countries for future energy resources. This assertion overlooks the National Critical Minerals Mission, prominently featured in the budget, focusing on the entire supply chain of critical minerals. Sixth, the op-ed argues that the survey outlines historical energy transitions but fails to justify 2024 as a starting point, given India's climate moves of 2008 and 2016. Even if 2008 is taken as the starting point, it does not alter the reality that energy transitions tend to span three-four generations.

Seventh, the critique claims that the *Economic Survey* didn't discuss extreme weather events. However, it is precisely because of these that the survey calls for more efforts towards and investments in adaptation.

The critique misses the original chapter's depth. The survey recognizes the need for dialogue and creates an atmosphere of trust for discussions to take place. The chapter advocates a culturally rooted and sustainable approach, emphasizing individual, collective and government action, and offers us holistic solutions to India's challenge of balancing development with climate goals. These are the author's personal views.



## GUEST VIEW

## MINT CURATOR

# Why collective intelligence must always favour the common good

It's time to debunk the myth that value is created by the private sector and the state is a de-risker and crisis manager at best



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Collective intelligence is becoming a catchphrase meant to capture the essence of the knowledge economy, where multitudes of people collaborate on difficult challenges, with each bringing something different to the table. The result is continuous experimentation and innovation, leading to great discoveries. And with the proliferation of artificial intelligence, the participants in this process may not even be human. Isn't that a nice thought?

As compelling as this description may be, our romantic narrative of how discovery occurs obscures the terms of collaboration. Who is participating? Who is actually creating value? And how are the rewards being distributed? Those profiting from the *status quo* would prefer that we not ask.

Yet, these are pertinent questions, because many of those who contribute to innovation are often overlooked. Labour regularly gets dismissed, as does the state. I called attention to this in my 2013 book, *The Entrepreneurial State*, which examined the tendency to see the private sector as a value-creating risk taker and the state as merely a de-risker or impediment to value creation. This traditional framing ignores the state's role in funding innovations like the mRNA covid vaccines, which were supported by some \$31.9 billion in US public investment.

Unless we rethink these narratives about value creation, innovation will continue to benefit only shareholders, rather than all stakeholders—from workers to the communities where businesses operate. For 'stakeholder value' to be more than a corporate-governance gimmick, we must not only recognize that value is created collectively, but also ensure that the rewards are shared more broadly across all creators.

For example, profits should be reinvested in the real economy, rather than being put toward share buybacks, which totalled \$6.3 trillion between 2010 and 2019. Making matters worse, under the current system, tax havens collectively cost governments \$500-\$600 billion per year in lost corporate-tax revenue, and the magnitude is even greater if we consider wealthy individuals as well. This avoidance prevents all stakeholders from reaping the rewards of collective intelligence and collaboration.

To fix the problem, one must understand how collective intelligence leads to value creation in the first place. Collaboration entails knowledge sharing, but if we privatize knowledge and research, this becomes more difficult. It makes sense to have intellectual-property rights to incentivize investment and innovation. But if those rights are too broad, they can be abused for strategic reasons. If they are too strong, technologies become harder to access or license. And if they are too concentrated



upstream, with basic research tools remaining privatized, discovery and innovation will suffer.

As contracts that grant 17 years of monopoly profits to a business (in the US case), patents should be negotiated and governed with these considerations in mind. Rather than serving merely as a tool to fix information asymmetries (a type of market failure) they must shape the broader knowledge-governance system.

How might a genuine collective-intelligence framework alter the structure of patents (in medicine, for example) and other contracts that determine how knowledge is created and shared? The objective in all our collective economic activity should be to serve the common good. This is the principle that should guide our thinking about collaboration and the distribution of rewards.

Whenever wealth is created socially, many partners in the collaborative process will have taken a risk with no guarantee of a return. As powerful as collective intelligence may be, failure is always a possibility. But when success does come, the returns ought to be shared as widely as the risks were. Else, the arrangement is more parasitic than symbiotic. A mutualistic innovation ecosystem would ensure that the monetary rewards are shared (such as through profit-sharing or equity schemes); or that the knowledge is shared; or that the prices of the final products (like medicines) reflect the collective investment that went into them. This is rarely the case, not only with medicines, but also in digital technologies and renewable energy. For example, many renewable-energy companies benefit from generous tax schemes, which means the public is supporting their profit margins without partaking in the gains.

In the digital domain, a common-good approach would ensure that new technologies like AI are creating opportunities for public value creation. Diversity is essential here, because innovation benefits from different perspectives. That is why Apple brought in musicians, designers, and artists to help design its products. The original moon landing succeeded because different departments in NASA

worked together horizontally, not vertically.

Collective intelligence is not groupthink, which merely creates silos. I warned in a previous commentary that AI-powered systems are reproducing unfair social biases. Without better oversight, algorithms that are supposed to help the public sector manage welfare benefits may discriminate against needy households.

Finally, voice matters, because finding durable solutions to our biggest problems increasingly requires contestation and negotiation. Too often, policy outcomes are distorted by those with the loudest voice, those who can afford top lawyers, and those with the most power to influence the direction and define the purpose of innovation.

Is digital data collection and analysis supposed to make a few people rich, or should it liberate us, such as by helping to make housing more available and affordable? Given that technology consumers often provide their personal data to corporations for free—even amid growing concerns about data privacy—shouldn't they have a voice in how that technology is developed?

Or consider climate change. Indigenous communities disproportionately bear the consequences of a problem created by others. Should they not have a prominent seat at the table when the topic is discussed? In recent negotiations for a global pandemic treaty, lower-income countries were asked to share pathogen data without any guarantee that they will have access to resulting products. These stakeholders need to have a say in determining the future of pharmaceutical innovation, as well as how its rewards are distributed.

The reality of how value is created and distributed through collaborative innovation has been woefully obscured.

By debunking the myth that value is created by the private sector and that the state is at best a de-risker and crisis manager, we can develop a proper understanding of how innovation works. If we want to leverage the power of collective intelligence, we will need to adopt a common-good framework.

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## GUEST VIEW

# Banks are staring at adverse trends that may not ease

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On 19 July, Shaktikanta Das, governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), flagged a growing gap between bank deposit mobilization and credit growth, a concern he reiterated after RBI's monetary policy decision of 8 August. As on 28 June, bank deposits had grown 11.1% year-on-year, as against credit growth of 17.4%. While acknowledging changes in Indian saving patterns, he exhorted banks to step up efforts to mobilize deposits. Similarly, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while laying out figures for small savings mobilization in Parliament, highlighted the country's declining rate of deposit growth.

The outlook of people and their interactions have seen significant changes in recent years. Isolation during covid went with deep digitization. Even as the digital divide has been closing, technology has made many services accessible to large numbers. These include convenient avenues for investment and credit. The spread of financial literacy, particularly through social media, has led to

informed choices being made from a basket of investment options.

A declining interest rate regime occasioned by the pandemic had led to a yawning gap in the rate of return between bank savings and equity. The popular discovery of superior returns from non-debt instruments, especially in real terms, has marked a shift away from money being kept with banks. The investor today seems less willing to pay for the financial intermediation done by institutions that mobilize savings to lend borrowers. This behavioural change is causing a paradigm shift in financial markets.

Financial markets offer an institutional framework that enables trade through various instruments designed to address the needs of society at large. As I said in a recent lecture, the interdependence of economics, sociology, politics and technology creates fusion, and emerging economic trends often become capricious. The transformation in the behaviour of savers will have structural consequences for the business model of intermediary institutions.

In the last one, five, 15 and 20 years, the National Stock Exchange's Nifty-50 index has delivered compounded annual returns of 28.4%, 17.6%, 11.8% and 12%, respectively. Returns on mid-cap and small-cap stocks have been higher. Some companies in sur-

rise industries have delivered still higher rates of return.

Even though market valuations of individual companies now appear stretched, individual investors remain bullish on the strength of the Indian economy's high growth prospects, macroeconomic stability and improving corporate governance standards, in addition to the experience of high returns on equities and physical assets (mainly real estate). Retail investors have chosen to take the systematic investment plan route. The number of demat accounts has grown from 41 million in 2019-20 to 151 million, as of end 2023-24, and are growing at an average of 3.1 million per month.

Proactive regulation of capital markets and the record of scam-free stock-market booms (in contrast with large-scale market misconduct seen in 1991 and 2001) over the past two decades have strengthened these trends by instilling public confidence.

Every investor makes trade-offs to bal-

ance liquidity, returns and safety. With the gradual effacement of the equity risk premium having been enhanced by the transition from T+1 to T+0 settlements, the ease of making transactions has improved. With market depth, equity sales and purchases are easy to execute, so liquidity is no worry.

On safety, even individual investors are learning the ropes of risk management by dabbling in the derivatives segment. Astronomical transactions in daily swaps, notwithstanding the losses made by most individual participants, can be seen as their investment in learning how to mitigate market risks.

With liquidity and safety broadly taken for granted, the focus of retail investors has turned to returns, which in the case of equities beat fixed-income securities by far. The average returns on debt instruments range from only 6% to 9%. Debt mutual funds are getting dismally low inflows now, and even this money is coming in mainly to meet statutory obligations to invest in debt, or as part of treasury

management needs to park excess funds.

The banking industry is thus at a major crossroads. Several banks, especially in the private sector, are offering over 7% interest per annum on deposits, which ranges from 10 to 75 basis points above 10-year government-security yields. Yet, deposits are hard to attract. It should be no surprise that the profitability of banks is coming down. Not long ago, some lenders enjoyed a net interest margin of 4-4.5%. That's no longer so.

The Bank Nifty index has delivered a return of 14% and 12.5% over the past one year and five years, respectively. This is much lower than what the Nifty 50, composed of a wide range of stocks, has delivered. It's no wonder that private sector banks are no longer preferred investment options for overseas fund managers.

Treating just the symptoms by marginally increasing interest rates and/or pushing sales teams to leverage customer relationships to increase deposits will not suffice as a response. The structural transformation in the country's patterns of saving and investment warrants a re-engineering of the organizational design and business model of banks. Similar dynamics are affecting insurers, also need a look-in. In a liberalized market, it is the fittest that survive.

# The US Fed should resist any placation of financial markets

The American central bank can't afford to be bullied by investors



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Fed chair Jerome Powell could take charge of the narrative at Jackson Hole.

AP

Family Feud, a popular game show when I was growing up, would ask contestants to guess how a group of people had answered a specific question. It served as a regular reminder of the importance of supplementing one's thinking with external perspectives.

If, in the tradition of Family Feud, we were to poll market participants about the turmoil we've seen since the worse-than-expected US jobs report, I suspect we would get quite specific responses on what is causing the global stock selloff as well as what would be the best circuit breaker to avoid further big losses. Let's consider what I think that list would look like before departing from the game show's format and exploring what I believe the answers should be. Five things have come together to destabilize what seemed to be fundamentally solid stock markets. Here they are in order of declining importance.

First are worries that a slowdown in US growth would meaningfully undermine the 'American exceptionalism' we've seen over the past few years. Such a deceleration would damage corporate earnings and turn the strongest engine of global growth into a possible detractor.

Second is concern that an economic downturn will be worsened by the Federal Reserve's decision not to cut interest rates, which left its policy stance too restrictive for the current environment and heightened the risk of another policy mistake.

Third is crowded investment positions being caught offside by the sudden change in both the economic and policy narrative. This squeeze was amplified by concerns of a Japanese-related deleveraging and sky-high valuations in certain segments of the market such as technology stocks.

Fourth would be geopolitical worries centred on the possible escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, which, in turn, would cause a stagflationary spike in oil prices and complicate the functioning of international supply chains.

Finally, there are US political developments resulting in what is likely to be a messy run-up to the presidential election.

How about views on the best circuit breakers? Again, in order of declining importance, the markets favour: First, the Fed signalling a 50- or 75-basis-point cut in September. Second, an emergency interest-rate cut of that magnitude. Next, verbal intervention from the Fed to calm markets. And finally, market bottom-fishing/dip buyers; followed by verbal intervention from the Joe Biden administration.

What about my own assessment?

India's financial intermediaries are finding that savers at large prefer to invest directly in businesses



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Capital of monsoon misery

Three national capital grapples with waterlogging and a host of issues that accompany the rains

**T**S Eliot wrote, "April is the cruellest month..." in his famous poem *The Waste Land*. He was, of course, speaking of a different context and place, but one might wonder if he would have felt the same had he experienced Delhi in August. This year has brought a good monsoon, but for Delhiites, heavy downpours rarely bring good news. They must brace themselves for waterlogging, traffic snarls, a host of diseases, unclear water, power failures, and what have you. Streets turned into rivers, traffic reached a standstill, and daily life was thrown into disarray. The scene is all too familiar, a recurring nightmare that haunts the city every monsoon. But why does Delhi, with its sprawling infrastructure and resources, continue to grapple with such chaos year after year? More importantly, what can be done to mitigate this annual misery? Heavy rainfall over the past 24 hours has left several key areas in Delhi, including Connaught Place, Minto Road, and the Ring Road, severely waterlogged. Commuters faced long hours in traffic jams, and pedestrians struggled to navigate the flooded streets. The drainage system, overwhelmed by the sheer volume of water, failed to cope, leading to a cascading series of problems: halted public transport and power outages.



The residents of low-lying areas are the worst hit, with water entering homes and causing significant damage to property and belongings. Unfortunately, it's an annual ritual: heavy monsoon showers overwhelm the infrastructure, bringing the city to a standstill. The blame game ensues, followed by knee-jerk responses and funds allocated for improvements. Yet, by the next year, those efforts are washed away, leaving the city again at the mercy of the weather gods. It is not rocket science to find the root cause of the problem and even fix it. Surely, the authorities would know that but the execution plan is missing. Despite being a metropolitan hub, Delhi's drainage system is outdated and poorly maintained. Besides, rapid and often haphazard urban development has led to the encroachment of natural water bodies and green spaces. These areas, which once absorbed excess rainwater, have been replaced by concrete structures, exacerbating the problem of water runoff. There is an urgent need to remove those encroachments and upgrade the drainage system. But unfortunately, urban planning in Delhi often happens in silos, with little coordination between different departments. This lack of an integrated approach has led to a situation where roads are built without adequate drainage. Delhi needs a multifaceted approach that addresses both the immediate challenges and long-term vulnerabilities: Utilising smart city technologies, such as real-time monitoring of drainage systems and predictive weather modelling, can help in better preparedness and response to heavy rains. While heavy rains are a natural phenomenon, the resulting waterlogging and disruption are largely man-made problems. To tackle this issue, concrete measures and decisive actions must be taken immediately.

## PICTALK



Devotees carry a Lord Ganesha idol for the Ganesh Chaturthi festival, in Mumbai

# Progress depends on retentiveness

Today, as political discord echoes through our democracy, I find myself reflecting on those dark days of Emergency and the enduring wounds inflicted on our nation's soul



J.S. RAJPUT

**I**t was only in 1956 that I got some idea of how the Constitution of India was framed, and who were the major personalities that constituted the historic Constituent Assembly. The teacher who introduced me to it was a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and adored Pandit Nehru and Neta Ji Subhash Chandra Bose. The library had a copy of the constitution of India having the signatures of all of the members of the Constituent Assembly and also images representing Indian culture and heritage. We learnt the Preamble by heart. This teacher-created interest amongst students interested in dramatics, and after hectic preparation of a couple of weeks, a mock Constituent Assembly was enacted in the presence of a huge gathering.

This young teacher was also confident that the ancient Indian culture would be resurrected, and the entire world would know how advanced Indians were in 'thought and deed'. In 1975, I read the constitution in all seriousness, and witnessed how it was being mercilessly mutilated! After nearly five decades, as one peruses the print and electronic media, one witnesses a slugfest between the union government and the opposition, it makes one reflect on the emergency days, and one just can't avoid reflecting on the 18 months of democratic darkness that shattered the lives of millions of the people. It ruined the credibility of Indian democracy internationally. No apology could erase the wound inflicted on the constitution and the humiliation of the stalwarts who created the constitution of India. Was it not a shameful humiliation inflicted on Baba Sahib Bhim Rao Ambedkar? He had repeatedly opposed the inclusion of the term 'secular' in the Preamble of the Constitution. How could any active and alert citizen forget the fact that the 44th Constitution Amendment Act was passed by a Parliament that in its arbitrarily-extended sixth year? Practically all of the opposition stalwarts were in jail! Today, any voice that says 'I want my



original Preamble back' should be deciphered in the spirit it deserves to be comprehended in its objectivity. It could certainly be a great tribute to Dr Baba Sahib Ambedkar! This correction would offer a healing touch to persons like me who had witnessed the emergency and also - a great extent - to those who had suffered damages of an irreversible nature. Let me narrate a personal experience. One senior academic was appointed head of a regional institute in Bhopal in December 1974. In August 1975, he was asked to report to the central office. New Delhi next day 'for consultations'. I was number two in the institutional hierarchy and had become a full Professor just a year back in August 1974. I assisted him in preparing certain project proposals he would carry that evening for obtaining sanction from New Delhi. The next morning, I received a 'lightening call' to take over as Head of the institution immediately, as the incumbent stood removed from his position. It was shocking, and I was just not ready to comply. I was advised by all my well-wishers including those from senior bureaucracy and police services to 'quietly take over', without in any way indicating unwillingness.



NO APOLOGY  
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INFLICTED  
ON BABA SAHIB  
BHIM RAO  
AMBEDKAR?

On return, the summarily sacked academic described the ordeal he suffered. As he was to reach the designated office, a peon was waiting with a letter that he swiftly handed over, obtained his signatures on the peon book, and vanished! I got instructions to ensure that no one even meets him! I insisted that the head of an academic institution should not be humiliated before his students. A lady bureaucrat from the New Delhi office repudiated faith in me, but told me that only I, and I alone, would be responsible for any mishap that may occur, and its consequences. The academic who was humiliated and removed never got justice during his remaining lifetime of around two decades. Those who would not like even a mention of emergency could recall how strongly India was proud of the persona of that great intellectual and jurist Nani Palakhiwala. He had refused the brief from Mrs Indira Gandhi and fought for the constitution in draconian conditions. His reflections on emergency shall remain ever-relevant: "No period in the history of our republic is of more educational value than 1975 to 1977." George Santayana said, "Progress far from consisting

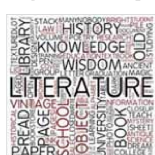
in change, depends on retentiveness... Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. If our basic freedoms are to survive, it is of vital importance that we remember the happenings during emergency when the freedoms were suspended." Is it necessary to 'fight facts' to negate the truth? What we witness all around us in the world of the current-day average politicians was envisioned by Sri Aurobindo in his lifetime: "The modern politician in my part of the world does not represent the soul of a people or its aspirations. What he does usually represent is all the average pettiness, selfishness, egotism, self-deception that is about him and these he represents well enough as well as a great deal of mental incompetence and moral conventionality, timidity and pretence." All of these attributes have grown up in gigantic proportions in our times. The only way out is the sincere acceptance of diversity of every imaginable hue, and revert back to the great dialogical tradition. The adults and elders must realize what the young of India are getting from him in the years of their growing up! (Professor Rajput works in education, social cohesion and religious amity; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Revamping the English literature curriculum

Once a cornerstone of intellectual pursuit, English literature studies are now facing a troubling decline in popularity among students in India

**O**nce a most demanding course for young students, English literature studies has seen a significant decline in the past decade. In many colleges in India seats of B.Literature remain vacant despite its huge potential in this digital age. The policymakers and academicians should brainstorm the reasons and come out with concrete plans to overcome this dilemma. In India, many students see STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) as a subject of intellect and opportunities, compared to humanities. Emerging fields like data science, artificial intelligence, and digital marketing are gaining popularity among students due to their perceived relevance and lucrative opportunities. This trend reduces the appeal of traditional literary studies. The perception that a degree in English offers limited career options and lower earning potential can deter students from pursuing it. This view is compounded by a lack of clear and well-promoted career pathways specifically tied to English studies. Many



English literature programs may have curricula that have not been updated to reflect contemporary literary trends and regional and global issues. The stress on Shakespearean and other literary works doesn't get connected to present-day society. Shakespearean plays and other classical works were written in very different historical and cultural contexts. The social norms, political structures, and everyday concerns of ancient times may seem foreign to modern readers.

This historical gap can make it hard for students to see how the themes and issues of these works relate to their own lives. A focus on classic literature without integrating contemporary and diverse works may alienate students who are more interested in

modern and global literary trends. The rise of digital media and alternative forms of entertainment, such as social media, video games, and streaming platforms, has altered reading habits. Students may be less inclined to engage with traditional literature due to these competing interests. Though science education reformation forms part of national policies, literature education rarely finds its place in national policy. Students should even be taught the fundamentals of computer programming. To make literature more relevant and engaging, integrate a diverse range of texts. Include contemporary works from different cultures, genres, and perspectives. For instance, introducing novels, short stories, and poetry from emerging voices around the world, alongside regional literature, can provide students with a broader view of the literary landscape. Academicians should link literature with other fields such as history, psychology, sociology, and environmental studies. For instance, studying dystopian novels alongside discussions of climate sci-

ence and environmental studies can provide students with a deeper understanding of both the literature and the real-world issues it reflects. Thrust should be given to include components that prepare students for the job market, such as resume writing, interview skills, and networking opportunities. Connecting literature studies with science and other relevant fields will enhance career prospects. In the age of bots, algorithms, and AI, students should even be taught the fundamentals of computer programming. Revitalising the literary syllabus necessitates a deliberate strategy that incorporates current issues, embraces digital and multimedia resources, fosters interdisciplinary linkages, and emphasises practical skills. Educational institutions can establish a literary program that is relevant and exciting for 21st-century students by using a variety of texts, utilising technology, and regularly updating the curriculum. (The writer is the Academic affairs, GCU and adjunct faculty at VJSS, Bengaluru; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

## QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT REMEMBERED

**Madam**— Mahatma Gandhi's relentless efforts were instrumental in India's journey to independence. From the 1930 Dandi March to the 1942 Quit India Movement, Gandhi's leadership was pivotal in challenging British rule. On August 9, 1942, India embarked on a crucial new phase in its fight for freedom—a mass uprising against colonial rule that heralded the imminent end of the British Empire in India. Although Gandhi and the Congress leadership were imprisoned on August 8, the call to 'Quit India' inspired a nationwide movement. With the leaders behind bars, the people took to the streets, driven by Gandhi's urgent call to action. Their resolve and sacrifice laid the groundwork for India's eventual independence, a testament to their undying commitment to freedom and self-determination.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Mumbai

## PM VISIT REASSURES WAYANAD

**Madam**— On Saturday, the Prime Minister visited Wayanad, a region recently struck by an unprecedented disaster that claimed around 400 lives and forced thousands into relief camps. His visit uplifted the spirits of the disillusioned and distressed and fostered the hopes. Their eyes were filled with tears emotionally as they recounted their ordeals to him. The visit also expedited the rehabilitation process, with authorities working tirelessly to restore normalcy, as the Prime Minister promised to provide all possible assistance. This gesture has won the hearts of the people, and such initiatives are now expected in the future. In the aftermath of the Prime Minister's visit, the people of Wayanad find themselves not only comforted by his empathy but also reassured by his commitment to their recovery. The renewed hope in their eyes speaks to the power of genuine leadership in times of crisis. As the region begins to rebuild, the memory of this visit will linger, a reminder that in the face of

## Bangladesh on boil



This is in response to the news article, 'Bangladesh: Uncertainty and Chaos Grip the Nation' (August 10). The recent violence, they are not alone.

## RAHUL GANDHI'S EVOLUTION

**Madam**— "Apologies for the article, 'The Evolution of Rahul Gandhi', published on August 8, this is my response. Rahul Gandhi, once mocked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his supporters as 'Pappu' and an 'entitled dynast', staged a remarkable comeback in the 2024 general elections. He became the central figure of an alliance that successfully penetrated BJP strongholds, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. As the heir to India's renowned Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty, Rahul Gandhi led two nationwide marches against what he termed Modi's politics of hate and fear, revitalizing his Congress party and redefining his own public image. Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly emphasized that his fight against Modi's BJP is not merely about seizing power but about challenging the party's and the RSS's 'Hindun-first' ideology, which contradicts India's secular principles as outlined in

the Constitution. The results of the last general election significantly boosted Rahul Gandhi's morale, prompting people to view him more positively and take him seriously as a leader. They have come to recognize him as a leader focused on real-life issues—such as unemployment, women's safety, the violence in Manipur, NEET exam paper leaks, rising prices of gas cylinders, petrol, and diesel, and caste-related issues. Most importantly, he is seen as the one who will uphold the spirit of secularism in the nation. These factors have collectively reshaped public perception of Rahul Gandhi. Now, having emerged stronger and as the Leader of the Opposition with substantial support from Opposition MPs in Parliament, Rahul Gandhi, known for his oratory skills, is poised to present significant challenges to Mr. Modi and his party in the days ahead on various issues facing the country.

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

Ranganathan Shivakumar | Chennai

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









## A thought for today

I have to do what's right for me & focus on my mental health... not jeopardise my health & well-being. That's why I decided to take a step back

SIMONE BILES (TOKYO 2020)

## Factor Of Four

Maharashtra heads for polls with all players battling questions. But the test is sharper for regional parties

The soon-to-be-held state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana, Jharkhand and likely J&K, will witness cut-throat contests no less brutal than Lok Sabha fights. Lok Sabha results were a timely reminder to the political class that no party can bank on past performance and no party, in today's multi-party reality, can fight alone at the national level. State-level issues dominated both campaign and candidate performance. The upshot is, ahead of assembly elections, particularly in Maharashtra, where the stakes are the highest for all parties involved, especially the four regional ones (two Senas, two NCPs), much of everything has muchly been said.

**Tricky lotus lines** | For BJP as the single party that is in office in Haryana and majority player in Maharashtra, the stakes are high not only as incumbent, but also in how the party is perceived after the knock it took in LS polls. In Maharashtra, where Mahayuti (Shinde Sena, BJP and NCP), much of everything has muchly been said.



viewed his haul of 60 of 15 seats contested as victory, while Fadnis, under whom BJP won 9 of 28 seats it contested, offered to resign over the party's tally. Perennial deputy CM Ajit Pawar, who recently lamented over missing out on CM-ship, holds his not being made CM as the factor responsible for his inability to rally all of NCP to his side.

**Where's what matters** | As Pawar Jr paddles furiously to line up his ducks in a row, the change in balance of power post LS has all three Mahayuti parties claiming credit for a slew of pre-poll measures - dole for men and women, free this and that. There's little, so far, by way of addressing Maharashtra's severe rural crisis, the Maratha quota mess or the jobs question.

**Vague party lines** | Whether opposition MVA (UBT-Sena, Congress, NCP-SP) will be able to carry to the assembly election gains of its LS performance is also iffy. Congress suffered a jolt when its MLAs crossed-voted in biennial polls to 11 seats of the legislative council. Uddhav is yet to articulate his own brand of Sena politics that's removed from Shinde's. Sharad Pawar is reeling in MLAs from nephew's NCP, but not everyone's taking the bait. The drama of party lines and party loyalties remains unresolved for both Senas and NCPs. The Maharashtra contest will be as fascinating as its impact on national politics.

## Mind &amp; Body

Elite athletes' mental health deserves more attention than it gets. Paris Olympics was a reminder

With curtains coming down on the Paris Olympics, there's much analysis about the performance of Indian athletes. But one aspect of the Games that has changed over the years is the extreme scrutiny of athletes via social media. India's Avinash Sable, who represented the country in the 3000m steeplechase at Paris, recently highlighted social media abuse as having a big impact on athletes' well-being.

**All in the mind** | Being a high-performance athlete requires considerable mental fortitude. But the mental health aspect of sports is only just getting recognised. The issue came to prominence at the Tokyo Games when US champion gymnast Simone Biles pulled out of multiple events citing a case of 'twisties' - a temporary loss of spatial awareness. For Paris, a psychiatrist and a sports psychologist accompanied the Indian Olympic contingent for the very first time.

**Not just about performance** | While sports psychologists have been part of training of elite athletes for a while, the focus till now has been on performance enhancement. It's only after the pandemic-hit Tokyo Games that overall mental well-being of athletes became a priority. Plus, stereotypes about that elite athletes aren't supposed to show 'weakness'. Which is why it was refreshing to see Viktor Axelsen, the men's badminton gold medalist at Paris, get emotional and say, "If men cannot cry, what kind of world do we live in?"

**The human touch** | Just as social-media trolling won't end, athletes too will continue to get impacted by cyber-chatter. Australia's female break-dancer Rachael Gunn was the target of internet mockery over her Paris performance. While she has strongly defended herself, others can easily break. English cricketer Jonathan Trott stepped away from the game over mental health. Another former English batsman Graham Thorpe recently took his own life after struggling with depression. Elite athletes need much more systemic support to ensure their mental well-being.

## Bestsellers by machine

So wrote Dahl 70 years ago, so it's happening now

Anupam Srivastava



As redundancy caused by artificial intelligence stares in the face of humanity, the first ones to go will be writers. They deserve this fate, along with their readers. Roald Dahl's short story, *The Great Automatic Grammatizator*, heralded the end of original writing 70 years ago. In it, books written by a machine became a roaring success even if some were of poor quality and not 'respectable'. In the real world, success is the respect that one needs. The one who wields the power of the pen is not the writer. The columns belong to celebrities and 'important people', with the pieces often written by 'ghostwriters' who are banished to a state of non-existence by the powerful. The bylines are fake, and as hollow as the angst the 'authors' claim to possess and display like their designer clothes.

A visit to the bookstore would further confirm the demise of original writing. The writers are departed, and have 'left no addresses', to rephrase Eliot. Beneath fancy covers lie words that are clichéd, the turns of phrase forced and insufficient to breathe life into dead prose. Even poetry as *vers libre* is a heap of broken sentences without rhythm or rhyme and indistinguishable from the mass of words littered in the literary purgatory. Plagiarists continue to thrive and, when caught, claim they were 'inspired', while editors reject great books that represent the best of the world.

The final actors in this tragic drama are readers - essentially OTT devotees who sometimes pick up a book when they cannot watch their favourite show. They are decision-making gods who dip into gossip tales to keep up, take a break, or turn pages without reading, like lip-synching singers who hide behind smoke jets, flames and other special effects to remain undisclosed to their audience.

It will be a nemesis of sorts for the world to lose its ability to create original writings since it has disrespected writers and artists for so long. Like everything beautiful, writing must be replaced by synthetic and perfect prose and poetry so well that few would notice the difference. In a utilitarian world, the purpose of writing is to inform and self-project, not awaken, reveal, or rouse. AI will take this vestigial aspect of writing out and make it fit for our times.

## US Recession? Good News For India

If Fed starts cutting rates, it will increase room for rate cuts here, which are necessary because our economy is still more than a year behind where it would have been if not for the pandemic

Neelkanth Mishra

Over the past two years, consensus on US economy had shifted from anticipating a 'hard landing' (that is, a recession) to a 'soft landing', that inflation would be contained without much of a growth sacrifice. Some observers hailed this as 'immaculate disinflation'.

This has been followed by recent economic data. Despite a slight fall, unemployment claims are well above the lows of Jan, and new job openings have slowed. In July, the unemployment rate rose to 4.3%, the highest in 3 years, and the ISM manufacturing PMI, an important bellwether, fell to a 9-month low, to a level rarely seen outside recessions.

Recession fears are back: Google Trends shows searches for 'recession' in US are up 9 times since mid-July to the highest in 2 years. A large part of the jump in stock-market volatility can be attributed to other factors, like some unwinding of the Yen carry trade, but recession fears have played a major role. Market expectations of rate cuts by the US Fed have risen significantly as many believe these will be necessary to moderate the economic slowdown.

In particular, July's labour data triggered the 'Sahm Rule'. Discovered by Claudia Sahm, a former Fed economist, this rule states that a recession is probably underway if the average unemployment rate over the past 3 months has risen by half a percent from its low point over the previous 12 months.

The underlying logic is simple - when unemployment rises by this quantum, it triggers a self-reinforcing cycle; it hurts incomes and therefore consumption, triggering more layoffs, and so on. Over the past half-century, this rule would have correctly predicted all US recessions.

At first glance, such fears seem premature. US economy is slowing but is far from recessionary. It is the only large economy where GDP is above its pre-pandemic path. Nowcast estimates for this quarter's GDP growth in US economy were recently raised to 2.9%, from 2.6% earlier. Consumption remains steady, wage growth on average is above inflation, home prices are still rising, and layoffs have not started yet.

Even after the increase in July, the unemployment rate is still below 'normal'. Further, a large part of the

rise in unemployment has been due to more people joining the workforce (including due to a rise in immigration), with the labour force participation rate the highest this century.

But much of that is backward-looking, and financial markets tend to price in recessions or recoveries several months before they appear. Let alone 'nowcast' estimates, built on a relatively narrow set of

significant part of the growth surprise over the past two years was due to an expansion in the federal fiscal deficit. An increase in fiscal deficit boosts growth, a falling fiscal deficit is a drag on growth, and high but unchanged deficits have no impact on growth.

The fiscal impulse in US was a mere 5% of GDP around this time last year. As the deficit could not rise further, this impulse has slowed sharply to nearly zero this quarter and is likely to be in negative territory in the next few months.

Over the past two years, the pain from higher interest rates in US had been offset by the rise in fiscal deficits. Even if the deficit does not shrink to sustainable levels immediately, the absence of a positive impulse is likely to show up in weaker growth.

For example, a guinea pig (economy) that gets a growth inhibiting injection (higher interest rates) but also a growth enhancing injection (higher fiscal deficit) may not see a change in growth. But when growth boosters are stopped, its growth would slow down.

The Fed is now likely to start cutting interest rates, but a complete normalisation will take several quarters at least, and the impact of cuts appears with long and variable lags. Separately, as US fiscal deficits were 'pro-cyclical' (high deficits when growth was already strong), slowing growth would push deficits higher, and, thus, despite the Fed's rate cuts, yields on US govt bonds and the cost of borrowing may not fall as much.

In our view, a growth slowdown is likely, but it is too early to call for a 'precipitous' decline. The slowdown should be orderly if monetary easing can reduce the risk of accidents in financial markets. Volatility in the markets, though, is likely to remain elevated, as growth expectations are recalibrated, and upgrades to US growth forecasts are replaced by downgrades.

A US slowdown would affect the Indian economy too, through weaker exports. However, if there are no accidents in financial markets, easier global financial conditions, and the Fed cuts rates, and potentially restarts quantitative easing, should provide Indian policymakers room to ease policy. This is necessary because despite strong growth, India's economy is still more than a year behind where it would have been if not for the pandemic.

Such large revisions are not normal, but some cooling of the economy is to be expected. In our view, a

indicators, even reported quarterly GDP growth can see significant revisions. The first estimate for the March 2001 quarter, for example, showed 2.0% growth, but the final one a 1.3% decline, showing that it was the first quarter of a recession.

The writer is Chief Economist, Axis Bank and Head of Global Research, Axis Capital

## The Kolkata Horror: How Unsafe Are Our Hospitals

A doctor's rape-murder has led to calls for a central law to protect health workers. Many states already have a stringent law in place. And absent in this conversation is the risk faced by women patients

Rena Nagarajan@timesofindia.com



The rape and murder of a resident doctor, in Kolkata, has put the spotlight on the safety of women in hospitals. Doctors are now protesting across India, asking for a central law to protect healthcare workers, citing rising attacks. However, is it the lack of a specific law that is responsible for attacks on health workers and healthcare facilities?

The petition being circulated by protesting doctors provides an insight into why a law alone might not provide the necessary safety. It cites the case of a nurse who was attacked in Surat, in March 2022, by an emergency ward patient with an iron rod and had to get three stitches. "The nurse filed an FIR and the person was booked under the Indian Penal Code 322. But there is no further information on any action taken by the hospital or by the police," states the petition.

If convicted under IPC 322, which deals with violence causing hurt to a public servant from his/her duty, the punishment is imprisonment up to three years and/or fine. It is a cognizable offence, which means the accused can be arrested without a warrant. It is non-bailable and it is non-compoundable (a provision usually applied for heinous crimes), which means that court proceedings will continue even if the victim and the accused reach a settlement privately.

Thus, the law applied was strong. That there was no further info on action taken suggests either inadequate follow-up by the hospital or the usual tardiness of the justice system. Both these problems would persist even with a new central law, as the difficulty seems to be with implementation more than the law itself.

A majority of states have already adopted a law - Medicare Service Persons And Medicare Service Institutions (Protection of Violence and Damages to Property) Act - that punishes violent perpetrators,

with some variations. However, research has shown that even in these states less than 10% of cases pursued under this law reached the court after charges were filed. Would a new law change this?

While the petition talks about safety for all health workers, there isn't a fraction of the outrage against the horror at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital when that attacks target nurses or lower-level hospital staff. There have been several horrific incidents of rape and murder of nurses where the fight for justice has



been left to their families.

In the health system, female nurses are the most vulnerable. They are subject to verbal, physical and sexual abuse by everyone from co-workers to patients and their attendants. They have no special law to protect them. They only have recourse to the general laws protecting all women in the workplace.

Consider a further twist. In four out of five cases of sexual assault in hospitals reported in 2023, the victims were female patients. In the last 10 years, there have been almost two dozen cases reported from

across India of female patients being sexually assaulted in hospitals. Do patients have recourse to a special law to protect them from violence inside the health system?

There is a special law to protect women subjected to obstetric violence, which includes abusing and slapping a woman in labour, the prevalence of which most doctors would attest to. Is there a special law to protect patients and their families from the financial assault of being overcharged? There isn't. They use the same sections of the law as available to the general population to seek justice within the same sluggish justice system that health workers struggle with.

Patients are probably the least empowered in a health system and they do not have an organised group to protect on their behalf. No lobby has taken to the streets for patients' safety or basic rights. There are plenty of studies on the violence faced by health workers, but hardly any on the violence patients face, often by those supposed to care for them. This asymmetry has a significant effect on the sense of victimhood among health personnel, deflecting it from systemic ills.

Violence against health workers has been documented globally and it is estimated that the likelihood of assault against health workers is four times greater than that against professionals in general workplaces. Has there been a similar study on whether patients seeking healthcare are more likely to face violence than consumers of any other service? Is there a more vulnerable category in the health system or in any service delivery system than sick patients and their families?

Studies addressing violence in health facilities have identified several risk factors, including understaffed emergency departments, lengthy waiting times for patients, poor quality of healthcare services and of communication. While these factors increase the risk of violence, they also mean that the mean risk of much suffering or even death for patients.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes

HOW MANY BOARDS WOULD THE MONGOLS HOARD, IF THE MONGOL HORDES GOT BORED?



Sant Rajinder Singh

People from all parts of the world practise meditation to realise its physical, mental, and emotional benefits. Doctors advise their patients to meditate to help them deal with many physical ailments. Research has shown the role of meditation in slowing down brain waves, which makes us feel calmer and helps with many stress-related illnesses. Meditation involves focusing our attention, which helps with concentration and thus increases our spiritual and efficiency in all spheres of life. Many people meditate for emotional gains so they can improve their relationships. We focus on these

benefits of meditation, but we forget that because living at the level of our physical senses, we take ourselves to be our body, mind and emotions.

There is another reason for which we should meditate, and that is for our spiritual gains. This is because our true nature is spirit, and the spirit, being a part of God, is everlasting. Thus, any gains experienced at the spiritual level are also everlasting. As such, it is our soul that we should focus on nourishing while we are in this body. We should meditate to realise our true nature and discover our relationship with the Creator. Meditation is a simple process for which we sit still and concentrate within to experience inner treasures.

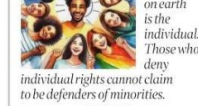
There is a typical problem that people throughout the world have while trying to meditate. That is: how to keep one's attention in meditation without being distracted by thoughts?

Our minds are active and restless and do not like to be still and focus on the wonders within. Distractions from the mind include trying to tell us we have more important things to do than to meditate, engaging us in anger, lust, greed, attachment, and ego through its need to fulfil desires, or making us dwell on the past or anticipate the future.

The solution for our attention: one is the switch to be attuned to our soul and the other is to be attuned to our mind. The mind sends us to be able to separate what thoughts are of God and the soul, and what thoughts are of the mind. We need to learn to be vigilant when the mind is pulling a trick to distract our attention either in meditation or throughout our day.

## Sacredspace

The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.



Ayn Rand

## Meditation Is All About Dedication And Diligence

When we have a goal that we really want to attain, nothing can stop us from trying to achieve it. Whether we want to win sports, reach our financial goals, lose weight, or improve our relationships, we spend time working to achieve success. We put in the time and effort. It is the same with meditation. We have within us a gateway to peace, joy, and happiness. However, to access these treasures we need to meditate, by sitting in silence and staying focused to enjoy them.

We need to set our priorities. When we want to study for an exam, we set aside time to focus only on that. Similarly, when we set a time for our meditation, we focus only on meditation for that period. We then allow time for other activities through the rest of the day. This helps us preserve our meditation time only for that purpose.



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Kolkata horror

Safety of medical staff must be prioritised

THE rape-murder of a post-graduate trainee doctor at a state-run medical college and hospital in Kolkata has shocked the nation and triggered countrywide protests by doctors and medical students. The chilling brutality of the crime has led to comparisons with the 2012 Nirbhaya case, which had shaken our collective conscience and served as a catalyst for tightening rape laws. The resident doctor was sexually assaulted and killed in a seminar hall, where she had gone to take a short break from her strenuous duty. The college principal has resigned, while two security guards have been expelled for dereliction of duty. Nothing less than a high-level probe is needed to get to the bottom of this horrifying matter.

The need to ensure the safety and security of healthcare professionals cannot be overemphasised. What makes life-savers and healers vulnerable to violence and harassment? Gruelling timings, especially odd hours, excessive workload due to staff shortage, the entry of unauthorised or undesirable persons and undue pressure from some patients' families are key factors. During the Covid-19 pandemic, countless doctors had put their lives on the line to save patients; around 1,600 of them didn't survive. Yet, the medical community remains unappreciated and unprotected.

Doctors and paramedics simply cannot discharge their duties to the best of their ability if the fear of being attacked or accosted hounds them at every step. A Bill seeking to safeguard healthcare personnel and the property of medical institutions remains in limbo. Practically nothing has changed on the ground since Kerala doctor Vandana Das was stabbed to death by a drug addict at a hospital in May last year. And not many remember the case of Aruna Shanbhag, a nurse who was sexually assaulted in a Mumbai hospital in 1973 and spent the next four decades in a vegetative state before she breathed her last. Will the Kolkata horror pave the way for much-needed reforms? Let's see.

## Climate-resilient crops

Encourage adoption, fund research to the hilt

CHANGING monsoon patterns, deadlier heatwaves, rising sea levels and intense storms pose an acute risk to the agriculture sector in India, a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned last month. Climate change is predicted to drastically reduce agriculture cover and crop yields in the absence of mitigation strategies. The impact will be more pronounced for small-scale producers who are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture. Climate-resilient crops are intended to maintain or increase yields under stressful conditions. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research started its project on innovations in climate-resilient farming in 2011. The launch of several high-yielding, climate-resilient crop varieties by the Prime Minister is a continuation of such endeavours. The government says its target to increase the paddy area with climate-resistant seeds this year follows the success of such seeds in the bumper wheat harvest. Indigenous solutions need consistent support, including by incentivising private sector participation.

There is no dearth of national programmes that have been activated for climate change adaptation. They range from promoting judicious management of available resources and water conservation to protecting forest cover and the Soil Health Card scheme that aims to curb the overuse of urea fertilisers. The progress of crop diversification is slow, even as several states are promoting organic farming on a wider scale. Technology demonstration alone cannot ensure optimum adoption. Equally significant is the farmers' access to scientific inputs and the effectiveness of outreach services.

Amid the debate on what's best for the farmer, building a broad consensus on adopting climate-friendly agriculture practices would be in order. As would be assured support for exhaustive empirical studies on their efficiency. Research and development must get the top billing.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune

CHANDIGARH, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13, 1974

## Public and private interest

THE essence of a modern democratic government is full publicity to all business that is of public interest, but several Union Ministers seem to think otherwise. Thereby, they reflect their disbelief in the precept that the State itself is public property and that it must do everything above board. This is evident from Labour Minister Raghunath Reddy's refusal, in the Lok Sabha on August 8, to divulge the contents of the Chakravarti Committee report on a wages and income policy. He needlessly created suspicion by insisting that the report was "a secret document" and meant for the Government's "internal use". What precisely is a popularly elected Government's "internal use" of a report on wages? The implicit secretiveness strikes at the root of government by open discussion and consensus. Reddy said the document was intended "to help the Government understand certain problems connected with wages, profits and income policy". What the people's Government wishes to understand, the people themselves wish to understand more clearly. Otherwise, it would be a closed and not an open society where everything is expected to be subjected to the public gaze all the time, with no iron or nylon curtain to suit the administration's convenience. Reports dealing with defence and national security may, with some justification, be treated as confidential. Premature disclosure of vital details would mean offering military secrets on a platter to a hostile country. Even in this sphere, the people's fundamental right to know is being increasingly asserted.

## Too early for India to intervene in B'desh

New Delhi is currently in no position to influence the events in the neighbouring country

KP NAYYAR  
STRATEGIC ANALYST

THE best option for India in dealing with Bangladesh after the exit of Sheikh Hasina into exile is not to do anything now. With a torrent of advice, suggestions, tips and hypothetical expertise flowing from the humble teashops of Siliguri in West Bengal to think tanks in New Delhi brimming with erudition, it is not easy for policymakers in the national capital to sit tight while an important neighbouring country is in turmoil.

The government was particularly vulnerable to criticism by the political class because Parliament was in session when Hasina left her country and arrived in India. Ministers and senior officials had to be seen as being responsive to the situation across the eastern border or face flak. Besides, the evolving national mood in India in the last decade has been one of assertion, be it in foreign policy or sports, to mention two spheres of activity that are currently dominating the 24-hour news cycle.

To borrow from the memorable phraseology of then US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq two decades ago, there is little point in discussing the 'known knowns' about Bangladesh. That has been the essence of public discourse in this country since student protests erupted in Bangladesh. What is important are the 'unknown unknowns' about Bangladesh. Rumsfeld had said in 2002 that these are "the ones we don't know that we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones."

That being the case, India must

GOOD CALL: It is to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's credit that he did not use the worn-out cliché 'Wait and watch' when he briefed Parliament on August 6 about developments in India's eastern neighbourhood. **AV**

pause until the unknown unknowns about Bangladesh — the domestic evolution there, its external dimensions, the fallout on India, etc. — translate into the first category, that is, the known knowns. As a rule, governments and their image-makers are loath to accept incipient policy. Former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao was an exception to this. He once famously remarked that "even not taking a decision is a decision." Rao practised this dictum in many spheres when he was the head of government in a fluid political environment, often with remarkable success. India's best recourse now is to follow this truism in dealing with the uncertain situation that has unfolded in Bangladesh. In any case, the stark reality is that India is currently in no position to influence the events there. Beyond urging restraint and perhaps making an issue of

Beyond urging restraint and perhaps making an issue of Hinduphobia at the UN, can India do anything to stop the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh?

this country, panelists who seek their 15 minutes of fame are not going to accept that India is helpless in this matter. Even if it were feasible, the Indian government is not foolhardy enough to resort to any such course. If there is a fundamental threat to India's national security, the Cabinet Committee on Security will surely act, as it has done many times before. But we are not there yet. Incendiary rhetoric, a sadly familiar feature of Indian society now, must stop.

If India is to have a realistic Bangladesh policy once things

settle down in Dhaka, it must not fall for fanciful depictions of how good things were in the neighbouring country during Hasina's rule. It is a safe assumption based on extended conversations and the fallout of public opinion from Kolkata to Kochi and from Gurgaon to Gandhinagar that most Indians have come to believe that the best is behind for Bangladesh. And that it is now staring into an abyss of regressive forces and Islamic nationalists whose agenda is to destroy the friendship that Hasina struggled to create with successive Indian leaders. There is, of course, no polling or any scientific evidence to support this assertion.

No one will dispute that Bangladesh's performance in many sectors was worthy of emulation by other similarly placed nations. After all, how many other countries in our time have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and graduated out of the Least Developed Country rankings by global parameters? Dhaka would have done just that in two more years, but that outcome is now in doubt — unless its new, interim leader, Muhammad Yunus, can perform a miracle of creating

national cohesion and sustaining human development alongside.

Even those who have only dabbled in foreign policy — though for decades — know that India has gone through this before. When the Shah of Iran had to flee his country in 1979, much like Hasina now, Indians were similarly friendly because he had tried to be friends with India in his later years as a monarch. He had downgraded relations with Pakistan in a zero-sum game. Most Indians failed to grasp the meaning of Iran's historic Islamic revolution. New Delhi had a tough time building bridges with Qom, and relations did not stabilise until Khomeini visited Tehran in 1983.

A serious mistake that Indians are making in forming their opinions about Hasina's troubles and Yunus' challenge is to conclude that Bangladesh was a peaceful country during the now-exiled Prime Minister's rule. Bangladesh was created because the blood of East Bengalis was being shed before Partition and after it became East Pakistan. Its bloodletting has continued throughout. If Hasina had not fled, she would have likely met the same tragic fate as her father.

Counting mutinies, revolts and coups d'état — all with fatalities — Bangladesh has encountered 15 attempts to change its governments by force. Two of its Presidents have been assassinated. In addition, the army has intervened to change governments peacefully. No other country in South Asia has experienced such violent transfers of power. By comparison, Pakistan has had only five successful coups. 'Wait and watch' is one of the more popular clichés in diplomacy, although in reality it has no meaning. It is to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's credit that he did not use this worn-out cliché when he briefed Parliament on August 6 about developments in India's eastern neighbourhood. With formidable resources, both overt and covert, India will hopefully be in a position to act if the situation demands in a few months. Now is not the time to act.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Sincere diplomacy is no more possible than dry water or wooden iron. — Joseph Stalin

## Pride of place at Bara Khana

NJ RAVI CHANDER

I grew up listening to stories about World War II from my uncles, granduncles and grandparents who served in the war. My paternal uncle Major P Sampangi Raju's unit, 12 Field Company of the Madras Sappers, was among the first to go overseas and distinguish itself on the battlefield. In October 1939, the 12 Field Company joined a combat unit in Egypt. The soldiers' versatility and adaptability were evident as they built camps and hunted accommodation and initiated defence works. They took part in the encounter with the Italians at Sidi Barani and were engaged in water supply, track repair, mine lifting and obstacle demolition. The operation in Sudan, as part of the Fourth Infantry Division, highlighted their adaptability. They provided long-range reconnaissance patrols and did mine and track construction. They participated in the fighting that led to a spectacular victory over the Italian forces and the capture of Kerem.

Major Raju was awarded the Indian Order of Merit for his exceptional courage, initiative, skill and devotion to duty in detecting and destroying minefields during this operation. Later, he was decorated with the Indian Distinguished Service Medal and the Vishistha Seva Medal. The MEG Museum and Archives in Bengaluru showcase his medals.

On one occasion, Major Raju and a fellow soldier were riding atop an armoured tank with its hatch open when they came under heavy enemy fire. My uncle died into the mouth of the tank heading and escaped with his life. But his mate, who jumped in with his leg down, didn't survive after being shot in the head. A little-known incident occurred during the African campaign. Col DN Das, who commanded 12 Field Company in the early 1940s, narrated it. "When I first met Chatu (Major Raju), he was the oldest hand in the company. He was a sweeper who enrolled just before the company embarked on the desert campaign and had served in it throughout the war. He enjoyed unusual freedom in his dealings with the men, calling platoon havildars and NCOs by name and participating in all the chores and activities."

Col Das further said: "What caught my attention was that he was the first to be served at the company Bara Khana. Major Raju told me the story behind this unusual custom. During the African campaign, some sappers were trapped inside a minefield. At nightfall, they were still there, without food or water. Chatu volunteered to carry sustenance to them. The Officer Commanding, Major Cameron, honoured him for his selfless courage. At Bara Khana, Major Cameron held after the war. Major Cameron led Chatu to the table and insisted that he be served first. The tradition continued till the day Chatu left the company on retirement."

Being introduced to King George VI in Tunisia was a source of great pride for Major Raju. This royal introduction was a testament to the recognition he received for his exceptional service. Besides, a ground on the MEG campus has been christened 'Sampangi Circus' in his honour, further cementing his legacy.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Violence against health workers

The rape and murder of an on-duty doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata is horrifying. The fact that the perpetrator managed to commit the heinous act at a medical facility with security arrangements in place is mind-boggling. The incident exposes the extent of negligence on the part of the authorities concerned. It is a pity that no effective steps have been taken to ensure the safety of healthcare workers, who toil day and night under enormous pressure. It is incumbent on West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee to ensure that the guilty is brought to book. Besides, all states should come up with stringent laws to deter violence against medical professionals.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM

## Counter allegations with facts

With reference to the editorial 'Hindenburg at it again', the allegations against SEBI chairman Madhabi Buch and her husband raise serious questions about the credibility of India's market regulator. The claims of conflict of interest, if left unaddressed, could erode investors' confidence and undermine the integrity of our financial system. This is an issue that transcends corporate manoeuvring. It is essentially a matter of transparency and accountability. Dismissing the allegations as 'baseless' or branding those making them as conspirators is not enough. SEBI must counter the claims with facts or risk losing the trust of the very investors it is meant to protect.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

## SC strikes the right balance

The Supreme Court has done well to partially stay the Mumbai college circular banning the hijab while upholding restrictions on the niqab and burqa. The decision balances religious sentiments with modern educational needs and fosters inclusivity while maintaining discipline and uniformity. The nuanced approach adopted by the apex court will go a long way towards promoting progressive educational spaces. Besides, the ruling can serve as a template for handling such sensitive issues without causing polarisation.

AMANJOT KAR, MOHALI

## Get the House in order

Apropos of 'Oppn must apologise, says Scindia' (Dhankhar-Jaya face-off), Union Min-

ister for Communications Jyotirmitya Scindia has rightly called on Opposition leaders to apologise to Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar over his recent spat with Samajwadi Party MP Jaya Bachchan. The lawmakers must be respectful while dealing with dignitaries holding constitutional posts. Just recently, VP Dhankhar had to tell MP Jaya that her celebrity status did not give her the right to disturb the decorum of the House. The Rajya Sabha MP is known for her haughty behaviour. A few days ago, she even took exception to being addressed as 'Jaya Amitabh Bachchan' in the House, insisting that her identity not be tied to her husband's name. This was so needless.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

## Don't disrupt House proceedings

It has become increasingly common for Opposition MPs in the Rajya Sabha to disrespect Upper House Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar. It seems like a calculated move by them to derail the proceedings of Parliament. MP Jaya Bachchan recently sparked a massive controversy when she objected to being called 'Jaya Amitabh Bachchan' in Parliament. Her attempt to politicise a non-issue was condemnable. This is nothing but a nefarious design to create a flutter and cause disruptions.

ASHOK KUMAR, BY MAIL

## Bring our men back

The delay in the discharge of the 69 Indian nationals still fighting in the Russian army is a matter of grave concern. Going by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's recent remarks on the matter in the Lok Sabha, Russian authorities maintain that the Indian citizens had signed contracts for service with the Russian armed forces. Though PM Narendra Modi took up the issue with President Vladimir Putin last month, and was assured by the latter of their prompt release, there is still no sign that our men will be brought back home soon. Some of the Indians recruited into the Russian army have already perished. It is time for New Delhi to facilitate a speedy return of our nationals. Besides, there must be a stern crackdown on the unscrupulous travel agents responsible for pushing Indians into the war against their will.

HARSH SHARMA, JALANDHAR



## Airtel Rules the Britannia Microwaves

BT stake a strategic fit for Mittal empire

Bharti Global's acquisition of a strategic stake in BT (formerly British Telecom) is an unprecedented diversification for the Indian telecom industry. Sunil Mittal has pursued subscribers in Africa after building up an enviable base in his home market and has placed big bets on European satellite communications. The latest investment gives him exposure, at least as an investor, to better-yielding markets. It also delivers technology synergies for upgrading Bharti Airtel's terrestrial and broadband networks. BT partnered Bharti Airtel at the onset of its cellular journey in India to mutual benefit. Those benefits are still on offer in the rapidly evolving telecom landscape.

Indian telcos have had a chequered history as policy changes kept the landscape uncertain for most of the previous quarter-century. The industry suffered from pricing wars and high upfront spectrum costs that affected network upgrades. With policy becoming more stable and data consumption propping up subscriber revenue, competition in the industry is swelling towards service quality.

Bharti's move is an admission that the game has changed from chasing low-yielding subscriber volumes to lucrative enterprise and upscale personal data consumption. Satellite communications offer an easy and quick way to roll out the latest-generation telecom networks.

Bharti's strategic stake in BT does not materially alter the pecking order of the world's most valuable telcos, which US firms dominate. Bharti Airtel will continue in 7th place, trailing Deutsche Telekom. Yet, the valuations can only change in Bharti's favour as Indian and African subscribers increase their data consumption and are willing to pay more. The disconnect between subscriber numbers and revenue will subside over time. Satellite communications could likewise weigh in for telecom networks spread over larger geographical areas, such as those in Africa, the US, China and India. Mittal is taking the back seat as an investor in BT. But it is a strategic fit in his telecom empire.



STATE OF PLAY India is gaining influence regardless of shifts in the neighbourhood

## Operation Opportunities



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Bangladesh has emerged as the latest worry point in India's testing neighbourhood. Last year, it was the Maldives when Mohamed Muizzu stormed to power on an anti-India plank. In 2022, it was Sri Lanka when scenes similar to Dhaka saw the presidential palace being ransacked by angry protesters as Gotabaya Rajapaksa, like Sheikh Hasina, was forced to flee the country.

But India has made a strong comeback in Sri Lanka, wresting significant advantage from China. And going by the grammar and tone of S. Jaishankar's just-concluded visit to Maldives, Muizzu, too, seems to be course-correcting. So, there's more than what meets the eye — a fresh dynamic that reflects changing geopolitical and economic realities.

Take the Maldives. In May IMF warned the country against a ballooning Chinese debt folio. A month later, Fitch downgraded its rating on grounds of increased risks associated with the country's worsening external financing and liquidity metrics. It assessed that weakening foreign reserve buffers and rising external government debt increase the challenges for the new government to meet its substantial upcoming external debt-servicing obligations and keep the currency peg to the US dollar.

According to the 2023 World Bank International Debt Report, 30% of the Maldives' external debt is with China, which exceeds \$4 bn. The debt trap that Sri Lanka found itself with China, accentuated by the economic slowdown during the pandemic, has engulfed many small economies. Muizzu realised so that he needed New Delhi's help. Warning signs of a Lanka-type crisis were writ large. Got obliged by easing debt repayment schedules and helping with currency swap arrangements.

Further, Muizzu's attempt to reduce



Spreading the light

dependency on India by sourcing essential food supplies from West Asia raised prices within the Maldives. It soon became clear that India remains the most affordable option for food and essential supplies. Finally he had to take a call on whether to forgo political credit for many India-funded public-facing projects like reaching drinking water and sanitation facilities to 20 islands. Even today, it made sense to course-correct.

In Sri Lanka, the 2022 turmoil has so far worked to India's political advantage. New Delhi was the first responder to Colombo's financial crisis, helping with liquidity on crucial occasions, and then to secure an IMF package. Sri Lanka's inflation is below 3% today, down from a staggering 67.4% in September 2022.

As for the China concern, Colombo banned foreign research vessels in Lankan waters after Beijing's aggressive 'industrial' mission. While it's likely to lift the ban next year, the broader concern is that China's growing influence on China is a key shift. With elections due this year, India, too, has taken

en fresh guard, opening conversations with all contestants.

On a broader plane, therefore, a couple of points require emphasis. A political crisis in the neighbourhood can't always be controlled, calibrated and overseen by India.

India can turn such a crisis into opportunity, especially in the current geopolitical context. This is also possible because of India's own strong economic profile that has enabled it to create more economic leverage in the region.

Over the past decade, India has built deep linkages in four key areas — finance, supply chains, petroleum, and power and grid infrastructure. These investments have now emerged as stabilising factors during a political crisis. Any political regime in the region requires India's assurance and support because of their intricate network of dependencies that have been built into the equation.

India has added to this by rene major transmission lines into Nepal, allowing every crisis to not just be a source of instability but also an opportunity to build further strategic leverage. A power purchase deal was recently signed



India's own strong economic profile has enabled it to create more economic leverage in the region

between India, Nepal and Bangladesh. New Delhi is already Kathmandu's principal customer. Supplies from NTPC plant in Tripura and the Adam power plant in Gadda, Jharkhand, to Bangladesh have started. An ambitious \$1.2 bn under-sea transmission line is in the works with Sri Lanka.

India's economic embrace, therefore, is both deepening and expanding regardless of political shifts. Any new government in Dhaka will need to immediately lend political stability to the economic interaction with India. The costs of a fallout, as Muizzu realised, are just too high.

Further, alternatives to India are riskier and costlier in the long run. Unlike China, India neither overtly weaponises its assistance nor does it pose any threat to sovereignty of these countries.

Also, India's interests in building an economically prosperous neighbourhood because of risks in any of these countries easily spills into Indian territory. Finally, the larger geopolitical context weighs in India's favour, probably for the first time since independence. India and the US have held differing views on the Sheikh Hasina government. But will they let that play out in a way that benefits China in Bangladesh? Given the high stakes of the India-US strategic partnership, both sides should work this out to mutual benefit as in other cases. That opportunity, too, has presented itself as a new political order seeks to find its feet in Bangladesh. For its part, India doesn't have a closed-door approach. Its current engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, for instance, conveys political flexibility which is essential because unstable polities can't be controlled. What's important is to build economic leverage, so that every crisis is not just a source of instability but also an opportunity to build further strategic leverage.

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### THE SPEAKING TREE

## The Seer And Seen

SHIBANI BELWALKAR

The vedas describe the visual discrimination of the seer; one who sees, and the seen in a distinct manner; building levels of awareness and transitions in the seemingly ordinary relationships of our everyday observations. The eye is seen. The colour and colour: the seen. That, eye is the seen and the mind is its seer. The witness alone is the Seer of thoughts in the mind and never the seen, according to Drig Drishya Viveka, verse 1.

Our eyes perceive a myriad of objects in their field of vision, yet they cannot simultaneously observe themselves in this process of viewing, and, hence, remain separate from these objects. While the objects before our eyes change, the essence and role of the eyes as instruments of vision remains constant. Once these objects are viewed, the mind takes on the role of the seer. Powering the mind is the consciousness that progresses through the mind, wisdom and intellect, and finally through the eyes of personal likes and dislikes. Such a progression is a more profound connection with others, ultimately creating a more mindful and compassionate world, where each action and choice reflects our highest Self.

The Seer and seen can be a filtration through a consciousness hierarchy — beginning with core values and manifesting through the mind, wisdom and intellect, and finally through the eyes of personal likes and dislikes. Such a progression is a more profound connection with others, ultimately creating a more mindful and compassionate world, where each action and choice reflects our highest Self.

### Chat Room

## Not the Tip of The Hindenburg

Ayuppos' Much Ado About SEBI'

By Sugata Ghosh (Aug 12), imputations over the Adani Group issues are not only unfortunate but seem to have frozen saner thoughts on either side of the aisle. This time, the tip of the iceberg, as it were, is the Hindenburg. Under similar circumstances of the 26 spectrum episode in the UPA era, the JPC found it 'improper'. The case was dismissed by the courts, with the prosecution attracting uncharitable comments from the bench. The CAG, who had ab initio triggered the issue in 2011 with the theory of 'notional loss' to the exchequer, apologised to the nation much later. Facts tend to float up even when the Opposition is weak. Got to be remiss in not setting up the JPC, thus allowing perceptions to needlessly permeate through the public psyche. Institutions need to endure and strengthen even as gears are designed to be transient.

R NARAYANAN

Navi Mumbai

The startling revelations by Hindenburg on the markets regulator cannot be countered by only an outright denial by all the affected parties. Given that Madhavi Parthi, a Sebi chairperson, there will be a question mark over any process initiated by the regulator to get to the bottom of these revelations. As questions are being raised about Sebi's integrity and independence, it is incumbent upon all the stakeholders, ranging from Sebi to GoI, to act with alacrity and usher in a new era of transparency by protecting the regulator's institutional autonomy without delay.

H JAYARAMAN

Shelvarandan, Tamil Nadu

## It's Stranded Deduction

The taxpayers, especially senior citizens, who get old salary or pension — and depend solely on interest income from deposits held in banks, post office, etc. must avail of the benefit of ₹5,000 Standard Deduction under the new tax regime. To address this need, the government has introduced Section 80TTB up to ₹5,000 for these senior citizens in the new tax regime. This new provision is a welcome move as it will further incentivise deposits in banks, the low growth rate, which has become a matter of concern for both RBI and GoI.

AVANINDRA CHOPRA

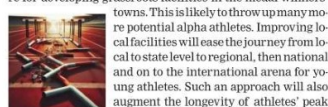
Chandigarh

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

## Slim Olypickings, A Correction Strategy

The world's most populous country, and 5th-largest economy ranked 71st among 206 countries in the just-concluded Paris Olympics. Clearly, the proverbial 'hopes and prayers' of 1.4 bn people doth not an impressive sporting nation make. Improving India's performance in future needs more than patriotic yelling. It requires changing the system of rewards, eschewing the propensity to politicise the sporting arena, and treating athletics as an avenue to build 'Yiksit India'.

The current system of central and state governments giving medal-winners — six this time, one less than in Tokyo — cash awards should be replaced by ploughing that amount and more for developing grassroots facilities in the medal-winners' towns. This is likely to throw up many more potential alpha athletes. Improving local facilities will ease the journey from local to state level to regional, then national and on to the international arena for young athletes. Such an approach will also augment the longevity of athletes' peak performance and career curve. Powering



through injuries aggravated by lack of proper treatment, 'rough and tough' training adversely affects the peak age of athletes. More often than not, Indian athletes are at their prime before they reach the world stage. This queue must quicken.

For most Indian athletes, a difficult journey to the big stage makes it doubly hard to make way for the next gen. They, along with their movers and backers, become recalcitrant gatekeepers restricting free entry to new talent. Absence of systemic nudges to create a continuous supply of potential world-class athletes, and the propensity to corner opportunities, is made worse with politicisation of sports. Medals will come if this creaky architecture is jettisoned.



Unnecessary emails, reply-alls and forwards are destroying the world

## Think Before You Hit The Send Key Again

Most veteran Earthlings who've been around the email and social media circuit for a while now have given up resisting the relentless tide of unwanted messages, reply-alls, forwards, photos, memes (most of which at least are funny), and the truly insufferable 'Good morning!' and 'Good night!' exhortations on WhatsApp groups. A new study might just offer a way to tame this digital avalanche we lie buried under. Ian Hodgkinson, a strategy professor at Loughborough University in Britain, has uncovered that 6% of data used by companies never sees the light of day again. Personal data fares no better. So, every time you hit 'reply all' to the office mail with that Earth-shattering idea at 3 am, or share a pic of your artisanal avocado toast, somewhere a data centre lets out an exasperated groan, burning energy and spewing carbon into the atmosphere. Multiply that by your infinite chain-of-forwards — each email equals 4 gm of carbon — and you've practically pushed Tuluva or Kiribati to the brink. Meanwhile, cloud operators and tech firms are grinning like Cheshire Cats, rubbing their hands together as they watch their profits soar. If you're keen on avoiding the role of villain in a dystopian eco-drama, cut down your digital high-fives, inane emails, soul-suckingly pretty pics, and the digital equivalent of stable burning — internal memes.

## ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

India's Olympics medals are few,

But cricket! Oh, that's what we do!

With a bat and a ball,

We forge it all.

When a new innings is again in view.

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## Not NEET

In 2023, 256 million youth people aged 15 to 24 (17% of the world's population)

are not NEET (Not in employment, education or training). That's about a fifth (20.4%) of the youth population — percentage point below the pre-pandemic year of 2019. For young men, the NEET rate was 13.1% (0.5 points below 2019), while the rate for young women remained twice as high at 28.1% (1.6 percentage points below the 2019 rate).

NOTE: 2005 is the earliest year of data availability

LatAm & Carib: Latin America and the Caribbean; Northern, Southern and Western

Source: ILO

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## Bell Curves

By R Prasad

The flock is shrinking, Tommy. Isn't the wolf a cousin of yours?

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## Medals Tally With Nations?



Amit Kapoor

With the final top 10 medal country standings at the just-concluded Paris Olympics reading the US, China, Japan, Australia, France, the Netherlands, Britain, South Korea, Italy and Germany, one is bound to ask: why do some countries fare better than others?

Discussions usually attribute wins and losses to individual abilities, training and dedication. These factors are undoubtedly crucial. But there could be other determinants like economic prosperity — each of the last three Summer and Winter Olympic Games, the top 10 medal-winning countries have been high-income countries based on World Bank's income-level classification, with the exception of China (upper-middle income) in Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and OAR (Olympic Athletes from Russia) — upper-middle income) in PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics.

However, research has found a range of determinants beyond economic prosperity — team size, growth rate, expenditure on health, population, etc. — to have a significant impact. We investigated the association between national medal count for each country at the Beijing 2022 Olympics and their GDP per capita (PPP). A moderate positive relationship is observed with a correlation coefficient of 0.62.

It's important to note that correlation does not imply causation. Economic resources can potentially affect sports prowess. But it's not a sole determining factor. The correlation between a country's population and its Olympic medal count, for instance, is interesting. Intuitively, the larger the country, one would assume the greater its potential pool of talent and, hence, possibility of a higher medal count. The reality, how-

ever, is more nuanced.

The metric of 'medals per capita' provides a perspective that favours smaller nations. For instance, nations like Grenada and St Lucia, two countries with a population of 1.25 lakh and 1.8 lakh respectively, would rank high on this metric. If their medal wins are extrapolated to a scale of 10 mn, an approximate projection would indicate 160 medals by Grenada and 11 medals by St Lucia in the Paris Olympics 2024.

Among the countries in the top 15 of medal tally only Australia, the Netherlands and New Zealand have performed well relative to their population size. These figures show that on a per-capita basis, smaller countries sometimes do outperform bigger ones, and how a country utilises its resources and talent relative to its population size.

Investment in health and education is also an exceedingly important factor. Social progress is a multifaceted indicator, including parameters related to education, health, gender equality, environment and social inclusion. Concerted efforts to build an environment conducive to nurturing sports talent is key to gaining more accolades internationally.

The impact of corruption in sports is not to be overlooked. Lack of integrity and high levels of corruption in the system can promote unethical practices such as doping, bribing, match-fixing, unfair choice of candidates, etc. This leads to unfair competition and athletes who can't perform at par with global



Sporting fashion

standards.

Analysing the year-wise budget allocation for the Department of Sports from 2012 to 2020 highlights a telling trend. The difference between the revised estimates and actual expenditure has risen over the years, but in an uneven pattern — from a difference of ₹2.1 cr in 2012-13, ₹6.09 cr in 2016-17 to ₹244 cr in 2022-23. This trend points to underlying inefficiencies in budget management and inefficient utilisation of funds.

As we focus on ramping up our sports ecosystem, such inconsistencies call for deeper examination. India must also embed investments in sports infra and training facilities. There is a need to assess existing gaps in policies pertaining to sports ecosystem.

Another crucial factor is gender. The role of women in the Olympics has also evolved significantly over the years as it is important to broader social changes and demand attention to gender equity in sports. Women athletes account for 45% of total athletes in Beijing 2022. The growing inclusion of women in the Olympics is appreciable. But at a country level, it's often influenced by a range of complex factors — historical investment, societal attitudes and institutional support.

The relationship between Olympic success and social and economic growth is not a one-way street. Reciprocal association — stellar Olympic performance fuelling investment in sports infrastructure, education, health and improvements in policies governing sports — is equally important. Feeling a sense of pride watching your nation's players emerge victorious on this international forum is a powerful experience. However, this should not be the end.





## Kashmir file

J&K needs a participatory democratic set-up to deal with people's needs

The recent two-day visit by a team of the Election Commission of India (ECI), led by the Chief Election Commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) – its second since March to meet representatives of political parties and the local administration – comes amid the growing chorus from regional parties to hold elections to the 90-seat Assembly of the five-year-old Union Territory (UT). In its December 2023 judgment on Article 370, the Supreme Court was specific in its direction on holding elections in J&K. The Court had noted that “direct elections to legislative assemblies cannot be put on hold until Statehood is restored” and directed the ECI to conduct elections in J&K by September 30, 2024. The erstwhile State of J&K was bifurcated into two UTs, and its special status scrapped in 2019. J&K saw its last Assembly election in 2014. After the collapse of the coalition government of the Peoples’ Democratic Party-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2018, J&K has not had a representative government. The Centre should be buoyed by the faith shown by voters in the Lok Sabha elections held in April-May this year. Voters chose to depart from the previous trend, especially in the Kashmir Valley, of election boycotts, and instead posed a historic turnout of 58% in five Lok Sabha seats. Since 1990, J&K’s voting percentage had never crossed the 50% mark.

Therefore, holding Assembly elections will be a statement of confidence by the Centre. It will also be a positive reciprocity to voter enthusiasm. The Centre has been accused by several rights groups of curtailing democratic processes in J&K since its semi-autonomous status ended in 2019. Allowing people to choose their representatives will be a major step towards ensuring the restoration and the building up of political processes. Recurrent militant attacks in J&K point to the fact that a lot of work is still required to attain complete peace in J&K. However, making elections subservient to the security situation will only make the Centre hostage to the whims of terrorists. On the one hand, the Centre needs to further its efforts to deal with militancy, while on the other, kick off political processes. Assembly elections can turn out to be a democratic instrument to ensure that any sense of alienation does not get amplified and exploited by the enemies of the country. J&K needs to have a participatory democratic set-up in place to deal with issues such as growing unemployment, electricity crisis, and poor health infrastructure. These elections have the potential to act as a healing process for a place wounded by over three decades of conflict.

## More and better

States must develop capacity to conduct testing and sequencing of viruses

Since the Zika outbreak began on June 20, when the first case was reported from Pune, confirmed cases have been slowly but steadily rising. As of August first week, Maharashtra has reported 88 confirmed cases. Pune city, the epicentre, alone accounts for 73 cases, while six are from Pune rural. Of the total number reported so far, at 37, pregnant women alone account for half the number of confirmed infections. Though rare, people with Zika virus infection run a risk of suffering from Guillain-Barré syndrome, a neurological disorder in which the immune system mistakenly attacks part of the peripheral nervous system. But a more harmful effect is seen in pregnant women who run a risk of giving birth to babies with a smaller than average head size, called microcephaly, and other neurological impairments. As in a January 2023 paper in *The Lancet Regional Health - Americas*, a meta-analysis of babies born to 1,548 pregnant women infected with the Zika virus, from 13 studies in Brazil between 2015 and 2017, found the absolute risk of microcephaly to be 6.6% either at birth or during follow-up. Babies also had 18.7% absolute risk of suffering from functional neurological abnormalities, and a relatively smaller risk of neuroimaging, ophthalmic and history abnormalities. There was also a significant risk of premature birth (10.5%), low birth weight and small for gestational age (16.2%). Less known is the risk of sexual transmission of the virus by infected men due to the presence of potentially infectious virus in their semen for at least two months. It is hence important for infected men, especially those planning a family, to be made aware of the risk as well as recommend measures to prevent viral transmission to women for at least three months, as in the US, CDC guidelines.

Given the harmful effects of the virus, it is shocking that the Pune-based ICMR lab ramped up testing only after the publication of news about the Pune Municipal Corporation planning to send samples to a government medical college instead to cut the delay in testing. As Kerala just demonstrated in the latest outbreak of the Nipah virus, and as Gujarat learnt it the hard way in the ongoing Chandipura virus outbreak and acute encephalitis syndrome cases, it is becoming increasingly important and necessary that States develop the capacity to conduct high-quality testing and sequencing of viruses that cause frequent and deadly outbreaks. From the time that the first suspected case is observed, the reduction in the lead time to test results is the key to instituting timely public health responses that can limit the virus spread and stop an outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the advantages of decentralised testing and sequencing, and this should be replicated for every pathogen that causes deadly outbreaks.

The year 2024 had dawned with forebodings of a new wave of security threats, and security specialists the world over, had braced for a wave of attacks along a wide spectrum. Their concerns essentially stemmed from fears arising out of new threats posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its different manifestations, including Generative AI and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). Together with the expanding horizons of disinformation and cyber threats, the outlook seemed distinctly gloomy.

The 33rd Summer Olympic Games in France, during July-August 2024, were seen as a real and tempting target for digital, including cyber and other criminals. Experts across the world were, hence, bracing themselves for digital attacks of a kind they had not encountered hitherto, quite apart from those launched by known terror groups.

Such fears were not unfounded, given the rising profile of both AI and cyber, and the consequential increase in disinformation attacks. Several months down the road, the absence of any spectacular attack has been a relief. This is no reason to relax the vigil as newer variations of digital threats are beginning to emerge. The Paris Games ended peacefully, but eternal vigilance is still the price that security agencies need to pay to ensure proper safety. Undoubtedly, an Olympic Games of this size passing off without a major incident is indeed a triumph for security managers engaged in providing security for the Games, yet vigil can hardly be relaxed.

### The year so far

It might be worthwhile to look back and see what did, or did not, happen in 2024. The year started seeming to confirm the prognosis that 2024 may well be the year when the world confronts a cornucopia of security threats. Disinformation was already having a field day in the run up to the elections in Taiwan in January 2024, and the atmosphere was lousy with disinformation and videos, causing widespread confusion. This was attributed to China, but we live in a world today where nothing is what it seems. What was, however, evident was that the advent of AI seemed to have made it far easier to spread disinformation cloaked in the garb of reality. AI was the principal, though not, perhaps, the sole culprit.

It is indeed true that spreading disinformation has become far easier with the advent of AI. Deep fakes, comprising digitally manipulated video, audio, or images, repeatedly hit the headlines today, causing a miasma of disinformation. The truth is revealed much later – and after the damage has been done.

Yet, there is not enough comprehension today, about the threat posed by AI generated or other types of deep fakes. Together with cyber attacks, the world needs to realise that we face a new and grim reality which cannot be ignored any longer. National security stands imperilled by these



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never threats. But even when it manifests itself, there is not enough comprehension of what is taking place. A combination of cyber attacks and AI-enabled disinformation had and is still, causing grave havoc in the conflict in Ukraine. Ukraine is a good case study of how two sides in a conflict could employ disinformation – including AI-enabled disruption – against one another, to each other’s disadvantage. Together with cyber attacks, this has led to major disruptions in critical infrastructure, including telecommunications and power grids.

### The CrowdStrike outage as ‘preview’

The world had a preview last month of what could happen, or is in store, in the event of a massive cyberattack, whether AI-enabled or otherwise. A ‘glitch’ in a software update concerning Microsoft Windows caused a massive outage, which initially affected parts of the United States, but rapidly spread to different parts of the globe, including India. It disrupted flight operations, air traffic, stock exchanges and more. CERT-IN which was the first to respond, CERT-IN issued a severity rating of ‘critical’ for the incident. This was, however, not a cyberattack, but it provided a preview of the kind of disruption that could take place in the event of a cyberattack. According to Microsoft, over eight million Windows devices failed, leading to global disruption on a massive scale.

Human memory tends to be short, and it may be necessary to remind the world about some of the better known cyberattacks in the past, which caused mayhem across the globe. The world may, or may not, remember the widespread disruption that occurred in 2017 in the wake of the WannaCry ransomware attack employing the WannaCry ransomware cryptoworm, which infected well over 2,30,000 computers in 150 countries, resulting in damage amounting to billions of dollars. The same year witnessed another cyberattack using the Shamoon Computer Virus which was directed mainly against oil companies such as SA, ARAMCO (Saudi Arabia) and RasGas (Qatar), and was labelled, at the time, as the ‘biggest hack in history’. Again, around the same period, a cyberattack involving the ‘Petya’ Malware severely affected banks, electricity grids and a host of other institutions across Europe and the United Kingdom, as also the US and Australia.

Few cyberattacks have, however, had a more devastating impact than that caused by the Stuxnet ‘attack’ in 2010. Over 2,00,000 computers were impacted and physically degraded as a result. Stuxnet was a malicious computer worm, believed to have been in development for nearly five years, and specifically targeting supervisory control and data acquisition systems. The target in this case was the Iran nuclear programme, leading to the inference that it was state sponsored. What is now known is that Stuxnet’s design and architecture is not domain specific, but could be

tailored for attacking most modern systems in use.

### Growing cyber threats

While the potential threat posed by AI disinformation looms large across the global landscape, for ordinary individuals, cyber is already a persisting threat. The number of victims of cyber fraud and cyber hacking has grown exponentially in recent years. Our day-to-day existence is threatened by fraudsters posing as delivery company agents and making delivery attempts, and, in the process, obtaining personal information for malicious use.

There is today a rising curve of false credit card transactions, obtaining personal information in the process to defraud unwitting individuals. Compromising business e-mails is on the increase. One of the most widespread cyber frauds is ‘phishing’, that involves stealing personal information such as customer ID, credit/debit card numbers, and even PIN. The list is extensive and extends to ‘spamming’ as well (where someone receives unsolicited commercial messages sent through one of the many electronic messaging systems). ‘Identity theft’ is among the most serious dangers that has now become widespread.

Across the democratic world, governments are seeking to put in place proper systems to deal with digital threats. Industry and private institutions, however, appear to be lagging behind. It is the latter segment that is, perhaps, the most vulnerable to digital attacks. Having in place firewalls, anti-virus defences and a good back-up and disaster recovery system are not enough. Most CEOs of companies, again, are not adequately equipped to deal with digital threats. Hence it might be useful to have a chief information and security officer to look at their systems and advise them as to what they should do.

Awareness of the growing danger of digital threats is the first step in the battle against cyber and AI-directed threats. Unauthorised use of Generative AI content has already become the stock-in-trade of digital bullying. Preventing this demands a great deal of effort and adequate budgetary allocations – whether in the private or public domain.

More than anything else, potentially dangerous digital technologies require more, and the specific, attention of those in-charge, specially in the case of democracies. Awareness about digital bullying and other forms of manipulation is fundamental if we are to prevent situations getting out of hand. More than anything else, there is a need to create a realisation that the struggle against digital threats calls for coordinated action. Also, a realisation that nations, especially democracies, are today under attack from a new and different source. There is, hence, every need to counter digital surveillance, disinformation, bullying and manipulation, for our survival.

This year may well be the one when the world confronts a cornucopia of security threats

# The top court as custodian of liberties

Former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia’s enlargement on bail by the Supreme Court of India, after an unconscionably long incarceration, is a welcome vindication of the apex court’s remit as custodian of individual liberties. In an eloquent exposition of its mandate, the Court reiterated that ‘a constitutional court has to lean in favour of constitutionalism and the rule of law of which liberty is an intrinsic part...’

Citing its judgment in *Arnab Manojan Goswami vs The State of Maharashtra and Ors.* (2020), it reaffirmed that ‘liberty across all human eras is as tenacious as tenacious can be’. Reiterating the salutary constitutional principle expounded as early as 1977 by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, that bail is the rule and jail an exception, the Court reaffirmed that the right to fair and speedy trial was implicit in the right to life under Article 21. It concluded that this right was denied to Mr. Sisodia.

### Earlier observations

In arriving at its conclusions, the Court relied on the observations of the Court in its first order of October 30, 2023 (*Manish Sisodia vs Central Bureau of Investigation*), and also the submissions advanced before it in the first round, adverting particularly to the 56,000 pages of documents and 456 witnesses (at that stage which, numbers were subsequently increased) in the two cases – and which the Court felt could delay the trial and conclusion of the case indefinitely. It also referred to and relied upon several of its judgments, from *Kashmira Singh* (1977) till the latest decisions – (*in P. Chidambaram* (2020) and *Satender Kumar Antil* (2022)) – on the accused’s right to speedy trial. To these could be added the Court’s decision in *Sheikh Javed Iqbal* (2024).

Stating further that the constitutional mandate must prevail as the higher law, the apex court ruled, in *Manish Sisodia vs Directorate of Enforcement*, purposively that ‘the right to bail in cases of delay, coupled with incarceration for a



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long period, depending on the nature of the allegations, should be read into Section 439 Cr.Pc and Section 45 of the PMLA [Prevention of Money Laundering Act].’

In its entirety, the judgment must gladden the hearts of libertarians, considering the troubling and persistent apprehensions about the weaponising of the stringent penal laws in the country, and concerns about the oppressive application and implementation of the PMLA. Taking cognisance of the information furnished to Parliament recently, the Court noticed that out of the over 5,000 cases brought under the PMLA in the last 10 years, only 40 cases resulted in convictions. In his statement in the Rajya Sabha, the Minister of State for Finance disclosed that ‘the ED filed 15 enforcement case information reports (ECIRs) in 2019, followed by 28 in 2020, 26 in 2021, 34 in 2022, 26 in 2023 and three in 2024 as on July 31. Only one conviction in the cases was reported to have been made in 2020.

Clearly, the processes of our criminal justice system, leading to endless delays, are oppressive, with procedure itself being the punishment. The reality of the technicalities of procedural laws defeating justice has been judicially recognised and eloquently summed up as ‘the mortality of justice at the hands of law’ – *Sushil Kumar Sen* (1975); *Rani Kusum* (2005).

### A caveat

Notwithstanding its unexceptionable constitutional merit, the judgment begs a troubling question. Was it right for the Court, consistent with its other observations in the first round, to condone the custodial confinement of the accused based on the statement of the prosecution that the trial would be completed within six to eight months? Or to extend the detention of the accused on the basis of the prosecuting counsel’s statement recorded in the Court’s second order of June 4, 2024 that the complaint/charge sheet would be filed on or before July 3, 2024? In a sense, does this not

make the prosecutor a judge in its own cause, contrary to the first principles of natural justice and violating at its core the procedural imperatives of fair trial?

### The guarantee of civil liberties

In our constitutional scheme, the liberty of individuals cannot be held hostage to the benevolence or sense of fairness of the prosecutor alone. It must stand on the unbreachable foundation of justice anchored in inalienable rights ‘born in flesh, carried in our bodies from birth to death’. We know that sacrosanct rights ‘undergird’ the law; that there is no virtue in legal processes that are unjust and laws that fail to render justice must be changed. Denial of freedom is denial of humanity itself. Therefore, its preservation against excesses of the executive is the first charge on the apex Court’s constitutional and moral authority. Although the ultimate guarantee of civil liberties lies in the faith and assertion of the people, as Justice Robert Jackson of the United States reminded us in *Douglas vs City of Jeannette* (1943), the courts’ auxiliary protection against encroachment of human rights is the crucial test of a vibrant democracy.

In eventually restoring Mr. Sisodia’s liberty, pending the final decision in his case, the apex court has redeemed itself of the charge of ambivalence in the earlier rounds despite the existence of legal and factual basis for bail. It need not now ‘trudge on the debris of acquiescence’. The judgments would have served its purpose if undertrials are not made to languish in custody endlessly, with their freedom, reputation, privacy and dignity irretrievably lost without apology or recompense. And, the nation must repurpose its politics away from personal animosities in an ennobling pursuit of justice and dignity for all, thereby revitalising a democracy under stress.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Hindenburg report

The denial of allegations that have been raised in the latest Hindenburg report (against SEBI and its chairperson) is an expected move and hardly clears the air. The crux of the matter is the opacity around offshore

funds investing in the Indian stock market. It is strange that the ruling party at the Centre has rushed in to assert that ‘many global forces with the help of the Congress’s dynasty’ are attempting to target India’s progress. That the ruling

dispensation will try to stonewall the issue in the coming days is clear. The Congress party’s demand for a JPC probe is likely to end up as a cry in the wilderness. One fervently hopes the top court will take steps to ensure the

holding of an independent inquiry.  
**Manohar Alembath,**  
Kannur, Kerala  
  
Hindenburg Research’s claim that the government is a blatant attempt to undermine India’s economic

progress and stability. The government must reassure investors and the public that India’s regulatory framework is robust and capable of handling such unrelated attacks.  
**M. Ramdas Menon,**  
Kallai, Kozhikode, Kerala

### The vanishing sparrow

The decline of sparrows points to biodiversity loss (‘Open Page’, August 11). It is our responsibility to make sure that this little bird doesn’t go extinct.  
**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai



## Possible revival of Dalit politics today

In the 2024 general election, with the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh and the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) in Maharashtra, the independent political assertion of Dalit politics has been relegated to a new low. However, Dalit political parties like the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) in Bihar and Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in Tamil Nadu showcased a promise that Dalit politics can remain relevant in the democratic discourse if they form alliances with national political fronts.

Such diversification within the Dalit political discourse shows that the heightened ideological commitment to the Ambedkarite political values is diminishing, as Dalit political parties are exploring various alternatives to find meaning in their existence. This heterogeneity also reveals that the Dalit parties and leaders lack a grand political vision to build a national front against the conventional ruling elites, remaining comfortable with their regional specificities. For the rebirth of Dalit politics, newer ideological virtues under a committed political leadership are essential.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar expected that modern democracy would not re-establish the power and privileges of the conventional social elites but would instead allow the socially marginalised groups to take centre stage in transforming the power structure. He envisioned that independent India's new polity would allow Dalits to emerge as robust leaders of marginalised social groups and challenge the domination of social elites over political power. With the decline of parties, like the BSP and VBA, there are few takers of such a revolutionary vision.

Recently, Dalit politics based on the ideals of social justice have been marginalised and have remained passive. The divisions between Dalit political parties showcase that there is no consensus on ideological



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parameters. The Dalit leadership lacks political vision and influential social initiatives. While other political parties have often joined hands to secure their class and social interests, Dalit parties hardly pondered the possibility of uniting different Dalit political and social organisations at the national level. These parties often remain attached to their regional specificities and lack the political imagination to ally with the social justice parties to announce a robust national Dalit agenda.

Other marginalised communities, such as the Adivasis and Muslims, also hesitate to open a sincere dialogue with Dalit political outfits, as their political commitment and ideological merit often remain under doubt.

Instead, national political fronts, especially the Congress, have reinvented themselves by engaging with the concerns of the marginalised social groups and building impressive campaigns to safeguard constitutional ideals.

In this context, the victory of Chandrashekar Azad from the Nagina parliamentary constituency in Uttar Pradesh is a significant marker of the possibility of the arrival of independent Dalit politics. In contrast to the BSP-VBA bloc, Mr. Azad showed that a winning combination could be formed by building an engagement with the marginalised social groups, particularly Muslims. Further, on the ideological front, he offered a powerful challenge not only to right-wing politics but also reprimanded the secular-socialist political outfits for neglecting the issues of marginalised social groups. Building such an impressive social base with radical ideological values can revitalize the dormant Dalit movement today.

### Unified political bloc

Similar to the INDIA bloc that created a collective political assertion based on the ideals of social justice and secularism, a unified political bloc of Dalit

parties, especially the BSP, VCK, and VBA, could reenergise the dormant social justice movement and mobilise oppressed communities for a substantive political change. The diverse Dalit political movements need to consider organising a unified political bloc, an alliance of all the Dalit parties at the national level. Such a bloc could associate with other regional and national alliances to form a broader political alliance over the slogan of social justice and the ideals of the Indian Constitution. It is equally important for the Dalit leaders and parties to imagine themselves as essential components in the battle against the right-wing juggernaut. However, till recent times, it is visible that the political decisions of parties like the BSP and the VBA mostly segregate the Dalits from associating with secular progressive alternatives and indirectly help the BJP.

Such an alliance is possible only if the segmented Dalit movement decides to come together to rewrite a new manifesto for social justice to confront the challenges raised by the neo-liberal economy and Hinduva fundamentalism. This ideological programme is possible if the current leadership could reduce their petty ego, sort out the intra-Dalit skirmishes with sensitivity, and work together to end their ideological diversions. For the revival of Dalit politics, it is imperative that contemporary Dalit leadership offers intellectual and visionary leadership to challenge the current passivity and dependency. It is required that various stakeholders, intellectuals, and civil society activists engage in deliberation upon the possibility of a federal Dalit front, forcing the political parties to reimagine their strategies and ideological goals.

A robust and engaged public deliberation to imagine a radical agenda for Dalit emancipation will help to rebuild a national movement for a substantive transformation in the economic and political spectrum.

## Power sector woes in Andhra Pradesh

NDA government faces the daunting task of 're-energising' the power sector

### STATE OF PLAY

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The initial exuberance of the NDA government in Andhra Pradesh quickly faded as it realised the daunting task of moving the bifurcation-hit State forward.

The government is concerned about the power sector, which, according to a White Paper released by Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu on July 9, was beset by a huge 'legacy loss' of ₹1,29,503 crore.

Given the pressing need to put the AP-Genco, AP-Tranco, and the DISCOMs back on track, the government started revisiting the reforms in the power sector, aiming to restore its position as the top in the country. The due priority is to streamline supply to industrial consumers, and to the farm sector for nine hours during daytime.

The government noted that the operational and financial parameters of the power utilities have deteriorated in the last five years. While conducting its study, it sought suggestions from all stakeholders.

Financially, the outstanding power sector loans amount to nearly ₹1.10 lakh crore, of which roughly ₹25,000 crore are owed by the government to DISCOMs for pending subsidies and charges payable by government departments for electricity consumed by office buildings, lift irrigation schemes, and local bodies.

Besides, DISCOMs made partial payments to Independent Power Producers (IPPs) during the controversial review of the long-term solar and wind Power Purchase Agree-



ments (PPAs) in 2019-24 and they (DISCOMs) are obliged to pay the remaining amounts with interest having lost their case in the court.

Notably, the Ministry of Power had warned of the consequences of reviewing or negotiating the PPAs, but to no avail, as the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government went ahead with its decision.

The total generation capacity increased from approximately 5,460 Megawatts (MW) in 2014-15, when the TDP came to power, to about 14,930 MW five years later.

A notable project under way is the 2,750-MW Integrated Renewable Energy Project (IREP) at Pinnapuram, touted as the world's largest Gigawatt-scale integrated project, comprising 1,200 MW of Pumped Storage Hydropower (PSH), 1,000 MW of solar and 550 MW wind power, expandable to 7,400 MW.

While the Commercial Operational Date of the IREP is still a few months away and other PSH projects are in various stages, the AP-Genco commissioned two new thermal power units of 800 MW last year.

The generation side has, therefore, something to cheer about, despite the looming obligation to retire obsolete thermal units numbering 11 of 210 MW, at the Narla Tatarao, Sri Damodaram Sanjeeviah, and Rayalaseema Thermal Power Stations, after 2030.

Another issue is the inordi-

nate delay in constructing the 960-MW Polavaram hydroelectric power plant, which suffered a major setback due to the termination of the turnkey contractor and the hiring of a new one. This resulted in protracted litigation, including an ongoing arbitration process expected to cost a whopping ₹1,500 crore. The Polavaram hydropower plant was scheduled to be commissioned in May 2023. There is an estimated generation loss of 3,000 Million Units (MU) till the latest expected commissioning date of January 2026. The delays in various projects entailed a huge burden in terms of the cost of power purchases. The projected financial position of the utilities, mainly the DISCOMs, has been a cause for worry.

It is pertinent to mention that the YSRCP government allegedly raised power tariffs nine times during its tenure (2019-24), in the form of true-up and other charges to shore up underfunded accounts.

Meanwhile, the TDP claimed that the government did not jack up the tariffs even once, and the subsidy component increased from ₹2,607 crore in 2014-15 to ₹6,575 crore by the end of 2018-19.

The deliberate backing down of some generators in 2019-22 to buy power from short-term sources had major financial implications. These are only some aspects of the State power sector.

The government's ultimate objective is to provide a quality, reliable, and affordable power supply for 24 hours.

The government has to do a tough balancing act of carefully managing the financial standing of the utilities (mainly DISCOMs) and meeting the burgeoning grid demand by making incremental renewable energy capacity additions.

## Socio-economic differentials within SCs/STs

Disparities among SC/ST sub-groups have led the Court to endorse sub-classification, aiming at ensuring a fairer distribution of reservation benefits

### DATA POINT

Sanjeev Alam

A common critique of the group-based approach to affirmative action policies is that it treats the potential beneficiary group as a homogenous class. In reality, as critics argue, rarely does a group turn out to be a homogenous class. Even within an identified disadvantaged group, families are often found to be placed poles apart in terms of access to material as well as symbolic resources. Therefore, group-based affirmative action policies are seen as benefiting relatively advantaged families from the beneficiary group. An inevitable consequence is widening intra-group inequality. This, in a way, goes against the very purpose of affirmative action, which is, achieving greater equality in society.

Reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in educational institutions, public employment, and legislative bodies is constitutionally mandated. These two historically disadvantaged categories consist of a large number of subgroups of different ethnic origins, living in different spatialities and social relations. The outcomes of the reservation policy have generated discontent and dissension within it. It has been asserted that the benefits of the reservation have accrued to a few subgroups within SCs/STs. This has led to the demand for a more equitable distribution of benefits by creating sub-classification within SCs/STs based on degrees of disadvantage and deprivation.

This demand has also reached the Supreme Court. In 2004, a five-member Bench of the Supreme Court (in *E.V. Chinnaiah vs State of Andhra Pradesh*) affirmed SCs/STs as a homogenous class and, ruled against sub-classifications within these umbrella categories, horizontally or vertically. However, in a landmark judgment

on August 1, 2024, the apex court allowed sub-classification and paved the way for sub-quotas within the SC/ST quota. While the Court has endorsed the existence of socio-economic differentials within SCs and STs and the idea of substantive equality over nominal equality, little analysis is available to get a sense of the extent of inequalities characterising these categories. This is even though India's population census collects and duly publishes data on socio-economic indicators for individual sub-groups within SCs and STs.

Here, we highlight socio-economic differentials within SCs/STs based on data from the 2011 population census. Owing to the space constraints, our analysis is confined to a few large States. Because the number of sub-groups comprising SCs and STs is too large in these States, we pick up two numerically important sub-groups (one being well-off and the other relatively deprived) to reflect the extent of socio-economic disparities.

Census data show that different sub-groups continue to have uneven exposure to urbanisation. Across States, while some sub-groups are advantaged by a decent level of urbanisation, others are overwhelmingly rural-based. Differential urban exposure shows a high correlation with opportunities for life chances. Invariably, sub-groups with higher urbanisation demonstrate higher levels of educational attainment and lower level placement in precarious forms of employment.

Among SCs, for example, (Table 1), Musahars in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh seem to be the most disadvantaged. Fewer members among them are likely to attain a high school degree. The number of those with a college degree is negligible. In contrast, Pasis in Bihar and Chamar in Uttar Pradesh are only a little way off the State average. In Maharashtra, sub-groups, such as Bhambis and Manes, occupy disparate levels of educational

and occupational attainment, with the former being much better off compared with the latter. Likewise, Chamaris in Punjab are ahead of Mazhabis in terms of access to education and exposure to urbanisation. The proportions of matriculates and graduates among the former were 1.5 times higher than the latter. In West Bengal, Namsudras and Bagdis stand poles apart in terms of urbanisation, educational attainment, and sources of livelihood.

Socio-economic differentials among STs are as pronounced as among SCs (Table 2). In Chhattisgarh, for instance, the Halba tribes are not only far more urbanised than and educationally ahead of the Baiga tribes but also have fewer members working as agricultural labourers when compared with the latter. Similar is the case between the Oraon and Mal Paharia tribes in Jharkhand. Oraons are also the most educated tribes in the neighbouring State of Odisha and far ahead of Bhumias – one of the tribes with minimal access to education. In Rajasthan, the Meenas are well known as the most educated and economically advanced tribal group. The developmental progress seems to have completely bypassed the Garasias, one of the largest tribal sub-groups of the State.

The above analysis brings into sharp focus the persistence of socio-economic disparities. It suggests that different sub-groups within SCs and STs are at disparate levels of socio-economic development. Given this, it is also not difficult to infer who might have most benefited from the undifferentiated reservation regime. The course to be taken by the political class is not known, but sub-classification within SC/ST and the creation of sub-quotas can be reasonably expected to result in a more equitable distribution of benefits of reservation.

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### Inter-group variations

The data for the tables were sourced from Census 2011.

Column key: 1: % urban population, 2: % of people with matriculate education (aged >15 years), 3: % graduate (aged >20 years), 4: % agri-labourer (% of main workers aged >15 years). SGs refer to sub-groups

Table 1: Socio-economic differentials within SCs by State (2011)

State/SGs	1	2	3	4
1. Andhra Pradesh	33.4	13.75	10.2	39.9
All SCs	21.8	12.4	6.7	64.3
SG 1: Adi Dravida	15.8	16	6.4	65.8
SG 2: Baiga	6	10.5	3.4	55.5
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.37	0.65	0.53	0.85
2. Bihar	14	11.7	5.8	44.5
All SCs	7.4	6.2	2	69.4
SG 1: Pasi	18.9	9.4	4.4	46.9
SG 2: Musahar	3.4	0.9	0.1	87.5
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.17	0.1	0.02	1.86
3. Maharashtra	45.2	16.4	12	25.2
All SCs	43.5	14.8	8.2	44.5
SG 1: Bhambi etc.	54.4	16.3	10.4	2.6
SG 2: Mang	36.3	11.3	3.7	57.3
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.66	0.69	0.35	22.2
4. Punjab	37.4	20.2	9.9	13.7
All SCs	26.7	13.9	3	31.9
SG 1: Chamar	30.1	17.8	5	22.6
SG 2: Mazhabi	18.2	12.7	3	48.9
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.6	0.71	0.6	2.16
5. Uttar Pradesh	22.2	11.8	9.4	21.7
All SCs	13.7	8.6	4.6	38
SG 1: Chamar	13.3	9.5	5.3	38.7
SG 2: Musahar	3	1.1	0.2	52.4
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.22	0.11	0.03	1.3
6. West Bengal	30.5	8.1	8.4	22.8
All SCs	20.4	5.5	3.5	22.8
SG 1: Namasudra	31.3	7.6	5.9	22.1
SG 2: Bagdi, Duley	10.3	2.9	1	58.3
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.32	0.38	0.16	2.6

Table 2: Socio-economic differentials within STs by State (2011)

State/SGs	1	2	3	4
1. Chhattisgarh	23.2	9.4	6.9	30.3
All STs	7.6	5.6	2.5	31.4
SG 1: Halba	13.4	9.2	4.6	22.2
SG 2: Baiga	1.8	1.4	0.2	37.2
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.13	0.15	0.04	1.67
2. Jharkhand	24	11.7	7.4	18.4
All STs	8.9	8	3.1	22.3
SG 1: Oraon	14.2	11.8	6.7	15.6
SG 2: Mal Paharia	1.1	2	0.3	41.1
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.07	0.16	0.04	2.63
3. Odisha	16.6	10.8	6.9	22.5
All STs	6.2	4.9	1.2	32.3
SG 1: Oraon etc.	17.3	11.5	3.1	14.8
SG 2: Bhumia	2.1	1.2	0.2	27.7
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.12	0.1	0.06	1.87
4. Rajasthan	24.8	10.3	8.1	10.3
All STs	5.9	5.9	4.3	14.1
SG 1: Meena	7.1	8.5	7.2	8.2
SG 2: Garasia (excluding Rajput Garasia)	1.1	1.5	0.5	26.8
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.15	0.17	0.07	3.2
5. West Bengal	30.5	8.1	8.4	22.8
All STs	8.3	4.1	2	42.2
SG 1: Bhutia	39	10.7	11.6	6.3
SG 2: Bhumi	3.9	3.4	1.2	61.4
Ratio (SG 2/SG 1)	0.1	0.31	0.1	9.7

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

#### The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1974

### Life term for food adulteration: Bill introduced

New Delhi, August 12: The Bill to inflict penalties including life imprisonment for food adulteration offences was introduced in the Rajya Sabha to-day by the Health Minister, Dr. Karan Singh.

"The Prevention of Food Adulteration (amendment) Bill, 1974" seeks to make food adulteration offences as "cognizable and non-bailable". The Bill seeks to plug loopholes and provide for more stringent and effective measures to curb the adulteration menace, which had "made a heavy dent in the already low nutritional standards."

An adulterator, according to the Bill, would be liable to be imprisoned for a minimum of three years extending up to life imprisonment and asked to pay a minimum fine of Rs. 5,000.

The Bill also seeks to provide for representation for consumers' interests in the Central Committee for Food Standards and in the Central Food Laboratory.

Under the Bill, if any colouring matter other than that prescribed or not within the prescribed limits of variability was used, the food article would be declared as adulterated. The Bill seeks to add to the definition of food under the parent Act "any other article which the Central Government, having regard to its character, use or composition, declares by notification in the official gazette, as food for the purposes of this Act."

In the parent Act, "food" meant an article used as food or drink for human consumption other than drugs and water and included those used in the composition or preparation of human food and flavouring matter or condiments. The Bill also seeks to appoint the "local health authority" in relation to local areas to be in charge of health administration. Under the parent Act, there was a provision for appointment of "food (health) authority" meaning the director of Health Services or the Chief Officer in charge of health administration.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1924

### Submarine K. 26.

London, August 12: The largest submarine K. 26 has returned to Port of Spain after a record submarine voyage of twenty thousand miles to Singapore unaccompanied by a parent ship.