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Hathras stampede

Draw lessons to improve crowd management

IT was a disaster waiting to happen, with around 25 kids people crammed into a venue in which only 80,000 were permitted by the authorities. The death toll in the stampede that broke out during a 'sat-sang' in Hathras (Uttar Pradesh) has crossed 120; the victims were part of the crowd which had gathered to hear a preacher. According to the FIR, the organisers secured permission for the congregation on the basis of a false undertaking about the actual number of devotees who were expected to attend it; they are also accused of refusing to cooperate with the police in traffic control and concealing evidence after the incident.

It is ironical and unfortunate that in a country where people throng one religious place or the other on a daily basis, crowd management often leaves a lot to be desired. A decade ago, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) had brought out a guide on managing crowds at events and venues of mass gathering. This document was aimed at spurring state governments, local authorities and organisers to adopt an integrated and structured approach to crowd and disaster management. The NDMA had stated that man-made tragedies such as stampedes could be prevented with 'proactive planning and flawless execution by dedicated groups with well-trained personnel'. However, all this was conspicuous by its absence at the Hathras event.

Giving misleading estimates about the size of the audience or congregation is a common ploy to get the administration's nod. At times, palms are greased to get the job done. However, the organisers cannot be solely blamed when things go horribly wrong. The authorities should exercise due diligence in granting permission; spot inspections are a must to ascertain whether adequate safety arrangements have been made for even the worst-case scenario. The way forward is to take exemplary action against those whose rank negligence or greed puts lives on the line.

On road to equity

Inject capital in free bus rides for women

THE free bus travel scheme for women in non-AC, intra-state buses across Punjab, initiated by the state government in 2021, has significantly empowered women by enhancing their mobility and providing them substantial financial relief. Serving as a lifeline, it enables girls and women to commute to better educational institutes and workplaces and even visit their family members without the burden of travel costs or dependence on others.

The success of the scheme is evident from official data: In April 2021, around 61 lakh women benefited from this scheme every day in the state. By November 2022, this figure had nearly doubled. However, the state-run Punjab Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) is facing a resource crunch, with the government owing the PRTC over Rs 250 crore in reimbursement for the free travel provided to women. The delay in clearing these dues has left the PRTC struggling to release salaries and pensions. The government must explore other avenues to address concerns over the sustainability of this service. A cross-subsidy mechanism is a viable option to mitigate financial losses. By slightly increasing fares for other passengers or introducing additional charges on premium services, the government can offset the costs of the scheme. Public-private partnerships as part of corporate social responsibility and targeted subsidies could also provide some financial support.

The free bus service has undeniably improved the lives of women in Punjab, enabling greater equity and participation in education, work and family activities. Ensuring the scheme's long-term sustainability is crucial as it is bound to foster socioeconomic growth in the state. Promoting women's empowerment is a crucial developmental objective as they tend to invest more in their children's education, health and nutrition, which, in turn, boosts economic growth. Social capital is recognised as one of the pathways through which empowerment can be achieved.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JULY 4, 1924

An eye-opener

WHILE the country is waiting with bated breath for the detailed impressions of the Mahatma regarding the last meeting of the All India Congress Committee, at which he was himself the central figure, it is only natural that the somewhat laconic statement which a representative of the Associated Press succeeded in eliciting from him at his first interview should form a subject of widespread comment. "The up on all the four resolutions that I had the honour of moving," said the Mahatma, "I had a majority. I must own that according to my conception I was defeated. The proceedings have been an eye-opener to me, and I am now occupied in an arduous search from within. As yet I am without an answer." The literal meaning of these words is perfectly clear: The Mahatma had not the sort of majority to which he had been accustomed in the past, while as regards the crucial question of the exclusion of Swarajists and other non-believers in his programme, he had no majority at all. This was not only contrary to his expectation but showed how largely he had overrated the measure of support which his programme and policy had in the country. That to him the meeting of the All India Congress Committee was only a test, we know from his own articles in *Young India*. He wanted to know, he said again and again, where he stood and where the Congress and the country stood. The meeting of the Committee, the speeches made at it, in some cases by professed No-Changers, and above all the results of the divisions constituted as convincing an answer to this question as he could possibly have expected.

Roll out a roadmap to rebuild agriculture

The sector needs out-of-the-box thinking, however much may it upset the governing elite

DEVINDER SHARMA
FOOD & AGRICULTURE SPECIALIST

FOR any discerning reader, this is a shocking revelation — in two decades, the price of bread in Switzerland was 2.5 Swiss francs (CHF) and the price of wheat was 110 CHF per kg. Today, the price of bread is 0.4 CHF and the price of wheat is 30 CHF per kg. 'Some time back, I had shared an example from Canada, where wheat prices had tumbled over the past 150 years but bread prices had zoomed in the past four decades. This disturbing trend of declining farm output prices is not exclusive to Switzerland and Canada — it is more or less a global phenomenon. For over a century now, farm prices have been declining, steeply pushing farmers towards economic suicide, abandon agriculture or struggle to survive against all-pervasive distress. This is food inequality.

People who produce food end up living perpetually in poverty. Often, it has been seen that the farm prices are low and do not even cover the cost of production. The tragedy is that those who bring food to our tables can't even afford to feed themselves. With successive governments pushing for increased productivity, the farmer's welfare was simply overlooked. Very cleverly, while farmers felt easily dealt with, called *canvassers*, the other stakeholders in the agricultural supply chains reaped in profits. In the process, farmers have been rendered bankrupt. While farmers suffer and rural wages stagnate, the broken food system has kept consumers happy. Keeping food prices deliberately low and pushing them still lower with every passing year, and at the same time extracting excessive profits — seller's profit, as it is now called — has led agribusiness companies to laugh all the way to the bank. Although corporates blame rising wages and supply chain bottlenecks for the rising prices, studies have shown that in the US, for instance, in the second and third quarters of 2023, corporate profits jumped after the Covid pandemic, reaching a record high by the last quarter of 2023. In the four decades prior to the pandemic, the contribution of corporate profits to inflation was only around 11 per cent.

For over a century and a half, the economic design had denied rightful prices to farmers. Obviously, with policymakers turning a blind eye to the despairing cri-



UNFAIR: Farm prices are often low and do not even cover the cost of production, farmers

Policymakers are again skirting the real cause of farm distress — falling farm incomes.

is on the farm front, rural anger only gets highlighted in the election season. 'India's government claims to subsidise farmers, but actually hurts them' (*The Economist*, July 12, 2018) provides an interesting insight. While the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, the richest trading bloc, provide an equivalent of 18 per cent of the farm income to producers, India actually ends up taking them. Accordingly, 6 per cent of the farm income is appropriated on an average in India. In another

OECD study, it became clear that while Indian farmers lost 15 per cent on an average by way of low prices between 2010 and 2016, the real benefit accrued to consumers, who gained by 25 per cent in subsidised prices.

As the Finance Minister gets ready to present the full Budget for 2024-25, it is time to visualise what kind of economic policies are needed not only to assuage farmers' growing anger but also to lay out a roadmap for rebuilding agriculture. Remember what economist Jean Dreze had remarked: "Political discourse in India normally takes place within certain boundaries set by the privileged and powerful. If you overstep these boundaries, expect some trouble." Agriculture needs out-of-the-box thinking, however much may it upset the governing elite.

All these years, the predominant route to raising farm incomes has been through more budgetary support for technological interventions. Even with the move towards digitalisation, artificial intelligence, robotics and precision farming, there-by bringing agriculture increasingly into the corporatisation lap, it has to be acknowledged that

while the industry around agriculture has and will benefit immensely from such budgetary support, farmers continue to be pushed deeper into distress.

Productivity gains haven't translated into living income for farmers. If farm incomes continue to be at the bottom of the pyramid even 60 years after the Green Revolution, the promise of technological transformation towards Agriculture Revolution 4.0 cannot be seen as a panacea for all the ills afflicting agriculture. As usual, policymakers are once again skirting the real cause of farm distress — falling farm incomes — and trying to cover it up with the flawed thinking that technological interventions will boost incomes.

Amid global boiling, resilient agriculture will come from regenerative farming practices. More than artificial intelligence, what is needed is to first utilise available natural intelligence. It is important to first invest in building the capacity and potential of human population engaged in agriculture. The dominant economic thinking will not be comfortable with this, but the time has come to look beyond the pre-designed parameters.

Given that agriculture is the biggest employer in the country, employing 45.5 per cent of the workforce, making agriculture a profitable enterprise is the need of the times. The conventional thinking of helping the industry which, in turn, will help raise farm incomes — conforming to the trickle-down principle — is unlikely to work.

To remove food inequality, there is a growing need for fresh thinking. First, provide a legal mechanism for guaranteeing farm prices as per the MS Swaminathan formula; secondly, the Finance Minister should ensure that 50 per cent of the Budget is allocated for roughly half of the population. To begin with, start enhancing the farm budget every year by 10 per cent of the total. At present, it is less than 3 per cent.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

There is too little public recognition of how much we all depend upon farmers. —John F Kennedy

The prophecy at Amarnath shrine

LT GEN PRADEEP BAI (RETD)

THE annual pilgrimage to the Amarnath shrine in south Kashmir commenced on June 29, with the devout undertaking the arduous journey to pay obeisance to Lord Shiva. In the holy cave located at an altitude of about 3,800 metres. A quarter of a century ago, I made the journey to the abode of Baba Barani.

In 1999, I was deployed in a Rashtriya Rifles (RR) unit in Anantnag district, carrying out counter-insurgency operations. Taking a short break, I decided to trek to Amarnath. An officer of my unit, Maj Ranbir Katoch, who was from the Army Air Defence Corps, asked me if he could come along. Ranbir always had a ready smile and was full of beans and guts — the kind of officer any commander would love to have in his team. On August 11, we set course for Bishnag and onwards to Chandanwari, from where the onward journey of 32 km was on foot. A steep climb of about an hour took us to Pissu Tip, after two more hours of arduous walking, we reached another landmark on this trail, Shesh Nae. With loads in between, we traversed Mohagunas Top and Jalsopathi, finally reaching Pandarni by nightfall. Here was a large tented colony for pilgrims, and Ranbir shared a tent with me for the night.

On August 12, we were up at the crack of dawn and negotiated the final 6 km at a fast clip to be the first ones at the cave, much before the pilgrim hordes started moving up. The head priest of the shrine conducted a prayer for us, while we stood in reverence in front of the ice Shivaling. Turning to me, he handed over *prasad*, a small vermilion box, bangles and a piece of red ribbon, telling me that these were for my wife as a blessing for marital longevity. He then turned to my friend Ranbir and said: "You must not be married yet."

I was quick to correct him and informed him Ranbir was married. He expressed regret that since it was early in the morning, some of the *prasad* items, including different kinds of *prasad*, had not arrived and he did not have any more of the marital symbols of blessing. However, he handed Ranbir some *prasad* and a miniature photo of the Shivaling.

About three days later, we launched a cordon-and-search operation in a remote village, based on information about the presence of terrorists. Ranbir was in the outer cordon with his troops, and while combing a maize field, ran into two heavily armed foreign militants. In the ensuing gunfight, both militants were killed, but at a very heavy price. Leading from the front, Ranbir received a bullet of automatic fire and made the supreme sacrifice.

Next morning, his embalmed body was sent on a commercial flight to Delhi, escorted by one of our officers. I remembered the incident at the holy cave when I paid my last respects to this braveheart — and it continues to haunt me. The 'denial' of marital blessings on that fateful morning was indeed prophetic.

Stop revering godmen

Refer to '116 killed in stampede at UP's Hathras as disciples vie for their guru's glimpse', as many as 25 lakh people had reportedly crammed into the venue meant to accommodate just 80,000. It is a pity that so many people still revere self-proclaimed gurus. These godmen hold massive sway over the masses. Hordes of gullible people credulously believe everything these gurus say. It goes without saying that Bhile Baba bears responsibility for the stampede. But those who had crowded into the venue are also to blame for the tragedy. Their irresponsible behaviour cannot be excused. The ongoing probe will help fix accountability for the harrowing episode.

O PRASADA RAO, HYDERABAD

An avoidable tragedy

The stampede in UP's Hathras that has claimed more than 100 lives was an avoidable tragedy, which makes it all the more heart-rending. The deadly mix of utter negligence on the part of the organisers, indifference of the authorities concerned and widespread ignorance among the masses is to blame for it. Why were hordes of people allowed to throng the venue without adequate arrangements in place? As is the norm, the government is going to set up a committee to ascertain what went wrong. Authorities across the country must draw lessons from this tragedy and take effective steps to prevent a repeat of it.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM (AP)

Rahul leads the Opposition charge

Rahul Gandhi's rousing speech as the Leader of Opposition (LoP) was significant. It has set the tone for a revitalised Opposition. His searing remarks, though expunged, reflect the truth. The Opposition's newfound confidence is palpable, and its determination to hold the ruling regime accountable is a welcome change. PM Narendra Modi's jibe at the Congress' lack of strength in numbers notwithstanding, Rahul has made a mark. The Opposition must continue to speak truth to power, but with facts and evidence, not hearsay. Mahua Mohi's feistiness is an inspiration, and the Opposition must draw strength from her.

GURDEY SINGH, RY MAIL

Don't disrupt the session

Led by LoP Rahul Gandhi, a buoyant Opposition has asserted its position in the first session of the 18th Lok Sabha without constant heckling or interruption. However, much to the dismay of the countryside, PM Narendra Modi's address in the House was marred by sloganeering and walkouts by a disruptive Opposition. It is imperative for a vibrant democracy that our lawmakers utilise the time during a session to hold productive discussions for public welfare. Regardless of politics, MPs must exercise restraint and not do anything disruptive.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Manufacturing on the rebound

India's manufacturing sector is on the rebound, with the HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) reaching 58.3 in June. The remarkable growth, driven by domestic demand and government infrastructure spending, showcases India's resilience and potential. The sector's strong performance is a testament to the country's status as the fastest growing major economy in the world. The record pace of job creation, with hiring surging for the fourth consecutive month, is a significant achievement. While inflationary pressures persist, manufacturers have managed to maintain profit margins by passing on higher costs to consumers. As the government prepares to present the full Budget, the manufacturing sector's growth is likely to be a key highlight.

SARIPREETH SINGH, MOHALI

Biden's age not a hurdle

US President Joe Biden's debate performance has sparked calls for him to step aside and let a younger candidate take on the mantle. The whole world watched as Biden struggled to string his thoughts together while on the big stage last Thursday. But his poor debate showing must not distract American voters from the achievements of his administration. Unlike Biden, Donald Trump puts his interests above those of the public. He is not fit for public office. The American electorate must not focus on Biden's age while casting their ballots this November.

HIMANSHU TANDON, RY MAIL

Sustainable development

The recent report showed mixed results

With less than six years remaining, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, require intensified effort on India's part to achieve its 17 goals and 169 associated targets. Adopted in 2015, these global goals serve as a universal call to action to eradicate poverty, achieve gender justice, safeguard the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all. In this regard, the recently released progress report on SDGs in India offers data-driven evidence, which underscores mixed progress by the country towards achieving the SDGs and their corresponding targets. Under SDGI (no poverty), India has done well in recent years. The report shows a 9.89 percentage point reduction in multidimensional poverty (MDP), dropping to 14.96 per cent between 2015-16 and 2019-21. A recent report by the NITI Aayog indicates a further decline to 11.28 per cent in 2022-23. Sustained effort will be needed to further reduce the level of poverty and increase real disposable income.

Continued government intervention will be needed in other areas to improve the quality of life. The report, for instance, emphasises that while maternal and child health has improved with a decline in malnutrition, stunted growth, and maternal and infant mortality rates, there has been a notable rise in anaemia among women aged 15-49 years and children below five. Under SDG4 (quality education), the gross enrolment ratio in higher-secondary education, the rate of vocational- and technical-training participation, enrolling differently-abled students, the teacher-student ratio, and school infrastructure have shown significant improvement since 2015-16. However, the completion rate for grades 5th and 8th has dropped below the pre-pandemic levels, reflecting how children were affected due to pandemic-related disruption. Further, the increased female labour force participation rate has been accompanied by a rise in wage disparity, dowry cases, and crime rates, including sexual crimes against women. These factors necessitate increased government expenditure on health, education, and social protection. However, the report indicates the share of expenditure on essential services in government spending has declined from pre-pandemic levels.

Furthermore, in pursuit of sustainable and carbon-neutral growth, India committed itself to achieving its net zero target by 2070 at the 2021 Conference of Parties-26 (COP-26) in Glasgow. This report highlights progress with increased shares of renewable energy and improved industry environmental compliance, signalling positive steps in this direction. However, an increase in per capita fossil-fuel consumption and a stagnant forest cover counteract these advancements. Moreover, the proportion of government expenditure allocated to environmental protection has seen minimal improvement, increasing by only 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product from 2015-16 to 2022-23, suggesting that the government needs to do more in this regard.

SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) strives to achieve peace, effective governance, and a transparent judicial system. In contrast, the report shows increasing rates of crimes against children and women annually. Furthermore, India lags significantly behind global standards, with only 193 courts and 1.53 judges per 100,000 people. The data also shows the percentage of responded RTI (Right to Information) queries has declined. Overall, while India is growing at a healthy pace, the benefits of growth seem to be not reaching some sections of the population. If economic growth is concentrated, it would undermine the economy's long-term prospects. The government would do well to focus on lagging areas to attain the stated goals in the coming years.

Lagging indicator

Gender diversity in India Inc still sub-optimal

Corporate India's record on gender parity in the workplace has never been optimal. Narrowed down to the boardroom and senior management, two recent studies highlight India's distance to horizon on this key marker of cultural progress. One by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) found that India Inc, with women's share of top and middle management at 20 per cent, lagged global average of 33 per cent (as of 2019). Another analysis by *Business Standard* showed that India's women directors were paid nearly 40 per cent less on average than men in the same role. The NCAER study also showed that almost 60 per cent of the surveyed firms did not have women in senior or middle-management roles. Five of the top 10 National Stock Exchange (NSE)-listed firms by market capitalisation had no women in their top management teams as of March 2023. While more than half of the NSE-listed companies in the sample did not have a woman as part of their top management, about 10 per cent had just one.

The situation is slightly better in corporate boardrooms, where women's share has risen from a little under 5 per cent in FY14 to 16 per cent in FY23, according to the NCAER study. This relatively gender-balanced picture — still lower than the global average of 20 per cent — is more the result of a mandate in the Companies Act, 2013, than a progressive social consciousness in corporate India. Section 149 of the Act requires every listed company or a public company with a paid-up share capital of ₹100 crore or turnover of ₹300 crore to have at least one woman director on its board. Rather than accepting the spirit of the mandate, many managements, especially at family-managed entities, sought to cynically fulfil the letter of the law by appointing relatives — mothers, wives, daughters — who were not necessarily qualified to dispense managerial wisdom. This aspect was highlighted by a committee on corporate governance set up by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), which proposed that the mandate exclude promoters' relatives. Accordingly, in 2018, Sebi made it compulsory for boards of India's top 500 listed companies to have at least one independent woman director by April 1, 2019, and top 1,000 listed companies by April 1, 2020, ensuring that the exercise was not reduced to box-ticking.

The dearth of women in middle and senior management, however, is likely to escalate into a problem in creating a pipeline of qualified women to fill directorial positions in the future. More so when *Business Standard's* analysis shows that the average remuneration for women has increased at only 1.8 per cent compound annual growth rate in the past decade, compared with 9.4 per cent for men, leading to a wider gap today than 10 years ago. The study found the situation to be worse at companies other than the top ones. The average salary of women executive directors across NSE-listed companies has declined 1.2 per cent since 2012-13, while it has risen 7.4 per cent for men executive directors. Given these weak incentives for women to rise within corporate hierarchies, gender diversity in India Inc is likely to remain a distant goal.

Yin, yang and assumptions



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

India and China are two of the world's largest civilisations, countries and economies. Both have adopted strikingly different routes to reach the position they are in today. India adopted the path of a democratic governance while China moved towards the one-party authoritarian state. The author asserts that "this yin-yang of national narratives has unfolded uniquely for each nation over the centuries, shaping their individual, path-dependent trajectories". The book also explores major events, policy decisions and bilateral realities that have shaped the path of both nations.

The author says he hopes to provide an overview of how India and China are affecting the global order in their own way. In effect, though, he has presented a comparative study of the two countries. The book certainly provides detailed information about the changes and developments that have been underway in each country. But it doesn't engage with any one specific development in detail. In the process, the quality of the analysis is inadequate.

The main premise of the book is that both nations have had different growth trajectories and thus are today at very different positions on the development scale. The book also offers a look at how both countries can exploit their current realities. The author sums up the present position of the two countries in the following way: "Multicultural diversity versus monocultural unity, centrifugal versus centripetal forces, non-violence versus war, democracy versus communism, continuity versus

disruption, long-term stability and social consensus versus short-term growth risks and imposed visions highlight the swirl of yin and yang through the contrasting histories of the two nations".

These are the yin and yang that the author discusses in various chapters of the book. The author has identified five yangs, which have been the drivers of growth. They are agricultural land reforms and markets, special economic zones, real estate and urbanisation, policy and infrastructure and entrepreneurship. He has identified five yins as the cost of growth. These are debt, corruption, geopolitics, demographics and environment. However, there is so much information and personal opinion packed into each of these aspects that reading becomes daunting and exhausting. The author also seems to lose the primary argument in the welter of fact and his own opinions, making it difficult to understand what he is really saying. The conclusions are mostly accepting of

everything that the Chinese government had pushed as a narrative.

One needs to accept that though India and China are Asian nations with superficial civilisational similarities, the social realities of the states are very different. Indian governments have had to look for ways to manoeuvre within the vast differences. India being a democracy

has always had to be accommodative of people's demands and aspirations. Indian governments are not as vulnerable to the people and thus the people also have to cater to their demands. On the other hand, China as a Leninist Party state looks at dissent and challenges in a different fashion. It does not face elections and is thus not put to the test every few years. It has also had a history of suppressing dissent militarily, the most recent being the 1989 Tiananmen Square. After reading the book one craves for some critical analysis,

not just narration and opinion.

The other consistent argument he makes is that since 2014 Indian policy and planning have been better because it has been ruled by a majority government. The author also argues that the coalition governments have not achieved much compared to China during the same time period. He writes that, "During the coalition period in India, multiple political forces and interest groups diluted the intent, effectiveness and implementation of the reform programmes' opportunities. This contrasted with Chinese

leaders' relatively long tenures and authority, as well as the consistency of policy intent, experimentation, speed and implementation in the Chinese economy during the same period". These assumptions indicate the lack of a more objective analysis of the politics and social realities of India as well

as China. As a result, it seems to be in awe of what China as an authoritarian state has managed to achieve. It is now central to global supply chains. It cannot be denied that China has successfully managed to lift millions out of poverty. But the question that looms large is at what cost. When we discuss economic growth and achievements, should we not look at the cost paid by the people in the form of human rights violations, income and gender disparities, and environmental degradation?

The author attempts to provide a parallel for similar events in both countries. However, while he is trying to understand India and China, one needs to acknowledge that it is impossible to find similarities and refrain from predictions. This is on account of the very same thing the author talks about at the beginning of the book — the contrasting histories of the two nations. Though the book provides a range of information, the lack of comprehensive analysis detracts from its value.

The reviewer is associate professor, OPJSD, Indira Gandhi University

Budget must signal change

It needs to move beyond headline GDP to prioritise job creation and alleviating rural distress



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

With the election done and dusted, it's time to get back to the business of running the country. The Budget for FY24-25 presents the government with an opportunity to show how it has absorbed the messages sent by the electorate. It cannot be business as usual; it must be a Budget for change. People have signalled that they want a greater focus on employment and alleviating rural distress. While headline gross domestic product (GDP) growth is undoubtedly important, it is not enough — the nature and quality of that growth matter as well. It's also a message that free food and other handouts were important, especially in coping with the pandemic, but they are not enough. People want a hand-up to better jobs and the dignity of employment, not just food and gas cylinders. Welfareism has its limits.

As the finance minister promised even before the elections in a speech to industry body FICCI in February this year, the government would open up the elections on what economists call factor-market reforms — land, labour, capital and digital public infrastructure. She was right in emphasising these and we now hope she will act on them in the upcoming Budget. These reforms are needed to address why we use our most abundant factor of production — labour — so poorly, and why India's manufacturing sector remains so capital-intensive. It must also address why our scarcest resource, land, is wasted in unproductive farms and sprawling urban agglomerations, rather than compact efficient towns and cities. India's capital market also remains hugely underdeveloped because of the need to finance a massive consolidated fiscal deficit of 8-9 per cent of GDP, soaking up massive resources that should be available to the private sector. The statutory liquidity ratio should be done away with. Improving our digital public infrastructure further —

where India is a pioneer — can only help even more.

While India desires to keep up its capital expenditure, it must also pursue fiscal consolidation more aggressively. The goods and services tax (GST) has finally stabilised and is generating more revenue. Disinvestment provides another potential source for the future. The existing system for disinvestment — where a target is announced, does not work. Even the government has recognised this. Based on my earlier study at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy on India's public sector units, except for the Maharatnas, I would suggest a massive privatisation programme over the next five years, but the way it is done matters hugely.

Handing over state assets to a few chosen corporations, akin to Russian oligarch-style privatisation, is not the right way. Transparent processes, competitive bidding, and ensuring that some of the funds are set aside for worker compensation are vital for strategic disinvestment to succeed. In democratic countries with reasonably developed capital markets, open market sales (share sales) could be designed to widen ownership and create a greater public stake for the disinvestment. Employees could also be provided shares — employee stock option plans (ESOPs) — in companies when they come under private management, so that they are not as resistant to the sale and can share in the upside of post-privatisation.

The push for more capital expenditure — especially for infrastructure — has been positive for growth, but it has not yet led to the much-anticipated revival of private investment. The business lobbies clamour for more production-linked incentive scheme-type initiatives, in which they receive even more subsidies, but these are hardly a sustainable model for genuine private sector-led growth that creates more employment. Because the existing trickle-down economic



IF TRUTH BE TOLD

AJAY CHHIBBER

Breaking the minerals monopoly

In the 21st century, critical minerals and rare earths have taken centre stage, becoming crucial for electronics, renewable energy, electric vehicles, defence, aerospace, and medical devices. For instance, the International Renewable Energy Agency's pathway to restrict global temperature rise to 1.5°C posits that renewables will constitute 91 per cent of the energy mix by 2050, requiring massive quantities of minerals like silicon, silver, lithium, and rare earths such as neodymium and dysprosium. The surging demand and deepening reliance have classified these and other minerals like graphite, manganese, cobalt and nickel as "critical", highlighting their pivotal role in shaping future technologies and industries.

The global surge in demand has elevated critical minerals to the status of strategic assets and geopolitical tools. These minerals are concentrated in a few nations, with China being the dominant one possessing substantial reserves of dysprosium (50 per cent), neodymium (50 per cent), and graphite (65 per cent). China's mineral dominance is fortified by securing advantageous agreements across Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and Australia, often through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, China's \$1.3 billion BRI investment in mineral exploration and processing in China, Guinea, Niger, Sierra Leone, and Mali ensures privileged access to bauxite and lithium. In Ghana, the involvement of SinoHydro, a Chinese firm in aluminium processing from Ghanaian bauxite, grants China concessional terms over 20 years, while the Ghanaian entity repays the Chinese loan.

Additionally, China's monopoly is reinforced by being the mineral processing capital of the world. China controls substantial global shares — graphite (80 per cent), dysprosium (100 per cent), neodymium (93 per cent), and neodymium (88 per cent). This industrial prowess of China, driven by economies of scale, has reduced their processing cost and erected significant barriers to entry for other nations, solidifying China's control over mineral supply chains.

The monopolistic weaponisation of critical mineral supply is raising concern. In 2010, China restricted rare earth exports to Japan amidst a territorial dispute.

Recently, when the US restricted semiconductor technology sales to China in October 2022, China imposed export controls on germanium and gallium from August 2023, commodities crucial for semiconductor manufacturing where China holds 60 per cent and 80 per cent of global production, respectively. Amid ongoing tensions between China and the US over the South China Sea, China also restricted exports of synthetic graphite grades crucial for defence and aerospace, where it maintains almost complete market dominance.

Other geopolitical initiatives include the possibility of creating an Opec-like cartel by resource-rich nations, a "Buyers Club" to avoid a bidding war among G7 countries or strategic stockpiling by others. The US and the EU are promoting localisation and friend-shoring of critical minerals even though it means higher costs. During Narendra Modi's US visit in 2023, the critical minerals partnership was high on the agenda. The Mineral Security Partnership, a US initiative with 13 countries and the EU, began in mid-2022, and India joined in 2023.

India's ambitions for net-zero emissions by 2070, semiconductor foundries, and expanding defence, nuclear, and space industries underscore the critical importance of minerals like lithium, nickel, copper, and cobalt. With India heavily reliant on imports for these minerals — 100 per cent for cobalt, nickel and lithium, and 93 per cent for copper and its concentrates — securing supply chains is crucial amid potential geopolitical pressures and vulnerabilities in strategic sectors.

India has abundant heavy minerals, found in the sands of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha, and significant deposits of polymetallic ferromanganese nodules and crusts in the Andaman Sea and Lakshadweep Sea, along with deep-seated deposits inland. Despite possessing over 210 million tonnes of graphite and 665 million tonnes of ilmenite and rutile, production remains minimal, with most exported as raw material. Many critical minerals have remained undiscovered due to the focus on bulk minerals, neglecting deep-seated critical minerals. Exploration was restricted to government entities, hindering investment and adoption of advanced prospecting technologies.



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR



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Avoidable tragedy

Gatherings should be tightly regulated to prevent Hathras-type stampedes

The stampede on Tuesday at a religious congregation at Hathras in western Uttar Pradesh, claiming over 120 lives, is only the latest in a series of such tragedies in the country. There have been at least half-a-dozen such incidents in the last 20-odd years. In this instance, at least a lakh of people flocked to Futrai village to listen to an address by a preacher Suraj Pal, also known as Narayan Sakar Hari or "Bhole Baba". There are reports that there were over 2.5 lakh participants at the venue, which could accommodate no more than 80,000. The preacher is said to have followers in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana too. Most of the deceased, mainly women and children, were from the economically vulnerable sections of society, and were in search of spiritual solace. While only a fair investigation can find out the cause for the stampede, the reasons being cited include overcrowding, and the bid by some to collect soil from around the feet of the preacher. Not surprisingly, the responses, particularly from the field-level public health system, have exposed how ill-prepared the Uttar Pradesh administration is. Visuals of bodies lying outside the place of post mortem and of the kin desperate for help, as well as an inadequate number of ambulances and medical staff have become the common features of such tragedies. What has made it worse is the preacher and his aides reportedly leaving the site even as panic-stricken people were dying.

The most tragic aspect, as seen in the past, is that it was all avoidable had there been proactive steps taken by a vigilant administration. Unfortunately, the authorities in many States do not appear to have learnt lessons or made use of the availability of better technology and communication. Apart from stringent action against those responsible, the U.P. administration should ensure a just compensation package, the cost of which has to be borne by the organisers. The tragedy is a classic study in the management of large crowds. The officials concerned should ensure that the organisers have the wherewithal to handle large gatherings of any size. The local authorities and organisers should also conduct a drill ahead of such events. What is more important is that the political executive, the bureaucracy and organisers of any public event should be conscious of the fact that the loss of a life is a tragedy for the person's family. The arrangements for mass functions should be governed by this fact.

Of accommodation

Treasury benches and the Opposition must uphold parliamentary tradition

The first session of the 18th Lok Sabha and the corresponding session of Rajya Sabha were notable for the renewed spirit of parliamentary debate on display, notwithstanding the excessive combativeness and avoidable grandstanding by the government and the Opposition. Echoes of the election campaign continued too, as Rahul Gandhi, in his debut as the designated Leader of Opposition (LoP), mounted an aggressive critique of the NDA government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Mr. Modi in turn called into question the track record and intentions of the Congress, and Mr. Gandhi's capacity. Both sides categorically declared fealty to the Constitution of India, while accusing each other of trying to undermine it. They also crossed swords over Hinduism and its political role. The rise of a strong Opposition — with no designated LoP earlier — and the return of coalition politics as the leading party lacks an absolute majority may restore the role of Parliament. The increase in Opposition numbers can help restore healthy traditions such as more Bills getting scrutinised by parliamentary standing committees. A robust Opposition can also act as an effective restraint on the government, preventing it from bulldozing opposition with its legislative agenda. The 17th Lok Sabha not only earned the dubious distinction of having seen the suspension of the most number of Opposition MPs (146 in a single session, including Rajya Sabha MPs) but also functioned without a Deputy Speaker, a post usually reserved for the Opposition. To underscore this point, the INDIA bloc predicated its support for Om Birla as the Speaker only on the condition that the government agreed to offer it the deputy chair. The stalemate eventually led to an election between Mr. Birla and Kodikunni Suresh (Congress), which Mr. Birla won through a voice vote. The Opposition did not press for a division and rich parliamentary tradition was followed, with Mr. Modi, leader of the House, and Mr. Gandhi, LoP, escorting Mr. Birla to his Chair.

The roles of the Lok Sabha Speaker and Rajya Sabha Chairman gain additional prominence. The Opposition has urged them to be even-handed. The Opposition has also questioned the expunging of portions of Mr. Gandhi's speech from the records by the Speaker. The threshold for removing parts of what is spoken in the House from official records should be very high. Following the deviation from the standard format by several members, the Speaker has constituted a committee to frame rules for oath-taking. Parliamentary speeches could do with more humour and less diatribe, but the fact that there was an expanded debate is encouraging. The Treasury and Opposition benches must understand that their place in the highest seat of democracy is to represent the people who sent them there. They must find a common sense of purpose and function in a spirit of accommodation.

Trials, medical ethics and the orbit of power

On January 10, 2021, Rashida Bee (representing the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationary Karmchari Sangh), Nawab Khan (representing Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Purosh Sangharsh Morcha), Rachna Dhangra (representing the Bhopal Group for Information and Action) and Naushveen Khan (representing Children Against Dowry Abuse) wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Dr. Harsh Vardhan. In the letter, they alleged irregularities and ethical violations in the conduct of the clinical trial for Bharat Biotech's Covaxin (a COVID-19 vaccine) by the People's Hospital in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and the resultant exploitation of trial participants belonging to vulnerable groups demanding stoppage, punishment and compensation.

The letter further alleged gross violations of ethics guidelines including violations of informed consent procedures, enrolment of vulnerable population among study participants, non-reporting of adverse events and a lack of monitoring and follow-up of study participants among others.

The writers sought urgent intervention to stop the study at the trial site and for investigation by an independent body. What became of the letter and any consequential actions are unknown. The Indian drug regulator, Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation had approved the vaccine candidate prior to the completion of the recruitment for the vaccine candidate's Phase III study for "Restricted Use of Covaxin under Clinical Trial Mode" — a term and process that finds no mention in India's Drug Regulatory Framework, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and its accompanying Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 2019.

Ethics committees and whistle-blowers
One of the issues that stands out in this case is the functioning of the trial sites and their respective ethics committees. Dr. Jacob Puliyel, a member of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI) filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of India where the Court said "subject to the protection of privacy of individual subjects and to the extent permissible by the 2019 Rules, the relevant data which is required to be published under the statutory regime and the WHO [World Health Organization] Statement on Clinical Trials shall be made available to the public without undue delay".

The development of potential therapeutic agents is often complicated by subjective and sometimes objective violations of ethical guidelines. The role of conscientious insiders, and sometimes outsiders, who have unique knowledge of such violations is the subject of a recent book, *The Occasional Human Sacrifice — Medical Experimentation and the Price of Saying No*, by bioethicist, philosopher and whistle-blower at the University of Minnesota, Carl Elliott. The book details several such



Dinesh S. Thakur
a public health activist and was the whistle-blower in the case against Ranbaxy Laboratories

incidents in the western world, starting with the Tuskegee Syphilis Study to the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study.

It also looks at what happened with Protocol 126 for cancer study of bone marrow transplantation at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and at the Eugene Sanger Radioisotope Laboratory, Cincinnati Medical Center, to study the effect of radiation on humans among others. Driven by his own experience to understand the suicide of Dan Markingson at the university, Elliott traverses some very difficult and human questions such as what makes someone speak out, the ethics of dissent, honour, respect, guilt and shame, and the concepts of dignity and integrity told through the journey of whistle-blowers. As Nancy Olivieri, a whistle-blower, recounts in her review, threats of legal action and, worse, often resulting in destroying the whistle-blower's life are far too common in such cases.

While one often wonders why such instances of moral courage are few and far between in our society, Sayendia Dubey, Sharmagum Maranjathi, Sanjiv Chaturvedi and a few other named exceptions notwithstanding, lack of strong whistle-blower protection statutes is only a part of the problem. Unlike the United States, India does not have a law that protects those who take great personal risks to bring wrongdoing to public notice. The existing law, whose scope is limited to public servants to begin with, was further diluted in 2015, making it a dead letter law.

The deeper issues which we should, but do not wrestle with are: understanding group think and organisational wrongdoing, loyalty to the ivory tower, fear of retribution, social conformity, status hierarchies and exercise of power that are so ingrained in us as a society. Unless we study these traits among us as a society, we will never understand why someone chooses to be an Anand Rai, the whistle-blower who exposed the Vyapam scam.

Innovative therapies and ethics

Back to the topic at hand, i.e., the development of life-saving medicines is a morass in our country. While we have a vibrant industry that manufactures generic (copy-cat) drugs, developing innovative therapies has not been our cup of tea. Development of life-saving medicines often entails balancing the risk to the patient with the projected benefit from using the therapeutic candidate. In most cases, there is not enough data to make an informed decision, which is not straightforward and requires specialised knowledge and experience. Using an approved drug that is on the market does not qualify a medical doctor to make such decisions. Drug development is a separate area of expertise. While we see green shoots of late, we do not have deep expertise in managing clinical development. Therefore, we make do with appointing medical

doctors to oversee the development of therapeutics. This requires better guardrails than we have in order to ensure that the basic tenets of ethics are not violated in the process. For example, when medical doctors who specialise in treating individual patients with specific diseases such as cardiology and paediatrics are appointed to run our pandemic response, we see absurd actions such as projecting cases to become zero during the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of subject expert committees make up things such as "emergency use authorization in clinical trial mode" and work hard to justify it with a straight face. These are glaring examples of gross violations of medical ethics in our recent past.

Indian patients and clinical studies

The bigger issue in our country is the historic and repeated violation of informed consent when patients are enrolled in clinical studies. More than anecdotal evidence exists that poor and uneducated people are enrolled in such studies without fully informing them of potential harm from the therapeutic candidate being evaluated in a clinical study. The job of ensuring such atrocities do not occur falls to what is called an institutional ethics committee. While such committees exist on paper and in our regulations, their function and effectiveness are at best patchy.

A publication (2022) by Gayatri Sabarwal et al. in the journal *PLOS Global Public Health* that evaluated 1,359 Phase II or III interventional studies registered in the Clinical Trials Registry-India (CTRI) identified as many as 30 problems with the way in which our ethics committees function. These include clinical trials without any ethics committees, and trials with more sites than functional ethics committees — for example, three ethics committees approving one study site. The simple takeaway from this analysis is that the primary guardrails that are supposed to be a check on abuse of medical ethics do not function in our country. This analysis says nothing about the competence of the members of the ethics committees, which was plainly obvious during the development of Coronil during the pandemic. The biggest abuser of these regulations is a section of the industry that is actively promoted by the Ministry of AYUSH. These poorly designed, ill-executed "clinical studies" with zero oversight are often used to provide a veneer of scientific validity to their concoctions and nothing more.

If there is one message that comes out clearly in Elliott's book, it is how even well-designed and well-run systems of checks and balances on accountability are often run roughshod over by those who have the means and power. We are nowhere even close to how such systems function in the West. If we truly wish to hold wrongdoing to account, we have a very long way to go before we even get the basics right. That is, if we truly want to.

In India, the primary guardrails that are supposed to be a check on the abuse of medical ethics do not function

Factory accidents, a pointer to rusty inspection reform

An explosion of a reactor in a chemical factory in the Dombivli Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) area in May 2024 resulted in the loss of lives and injuries to workers and people. It also caused damage to factories, shops and residences in the neighbourhood. The Maharashtra government announced compensation to the kin of the deceased and funds for the treatment of the injured.

Newspaper reports show that fatal industrial accidents were frequent in 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2023. The Maharashtra government is guilty of not relocating 156 chemical factories in the Dombivli MIDC area even after "deciding" in 2022 to relocate them to Patalganga. It is now known that the boiler in the chemical factory was not registered under the Indian Boiler Regulations, 1950.

Poor inspection

In 2021, in Maharashtra, 1,551 of 6,492 hazardous factories were inspected, i.e., a 23.89% inspection rate. And, 3,158 out of 39,255 registered factories were inspected, i.e., an 8.04% inspection rate. The situation is no better in two other top industrial States. In Tamil Nadu, the general inspection rate was 17.04% and the hazardous factories inspection rate was 25.39%. In Gujarat, it was 19.33% and 18.81%, respectively. The all-India figure, of 14.69% and 26.02%, respectively, is not surprising (the data are from the Directorate General Factory Advice Service & Labour Institutes report, 2022).

The poor inspection rates could also be due to a shortage of personnel among other reasons. In Maharashtra, the appointment rate is just 39.34%; 48 out of the 122 sanctioned officers were appointed. The numbers are better in Gujarat (50.98%) and Tamil Nadu (53.57%). The all-India figure was 67.58%. Even the sanctioned posts relative to the number of registered factories have



K.R. Shyam Sundar
Adjunct Professor, Management Development Institute, Gurgaon

The recurrence of the same kind of industrial disasters highlights the need for more meaningful reforms in the inspection process

been inadequate to ensure that every factory is inspected in a year. For example, for an all-India reach, each of the 953 sanctioned inspectors would have had to inspect 337 registered factories in a year, in 2021. The inspection rates are poor because of the heavy workload of the inspectors. An inspector in Maharashtra must inspect 818 factories in a year; 589 in Gujarat; 532 in Tamil Nadu, and 499 at the all-India level.

The prosecution rate, i.e., the number of prosecutions decided as a percentage of total prosecutions (including pending cases) was 6.95% in Gujarat; 13.84% in Maharashtra, and 14.45% in Tamil Nadu. As a result, inspections lose their "deterrent effect".

From the data, it is clear that labour market governance through the labour inspection system is weak and does not perform efficiently. However, employers call it pejoratively as "inspector-raj", implying harassment and prevalence of compromising practices such as bribes.

Need for the right reforms in inspection

The criticism is not without merit. Given the vast universe of inspection, the inspectors may "target" and "harass" several factories/establishments, exhibiting state power and also attempting to secure bribes. But this cannot be universal as the statistics are telling. The president of the Maharashtra Industry Development Association has admitted, in a media report in May 2024, that in many cases, safety inspection and certification were done "on an understanding" between the auditors and factory owners or managers. Employers are as guilty as the labour inspectors, and tackling the "supply side" of "rent seeking" is as important as reforming the "demand" side.

Reforms of the inspection system are necessary but not of the kind initiated in most States in response to employer criticism.

Self-certification, randomised inspections, online inspections, and third-party certification have been introduced by ruling political parties at the all-India level and in many States. These changes violate several articles in the International Labour Organization's Labour Inspection Convention (081), 1947.

According to the Convention, there must be sufficient qualified and well-provided inspectors and they shall enter the establishments freely and without prior notice at any time to secure due compliance of the labour laws, among others. Instead of liberalising the inspection system, governments must ensure a strong labour market governance by implementing the provisions of the ILO Convention. Given the fast-paced changes taking place in technology, and the use of hazardous and chemical substances, the increased need for inspection is felt. Inspectors can both "inspect" and "facilitate" due compliance of laws by providing suitable advice to employers and unions. This is recognised by the ILO Convention.

Penalties for the enforcer

If a firm or a trade union does not comply with laws, they are prosecuted by the state. If the state fails in its governance what is the penalty the state, viz. the government and the labour department officials pay? Simple and meagre compensation to the victims and their families? No. There must be a penal system for the enforcers also which will pave the way for complete legal compliance.

The recurrence of the same kind of industrial disasters shows a lack of learning by the government. In the name of reforms and a lean government, the state cannot abrogate its fundamental duty — to ensure a safe working and living environment. It should carry out meaningful reforms to ensure an "efficient" and "ethical" labour inspectorate.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Parliament

The abrasive exchanges between the Congress and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have certainly lowered the dignity of Parliament (Page 1, 'PM says mandate is for continuity, Cong. a 'parasite' on allies', July 3). The Prime Minister's seniority, should have shown some consideration

for fellow members instead of bulldozing them. No MP should forget that a strong Opposition, which has been missing for a long time, is essential for a healthy democracy. The BJP failed to win the required number of seats and must introspect over this. P. Sanath Kumar, Visakhapatnam

The Prime Minister's speech did not have answers for the points raised by the Leader of the Opposition or the other Opposition leaders. Instead, it was focused on levelling accusations and ridiculing the Congress. The Prime Minister's claim that the 2024 mandate is for continuity needs to be

clarified. The continuity is certainly not for such incongruent and hate speeches to continue even after the election is over.

The BJP too was not given the mandate to rule on its own strength. The leader of an august house is expected to be conscious of the

difference between a speech delivered in a street corner and a speech before a gathering of elites and in an august house such as Parliament. The Prime Minister's speech should only enhance the image of the nation and not the otherwise.

A.G. Rajinikanth, Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

Corrections & Clarifications

In a report, 'PM says mandate is for continuity, Cong. a 'parasite' on allies' (Page 1, July 3, 2024), the translation of the phrase "bala buddhi" should have been "childish mind", and not "imbecile" as published. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

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[OUR TAKE]

House must get back on course

Opposition has a right to be heard, but should also recognise its responsibility to listen

The first few sittings of the 18th Lok Sabha, and the new session of Parliament do not augur well for things to come. One of the big messages was that there was no meeting point for the two sides, nor even the vaguest of attempts by the Opposition to listen to the Prime Minister after their own representatives had spoken at length with few interruptions. This is worrying.

Ahead of the session, it was clear that an evenly poised House, albeit one where the NDA government has a clear majority in the Lok Sabha, would test the floor management skills of the treasury benches (until now, accustomed to a position of strength arising from their overwhelming numbers), but also invigorate the legislative process, adding teeth to important House panels.

But with the debates in the first session of the House have gone, there is merit to the Prime Minister's (PM) comment in the Lok Sabha that though the Opposition's "ecosystem is spending day and night trying to convince people that they have defeated us", he continues to remain in power. The Opposition MPs incessantly booing when the PM spoke in the Lower House, and then choosing to walk out in the Upper House also did not reflect well on a coalition that fought on a common platform to win sizeable representation in the same House it was now disrupting. Its numbers mean that it has a right to be heard, but the government's numbers mean that it also has to listen.

Over the last month, the government has been keen to project that it is business as usual, both in terms of policies and personnel—and the fact that most of the Cabinet and even the Lok Sabha Speaker have been repeated, accentuates this impression. Meanwhile, the Opposition has been equally keen to flex its numbers, now higher than at any time in the past decade, to show it can now hold the ruling dispensation accountable, perhaps even block legislation.

It remains to be seen if the sound and fury of the opening gambit will set the template for the next five years. The bottom line is that respect for the opponent is necessary to engage productively in Parliament, and there wasn't much of that on display. If the aggression on view over the past few days was a harbinger of the nearly two-month-long bitter campaign, it must pass; better sense must prevail. Parliament needs robust debate and disagreement, but it cannot function meaningfully without the decorum and dignity that make it a true temple of democracy.

Hathras tragedy and the failure to learn from past

The stampede at a religious congregation in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, on Tuesday that left 121 dead is yet another instance of administrative inertia compounding the risks from poor organisation. The *satsang* organisers failed on many counts—from anticipating the size of the crowd to having adequate exit points and medical arrangements. Holding the *satsang* in a tent amid oppressive humidity and with grounds slippery from the rains escapes conventional wisdom even when a gathering of 80,000—the crowd size the district administration had permitted—is considered, let alone the reported 100,000 who turned up. The offenders must be brought to book. A case has been filed against close aides of the godman at the centre of the *satsang*. But the latter, who goes by the names of Bhole Baba and Narayan Sakhar Hari, hasn't been named in the FIR. This raises many questions.

Many recent accidents were rooted in similar failures to enforce safety protocols. Just last year, the roof of a stupa in a temple in Madhya Pradesh collapsed from the weight of visitors who had gathered for Ram Navami celebrations. A probe flagged poor crowd control and the illegally constructed roof. The tragedy occurring many months after the local administration ordered the removal of the roof underscored administrative failure. The country has been in this territory multiple times, where large numbers gather for congregations and political rallies, and poor crowd control and the failure of the authorities to monitor organisers leads to disaster. In the Hathras incident, the officials who should have ensured safety compliance have as much to answer for as the organisers.

OPINION

BIMSTEC for Delhi's regional ambitions

It provides a platform for addressing shared challenges, such as the climate crisis, natural disasters, and transnational security threats. It can reinforce India's position as a responsible global stakeholder committed to regional stability

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) celebrated its 27th anniversary on June 6. As India's role gains heightened significance amidst a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, BIMSTEC emerges as a crucial platform that could unlock the country's potential as a regional leader.

In the existence of over two decades, its significance has been increasingly recognised by other regional blocs, with the most prominent being the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has become moribund due to the souring of Indo-Pakistani ties. There has been a renewed attention on the BIMSTEC in recent years as India seeks to strengthen its strategic partnerships and counterbalance the influence of other major regional powers, particularly China and its Belt and Road Initiative.

One of the critical areas where BIMSTEC can yield tangible benefits is in the realm of trade and investment.

(By RRB)

The BIMSTEC charter was signed and adopted during the 5th BIMSTEC Summit held in virtual format in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on March 30th this year, paving the way for partnerships and admission of new members and observers. Key areas of cooperation include economic development, trade, investment, technology transfer, connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges. One of the key advantages of BIMSTEC is its strategic location, spanning the Indian Ocean and the Southeast Asian regions. This positioning offers India a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between South Asia and Southeast Asia, fostering greater economic integration and enhancing regional connectivity.

India can play a pivotal role in shaping the region's economic and infrastructure development agenda, which is crucial given the region's infrastructure deficit, estimated at \$1.7 trillion per year, aligns with India's broader foreign policy objectives.

By including the Act East Policy, emphasising the importance of promoting a rules-based international order, strengthening regional cooperation, and ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region, by actively engaging with BIMSTEC, India can fortify its position as a responsible regional power, committed to fostering peace, stability, and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood.

One of the critical areas where BIMSTEC can yield tangible benefits is in the realm of trade and investment.

BIMSTEC members collectively represent a market of over 1.6 billion people, approximately 22% of the global population, and a combined Gross Domestic Product estimated at \$4.5 trillion. By enhancing economic cooperation and removing barriers to trade and investment, India can tap into this vast economic potential, creating new business opportunities and fostering inclusive growth across the region. Currently, intra-BIMSTEC trade accounts for only around 8% of the total trade among member countries, highlighting the untapped potential for deeper economic integration.

BIMSTEC provides a platform for addressing shared challenges, such as climate change, natural disasters, and transnational security threats. Collective action and cooperation in these areas can not only strengthen regional resilience but also reinforce India's position as a responsible global stakeholder committed to sustainable development and regional stability. This is crucial given the region's vulnerability to the climate crisis, with rising sea levels and extreme weather events posing significant risks to coastal communities and economies.

BIMSTEC member States collectively possess a diverse array of natural resources, skilled labour, and manufacturing capabilities that can be leveraged to create robust regional value chains. By fostering deeper economic integration, harmonising regulatory frameworks, and investing in regional infrastructure projects, India can tap into the complementary strengths of its neighbours.



Syed Munir Khuras



BIMSTEC must prioritise tangible projects, which include enhancing physical connectivity by developing regional infrastructure

There is a need for greater political will and commitment from all members. Historically, progress within BIMSTEC has been hampered by internal dynamics, divergent priorities, and a lack of sustained engagement. India, as the largest economy and a major regional player, must lead by example, driving the organisational agenda and fostering a shared vision for regional integration. Secondly, BIMSTEC must prioritise tangible projects and initiatives that deliver measurable benefits. This could include enhancing physical connectivity by developing regional infrastructure projects like the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan, fostering greater people-to-people exchanges through initiatives like the BIMSTEC network of policy think tanks, and collaborating on tourism, agriculture, and renewable energy. Currently, only a handful of BIMSTEC projects, like the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, have made notable progress. Thirdly, India must approach BIMSTEC as a complementary initiative to its other regional and global engagements, such as Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), and leverage BIMSTEC's unique strengths and partnerships to further its broader strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific.

Success depends on astute diplomacy, tangible results, and solidifying India's regional leadership. It is an opportunity to pursue mutually beneficial partnerships, sustainable development, and a prosperous Indo-Pacific vision. With an effectively functioning BIMSTEC, India can create an interconnected, secure neighbourhood while countering against other major regional powers.

Syed Munir Khuras is chairman of IPAC India, an international think tank with presence in Dhaka, Delhi, Melbourne, Dubai, and Vienna. The views expressed are personal.

Private investment: Wait from intent to realisation

The disaggregated national accounts for FY23 have revived concerns about the longstanding deficit in private investment. The update showed that private gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), which measures new fixed assets created by financial and non-financial corporations, was 10.9% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in nominal measures, marking a 30 basis points increase since the pandemic (FY21) and equal to the post-global financial crisis trend of 11%. However, it remains below the 11.7-11.8% range in 2012-14, and much lower than its 16.3% peak in FY08. GFCF solely by non-financial corporations also averaged -10.7% in the past decade. This decline matches the broader global trend of decline in private capital formation after 2008-09, a major factor for slower world growth in the period.

It's important to flag that the decline in India's business investments primarily originates from that in manufacturing, where the share of private capital formation in the GDP fell from 4.6% to 3.2% over FY12 to FY23, virtually stagnating thereafter. A marginal increase to 3.4% in FY23 perpetuates the pre-pandemic trend. Further, the fall in manufacturing private capital formation is primarily attributable to reduced investments in machinery and equipment, the biggest sign of manufacturing capacity addition. Illustratively, the proportion of such investments by non-financial corporations (the biggest share is from manufacturing companies) dropped sharply from 27.5% of the total in FY12 to 36% in FY20. Fresh creation of machinery and equipment assets has been broadly inactive, at 39% in recent years.

There are other features that are not widely noticed. For example, throughout the period of decline, the ratio of envisaged capital expenditure, as assessed from credit sanctioned by banks and major financial institutions, and actual GFCF measures from the national accounts, has systematically fallen. Last August, a study in the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) bulletin underlining this significant decline in the fraction of interest capital spending maturing into actual fixed assets addition—the long-term average over 1973-74 to 2020-21 for envisaged private capex that converted into actual investment (GFCF) of about 40.5% dropped to 15.3% in the decade to 2021-22. This was also half the 33% average in the decade preceding the 2008-09 crisis.

RBI regularly collects information on project finance data of private corporations from the major banks and financial institutions (along with equity investors, and foreign borrowings in later years) to assess the short-term investment outlook on an annual basis. The new-term outlook shared last year flagged the rise in the value of total funded projects to \$2.6 trillion in FY23 (\$2.5 trillion if other sources are included), the highest since 2014-15, at 1.3% of the GDP last year, this was clearly 1.8 times above that in FY22. In the longer-term perspective though, this intended private capex is 15% lower than it would have been if the pre-pandemic, five-year average growth in such funded projects

(4.9%) had been maintained. Moreover, with only about -10% of this potentially converting into actual capital formation in the last six years, there is likely a case for adjusting expectations. It is not as though investment financing has shifted to other role sources, at least from 2007-08, when about 21.4% of the intended capex was converted to actual fixed assets. During this period, banks financed nearly 50% of the commercial economic activity; foreign direct investment and corporate bond financing averaged 16% and 9%, respectively. There is, however, no strict match between capex and investments, which is merely illustrative in order to understand if the weakening trend in conversion can be ascribed to substitution of financing from other sources.

Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's project announcements data, which too isn't strictly comparable, also indicates the same tendencies. In 2023, for instance, private project announcements surged to -85% of overall announcements, but if we note that only -62% reached completion, then again optimism must be tempered, and expectations lowered. In fact, firms' forecasts regarding future economic conditions often appear overly optimistic, and misaligned with actual market realities, as observed from the systematic widening of the gap between current and expected economic growth expectations since 2015-16 in RBI's bi-monthly survey-based Business Expectations Index (BEI). For the last one decade, firms' assessments and expectations have predominantly been driven by profit margins and exports, which proxy external demand; they are consistent with observed patterns in manufacturing sector investments and global growth in the same period. Changes in capacity utilisation are another important driver of fluctuations in business expectations; this resonates with the growing slack in manufacturing capacities in the period.

The trend seems to be that while optimism fuels initial investment announcements, it frequently fails to overcome practical challenges. Possibly, the latter may be posed by an erratic growth pattern or cycle, external market conditions, or other factors, leading to many projects unrealised. What is pertinent here is that the numerous policy interventions from redressing policy uncertainties and stalled projects more than a decade ago to bad loans resolution, banks' strengthening and consolidation, thereafter, to a host of structural reforms like the GST, the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, simpler business, improved labour legislation, and enhanced flexibility in farming techniques, have altogether not succeeded in moving the needle from optimism and intentions to actual business investments.

What is the need, therefore, in this leg, or bridge the gap in intended and real, may be demand strength and its endurance. Clearly, the post-2008-09 growth rates are insufficient.

Renu Kohli and Kritima Bhattacharya are with the Centre for Social and Economic Progress. The views expressed are personal.

DICK SCHOOFF | NETHERLANDS PRIME MINISTER

We should not be naïve. A few hours' flight from here, there is a horrific war... Ukraine can continue to count on the Netherlands for financial, military and political support

HT

Five steps to turnaround India's horticulture sector

India, while being the second largest producer of fruits and vegetables globally, accounts for a mere 2% of global horticulture trade. To fulfil its horticulture potential, India must adopt a strategic, multi-pronged approach that strengthens its foundations and embraces new opportunities. Given its significant potential and ideal climatic zones, the country must boost horticultural production and improve access to nutritious food for fellow Indians, harness the advantages horticulture lends itself to for smallholder farming structure.

To do so, first, embrace the full strength of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). FPOs can enable economies of scale, ensure operational efficiencies, promote best practices, connect farmers with international buyers, secure fair prices, minimise the impact of intermediaries and build farmers' capacity to manage modern agricultural inputs and technologies. I have been fortunate to witness this transformation first-hand, over the last few years. Farmer High-Lands, an FPO started by progressive smallholder farmers in Purnea, Bihar, has become a model for other FPOs. It has developed a comprehensive infrastructure—including an advisory team, pack-house, cold storage, and technology—to reduce cost and improve quality. The FPO has also been successful in procuring quality goods that meet global standards and in establishing crop-specific value chains. FPOs can also ensure consistency in produce such as variety, size and level of maturity, which is a prerequisite for successful processing and trade.

Second, enhancing product quality and consistency to meet international standards. We must improve the quality of our produce to meet international standards. For this, we must bridge the gap in extension services and ensure that farmers are equipped with the latest agronomic knowledge and sustainable farming techniques. Precision farming methods, integrated pest management, and responsible use of crop protection products can boost yields and maintain quality while minimising environmental impact. Strengthening post-harvest infrastructure—including storage facilities and processing units—is essential for reducing wastage and enhancing the value and marketability of horticulture products. It will also be beneficial to have trade agreements that reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers that have impacted Indian exports.

Third, robust regulatory frameworks and

technology for safety and quality. Compliance with international safety and quality standards is crucial for establishing a strong presence in foreign markets. India must also embrace technology that can propel the horticulture sector forward. Supporting and investing in agri-tech through grants or tax incentives will enable the adoption of precision agriculture technologies, IoT-based monitoring systems, water management and drones for crop management. This will improve productivity, efficiency, and resilience against climate and market variations.

Fourth, an integrated logistics and supply chain framework. Effective cold chains are vital for maintaining the safe and quality of horticulture products. To ensure food security, especially when catering to global markets that conduct stringent checks for quality, freshness, and chemical residues. This can be achieved through a robust cold chain that includes pre-cooling facilities, refrigerated transport, and efficient packaging technologies. Enhanced cold storage capacity enables farmers to adjust the supply based on demand fluctuations—a crucial advantage while exporting. Government-led programmes such as the Cold Chain Logistics Cluster (CCLC) and the Food Cold Chain Logistics Cluster (FCLC) of Indian Railways

should combine cold storage and transportation facilities with real-time market data along with a provision to give farmers visibility into market demand, prices, and available logistics services.

Fifth, a bigger role for public-private partnerships (PPPs). Lack of adequate insurance coverage can leave farmers vulnerable, impact their financial stability, and discourage them from cultivating high-value crops. Affordable and customised insurance products can mitigate the risks associated with horticulture and encourage farmers to invest in quality improvement and compliance with export standards. The Cluster Development Programme (CDP) for horticulture is a good example of PPP, wherein the government plays a facilitative role, and private enterprises leverage their operational excellence to create specialised clusters focused on horticultural crops with export potential.

India truly has the potential to become a horticulture powerhouse. It can get there with robust, coordinated efforts and innovative strategies that enable equitable, sustainable growth for the sector and prioritise the prosperity of farmers.

Simon Wiebusch is president, Bayer South Asian, Vice Chairman, MD and CEO, Bayer CropScience. The views expressed are personal.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

AFTER THE STAMPEDE

Hathras tragedy should lead to setting down of careful safety protocols. UP government needs to do more

UTAR PRADESH CHIEF Minister Yogi Adityanath has announced that a retired judge will probe Tuesday's deadly stampede at a satsang (religious congregation) held by a self-styled preacher in Hathras. The investigation will "pinpoint lapses" and the culprits won't be spared, he has said. Accountability for the incident that claimed more than 120 lives and left at least 300 injured must be fixed urgently. Initial reports indicate that the crowd gathered to hear the godman, Bhola Baba, far exceeded the estimate the organisers gave to the district administration. Many devotees tripped while trying to collect the soil the self-proclaimed preacher had walked on. There is no doubt that the satsang's organisers must be held to account. But the state administration would be mistaken to assume that its role in a mass event, even if privately organised, is limited to issuing permissions and providing security. Along with the organisers, the onus is on state authorities to ensure that safety isn't compromised. CM Adityanath's allusion to "a conspiracy" sounds diversionary. His government must deploy its energies and resources, instead, in uncovering the multiple failings behind the grievous incident, and ensuring that it does not happen again.

Authorities must be stringent about the size of a gathering. However, the administrative and police machinery is not always equipped to ensure that the crowd does not swell beyond the sanctioned numbers. In such situations, the number and placement of exits at the event are crucial, as are real-time interventions to ensure that religious or cultural fervour does not imperil public safety. Healthcare facilities should be kept on alert. By all accounts, many of these boxes were not ticked at Hathras. Safety, it is now apparent, was not a priority for the organisers of the satsang and the administration did precious little to nudge them to take the necessary precautions. The devotees had gathered in a makeshift tent, pitched on a field made marshy by the rains. The terrain caused many to slip and the humid weather made matters worse. The narrow exit routes at the satsang site, partly blocked by vehicles, were insufficient to evacuate the panicking crowd. The nearby hospital was hard-pressed to handle the influx of injured people. Several doctors were reportedly not at work and the healthcare facility did not have oxygen cylinders to support people suffering respiratory distress.

Religious gatherings, festivals, weddings and functions that draw large crowds are a regular part of the cultural, political and religious calendars of almost every district, or even neighbourhood, in the country. Hathras is a lesson — such gatherings are susceptible to panic-inducing triggers. The tragedy should push policymakers to evolve safety-related protocols. The Adityanath government which uses Section 144 to restrict people's gatherings on occasions as different as the farmers' protest to religious festivals should reflect on its failings in Hathras. A government that takes pride in organising the Kumbh should do better than merely smelling conspiracies. It — and other authorities across the country — must ensure that mass gatherings do not turn chaotic and take such a high toll.

THE DRAVID STORIES

They speak of the little big things that made him a World Cup winning coach

VIRENDER SEHWAG TELLS a story about Rahul Dravid from his playing days that captures the essence of the coach he would later become. The first time a young Sehwag was getting ready to open the batting in a Test at Lord's in 2002, he saw Rahul Dravid, slated to bat at No 3, already ready, with his pads on. "You won't give me time to put pads on", remarked Dravid. The chronic risk-taker Sehwag went on to score 84 that day. After that innings, to put the team's opener at ease, Dravid began to wear his pads only after Sehwag. It was Dravid who fought hard with the selectors to keep faith in the out-of-form ODI opener Sehwag during his captaincy in the mid 2000s. And Dravid, again, who encouraged pacer Zaheer Khan's comeback in the middle of the career.

It's in these little big things that the strength of Dravid's reign as a World Cup winning coach lies. Of not imposing his own philosophy on the players, but allowing them to grow on their own, and stepping in when needed. When Shubman Gill's position was at stake in Tests earlier this year against England, Dravid had to tell the young opener that he could be let go after that Test. But the way he approached the situation — reminding Gill about his talent, what's needed of him, and how the worst-case scenario of playing in Ranji Trophy wasn't as bad as it seemed — relaxed the opener enough for him to return with a hundred. As Suryakumar Yadav told this newspaper, Dravid's pre-World Cup presentation told the team, essentially, that he trusts the players to know what's best. "Leave everything else to us, you guys go enjoy" were his words that put the team at ease.

It might have been Rohit Sharma who triggered the all-out attacking batting philosophy after the 2023 ODI World Cup, but he has shared with this newspaper how Dravid trusted and nurtured him. Legendary players seldom come without ego, but Dravid has a self-deprecating way. When the coach's selflessness and vision is not in doubt and when players don't feel their territory is being cramped or encroached, it's not a surprise that seniors and juniors combine as well as they did in winning the World Cup.

A GREEK WEEK

A new law wants people to work for six days out of seven. But to what end?

BACK IN 1930, when John Maynard Keynes predicted that within a hundred years, most people would be working for 15 hours a week, did the economist imagine how wildly wrong he would be? Not that there haven't been stalwart efforts by certain European countries, like Spain, Belgium, Germany and Iceland, to experiment with encouraging workers to have a life outside work and find meaning in other avenues and pursuits. But even as these places institute the four-hour work week, the pull in the opposite direction — of overwork and constant hustle in pursuit of the corporate profits at the end of the rainbow — remains strong as ever.

The most recent illustration of this is Greece's new six-day work week legislation which, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis hopes, will help boost the national economy's productivity. That he has described the initiative as "growth-friendly" (a phrase about as meaningful as other business jargon like "personal development" and "self actualisation") should be enough to set alarm bells ringing — as indeed they are, with Greek workers wondering what will happen to their hard-won legal protections in a country that already has the longest working hours in Europe.

The larger question confronting Greece, and the rest of the world, is this: Productivity, yes, but to what end? With the proliferation of "bullshit jobs" — characterised by anthropologist David Graeber as those which could disappear and leave the global economy utterly unaffected — it has become harder and harder to tell what work matters and what doesn't. Should workers really have to give up more of their shrinking leisure time to fill up reimbursement forms and sit in meetings that could have been emails? For Greece — as indeed for others — it might be useful to go back to what Aristotle once said, that "the end of labour is to gain leisure". A six-day work week puts paid to any hope of the latter.



RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

WITH A NEW government at the Centre, the economic policy discourse has now shifted to speculating about the Union Budget for 2024-25. This year's budget is especially important for one specific reason. In an unexpected turn of events, the RBI announced last month that it is transferring a sizeable dividend to the government, significantly more than what was anticipated. This has triggered much discussion about how the government can spend this windfall. We need to ask a more fundamental question: Should the government spend it at all?

Fiscal management should be guided by two general principles. First, deficits should be kept at prudent levels. In India, that level should ideally be around three per cent of GDP for the Centre according to the long-standing Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act. Second, governments should spend a bit more than this norm when the economy is doing badly and a bit less when the economy is doing well.

The purpose of varying the deficit, as specified by the second principle, is to stabilise the economy. In bad times, when private sector demand is falling, the government needs to step in and boost demand to prop up the economy. The needs are reversed when the economy starts to recover. As private demand revives, the government needs to curtail its spending lest overall demand races ahead of supply, fostering inflation. A critical aspect of this second principle is that policies must be symmetric. Larger-than-normal deficits need to be followed by smaller-than-normal deficits so that government debt gets stabilised instead of spiralling upwards.

Following these two principles can keep a country out of debt problems while stabilising its ups and downs of growth cycles. That is why these principles are followed in prudent countries all over the world.

But not in India. Here, governments have always struggled to spend within their means irrespective of whether the economy is slowing or booming. In the 20-year period from 2000-01 to 2019-20, the average fiscal deficit

How the government utilises the RBI's surplus will indicate its view of the economy

Governments spend on capex for two reasons: To stimulate growth and to meet the needs of the economy. Let's address the second criterion first.

Infrastructure in India is definitely a problem that needs to be solved. But not all at once. Since the pandemic, the government's capex spending has been growing at an average annual rate of 30 per cent. It is not obvious that this pace needs to be increased, or even sustained. On the contrary, recent developments demonstrate that the speed of construction has serious downsides.

of the Centre was 4.6 per cent of GDP, much higher than the three per cent medium-term target set by the FRBM Act.

During the pandemic, the deficit shot up to 9.2 per cent of GDP in 2020-21, a large increase but a reasonable one, considering the size of the shock to the economy. But curiously even after the economy recovered, the deficit has been slow to come down. In the Interim Budget presented earlier this year, the Finance Minister announced that the government was targeting a deficit of 5.1 per cent for 2024-25. In other words, three years after the pandemic ended, the deficit is still higher than the pre-pandemic levels, and nowhere close to the FRBM norm.

Since the Centre has been slow to reduce its deficit, India's fiscal metrics have deteriorated. The consolidated central and state government deficit is now around 8.5-9 per cent of GDP (compared to the six per cent recommended by the FRBM Act). Total government debt has been more than 80 per cent of GDP over the last few years, compared to an average of 74 per cent in the period from 2010-11 to 2019-20.

It is against this background that the RBI announced last month that it will transfer Rs 2.11 lakh crore to the central government as dividend, double the amount that had been budgeted. The crucial question now is: What should the government do with this unexpected bounty?

According to some commentators, the government should increase its capital expenditure (capex). As per the Interim Budget, the capex growth rate is supposed to slow down in 2024-25. But now with this surprise dividend, the government may be tempted to step up its capex spending. That would be a mistake.

The general sentiment in India seems to be that any spending on capex is great news. This is not correct. Look at China, for example. As part of their infrastructure building spree, they built two to three airports in the same city and are now struggling to repay the debt that was incurred for these projects. What is

therefore needed in India is to calculate how much capex is truly needed and of what kind.

Governments spend on capex for two reasons: To stimulate growth and to meet the needs of the economy. Let's address the second criterion first. Infrastructure in India is definitely a problem that needs to be solved. But not all at once. Since the pandemic, the government's capex spending has been growing at an average annual rate of 30 per cent. It is not obvious that this pace needs to be increased, or even sustained. On the contrary, recent developments demonstrate that the speed of construction — and focus on new projects, rather than maintenance — has serious downsides.

In addition, not all capex is essential for growth. For example, using Rs 1.6 lakh crore to revitalise telecom MTNL and ISNL is surely not critical, especially when affordable cell-phone services are being provided throughout the country by private operators. Likewise, it is not obvious that spending lakhs of crores on bullet trains can be justified in a country whose per capita income is less than \$2,500.

Regarding the first criterion, we have to ask the question again: Why does the government need to stimulate an economy that is doing so well? Given the strong economic performance, it should instead use the surplus dividend from the RBI to bring the fiscal deficit down closer to three per cent.

There is, however, a caveat to this discussion. And this relates to the true state of the Indian economy. What if the economy is actually weaker than what the 7-8 per cent growth figures suggest? Then there may be a case for the government to keep spending to support the economy.

There seems to be a lack of consensus on this fundamental point. If the economy is not doing very well, then we should not be surprised if the budget uses the surplus dividend to announce a further increase in infrastructure spending.

The writer is Associate Professor of Economics, IGIDR

ANSWER IS A QUESTION BANK

It can address problem of paper leaks, ensure transparency in evaluation process



VINAY SAHASRABUDDHDE

THE NDA GOVERNMENT has rightly appointed a committee under the leadership of Koppilalli Radhakrishnan, former chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to "make recommendations on reforming the mechanism of the examination process and improving data security protocols and the structure and functioning of NTA (National Testing Agency)". It was also courageous of the Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to bite the bullet and unhesitatingly cancel the UGC-NET examination after investigations unearthed some wrongdoings.

The obvious question is: "What next?" The answer lies in the NEP 2020. It clearly "aims to transform the nature of learning assessments from one that is summative and primarily tests rote memorisation skills to one that is: More regular and formative, more competency-based, and one that tests higher-order skills, such as analysis, critical thinking, and conceptual clarity." Critics must note that it is already a part of the agenda of the Ministry of Education.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, in its 336th report in 2021 had also taken note of some key challenges in the conduct of public examinations. It stated that "even after several decades, many State Universities regularly fail smooth and flawless conduct of examinations. Instances like question paper leak, administering a wrong question paper, confusion about seating arrangements and examination centre, rampant cases of copying, framing questions that are out of syllabi, wrong examiners being appointed for assessment and student-exam-

iner nexus etc are still not uncommon." Its report also said that "The Committee recommends that the parameter of the Institution's exam management competency be also considered as a mandatory norm towards consideration of accreditation. The NTAEC and NTA should award marks/grades to such universities/institutes who conduct examinations smoothly." The recommendation to look into the "experiments like the Question Bank system" besides incentivising "adoption of complete digitisation of the examination process by institutes/universities to ensure fair and timely conduct of examination and declaration of results, amongst others" is noteworthy.

The Question Bank system provides a solution to several issues. When a question bank providing a category-wise pool of questions is provided to the students at the beginning of an academic year, the element of secrecy vanishes. Professional wrongdoers out to leak a question paper also lose their "business". With likely questions already in the public, all that is left to the agencies conducting examinations is a draw of specific serial numbers of questions to be made a part of the question paper, limited to a specific examination centre.

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The Question Bank system provides a solution to several issues. When a question bank providing a category-wise pool of questions is provided to the students at the beginning of an academic year, the element of secrecy vanishes. Professional wrongdoers out to leak a question paper also lose their "business". With likely questions already in the public, all that is left to the agencies conducting examinations is a draw of specific serial numbers of questions to be made a part of the question paper, limited to a specific examination centre. Rules should provide for total rejection of the answer sheet when an examinee attempts questions not earmarked for his respective examination centre. When public examinations are conducted through this Question Bank system, issues like question paper leak, framing of out-of-syllabus questions or administering a wrong question paper, etc. can be eliminated and foul-play or cheating tendencies nipped in the bud.

The Question Bank system potentially provides one-stop solution to many challenges. It curbs the tendency of preparing for specific questions, ignoring the need to grasp a subject holistically. Also, with the question bank already made public, no teacher can enjoy the liberty of not covering portions of the syllabus. If one chooses to have questions with different chronological number(s) for every other student, the question of copying and related unfair practices may not arise at all.

The larger question is of the woefully inadequate supply of human resources to provide leadership to our educational institutions, not just universities but also colleges and schools. It is high time we deliberate upon the advisability of evolving an independent centre, an Indian Education Service. This may help some amount of quality control and perhaps, provide filling to institution-building in the present-day context. It is time to recognise the urgency and importance of evolving independent courses in school management, college management and also university management. If such courses are introduced, a few years later, we can have varsity VCs and registrars who have a Masters in University Management besides having a doctorate in their own discipline.

Trust in the system and guarantee of transparency, fairness and justice are the mainstays of any evaluation system. The introduction of question banks, evolving alternate evaluation systems and incubating institutional leadership will ensure that this trust remains intact.

The writer is former president, Indian Council for Cultural Relations and a BJP leader

JULY 4, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

VALLEY UNDER CURFEW

FOLLOWING THE DRAMA which led to the dismissal of Farooq Abdullah's ministry, there seems to prevail an uneasy calm in the Kashmir Valley. An informal curfew is in place in Srinagar and other towns in the Valley. The capital is under the watchful eyes of the CRPF, the Border Security Force and men from the MP Armed Police. The army is being kept on alert for any summons from authorities.

J&K's New Deputy CM

IN THE NEW 15-member ministry headed by G M Shah in Jammu and Kashmir, D D

Thakur has been appointed the Deputy Chief Minister. Thakur, who had previously headed departments of finance and law in Sheikh Abdullah's Cabinet, will be in charge of finance, planning and development, besides power development and labour.

AKAL TAKHT DAMAGE

THE ARMY MAY be withdrawn from Harmandir Sahib if tension due to its presence in the Golden Temple complex materialises. Government is keen to commence repair work in the Akal Takht and other damaged portions during the Army action. Arrangements for "kar seva" are demanded

by some from the Sikh community. However, a start could not be made as a demand was put forth for the withdrawal of the Army before the seva started.

FLOODS RAGE ON

FLOODS IN MAHARASHTRA continued unabated while the situation improved in West Bengal. The death toll in Maharashtra rose to six in the last two days while the rain-fed rivers, especially in the Konkan region continued to be in spate. Official sources in Bombay said the Shastri, Vashisti, and Jagbadi rivers in the Konkan region and Doodhaganga river in the Kolhapur district were overflowing.

THE IDEAS PAGE

A switch in the House

Two contrasting speeches in the 18th Lok Sabha, by the Leader of Opposition and the Prime Minister, show that myths have no monopolists



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

THE KISHKINDHA KAND section of the Ramayana narrates the story of Ram slaying the formidable monkey king Vali, son of Indra and elder brother to Sugriva. Vali had pursued an *asura* into a cave, commanding Sugriva to wait at its mouth. After a long period of waiting, as blood flows out of the cave, Sugriva assumes that his brother has been killed. He returns to the kingdom of Kishkindha and is crowned king. It was Vali, however, who had killed the *asura* and on his return to Kishkindha, accused Sugriva of betrayal and usurpation. Sugriva is driven away and subjected to many indignities at Vali's hands. Sugriva and Ram forge a friendship and the aggrieved brother asks his friend to avenge himself by killing Vali. Ram suggests that Sugriva challenges his brother to a battle, and Vali would then meet his end at his hands. A battle ensues, Sugriva is easily bested by Vali but no arrow leaves Ram's bow.

Sugriva is puzzled. Ram explains that he was unable to fire his arrow, as both Sugriva and Vali look alike and he was afraid of killing the wrong person. Ram asks Lakshman to make a garland of the *gajraj* creeper and put it around Sugriva's neck, to distinguish him from his brother. Sugriva once again challenges Vali who, naturally, accepts. This time the arrow from Ram's bow finds its target — piercing Vali's chest.

To deal with our fears, the story suggests, we must first identify them and articulate their presence. There is a middle-aged, t-shirt-donning politician who deployed the symbolism of fear in a Parliamentary speech, which suggests that he has learnt a thing or two about the potency of speaking about overcoming it. Politicians are neither gods nor *asuras*, but political success is as dependent on the here and the now as on deploying mythologies that move us. But two parliamentary speeches — one by the Leader of the Opposition and the other by the Prime Minister, are instructive in what they tell us about the peculiar nature of political symbolism after what can be considered a setback for the ruling party in the recent elections.

Let us start with Rahul Gandhi's manner of naming fear to — after his own fashion — counter it. In what must be considered an extraordinary departure from convention and tradition for a leader of the Congress, Rahul Gandhi's key strategy was to invoke a religious imaginary as the context for the re-fashioning of an opposition voice. He marshalled a variety of religious figures — Gurus Nanak, Jesus Christ, Shiva — in his cause. The visage of the Lord of Dance made multiple appearances — albeit interrupted by human forces — in the parliamentary building. However, as Gandhi repeatedly flourished an image of the “destroyer” of the Hindu trinity, human limbs that may have been directed to alter camera angles could not erase the meanings that were sought to be conveyed.

The Prime Minister responded the next day. The beatific smile sported by the Speaker of the House could not, however, disguise the uncharacteristically this-worldly response by Narendra Modi. Quite in contrast to Gandhi, the opening lines of Modi's speech referred to Indian history and the Indian people. This, from a political leader whose key electoral and political strategy has been the invocation of myths, including how “ancient” values and achievements continue to guide and make



C R Sasikumar

contemporary India a unique society. Rather than casting his arguments in the language of a direct connection with divinity, the PM presented comparisons and metaphors from everyday life. The Congress, he noted, is like the small child who has been injured in a bicycle accident and is being mollified that it's not such a terrible tragedy. The Congress deploys a mythical mode and the BJP a factual one to make sense of their respective post-election advantages. And the Speaker smiled away, whether in comprehension or bemusement, is not clear. Perhaps he had some sense of the epic — Ramayanic — proportions of the drama unfolding before him.

Let us now turn to another aspect of the two speeches. An important way in which Gandhi sought to make what might otherwise have been an entirely abstract idea — fear — into a concrete reality was through excerpts from conversations with those, he said, he had met on different occasions. There was the woman who spoke of being beaten by her husband as she was unable to prevent a delicate enough meal because of inflation; the family of the Agriworker who feared destitution because their son had lost his life and little or no compensation might be forthcoming; the fear expressed by a Manipuri woman at the possible future of her region; and the stories articulated by young women and men who had suffered in the recent NEET fiasco. Perhaps, most provocatively, he spoke of the fear within the BJP where dissent he said, is severely punished.

The PM responded — with an unprecedented chorus of the Opposition's sloganeering in the background, including exhorting the PM to “have shame” — by quoting “facts and figures”: It was notable that Modi did not di-

The Prime Minister responded the next day. The beatific smile sported by the Speaker of the House could not, however, disguise the uncharacteristically this-worldly response by Narendra Modi. Quite in contrast to Gandhi, the opening lines of Modi's speech referred to Indian history and the Indian people. This, from a political leader whose key electoral and political strategy has been the invocation of myths, including how “ancient” values and achievements continue to guide and make contemporary India a unique society. Rather than cast his arguments in the language of a direct connection with divinity, the PM presented comparisons and metaphors from everyday life.

rectly refute Gandhi's invocation of fear as the dominant motif of BJP governance. He spoke of the Supreme Court's warnings against the threats to nationhood — the Opposition's sloganeering now echoed with “we want justice” — and the “warning” he was now offering to the Congress to not obstruct the country's path to progress and development. The Opposition's “anti-national conspiracies” that obstructed the very development that was happening in the country, he declared, would be unequivocally countered. A politician whose political mastery lies in presenting certain possibilities that may otherwise remain at the level of abstraction — fear, anxiety, unease, hostility — as concrete facts, had become the purveyor of facts and figures. On the other hand, the Congress' key representative — who has unsuccessfully relied on “facts and figures” as a political strategy — now has recourse to the potency of mythological ideas.

We are now in a moment where the mythical narratives — of ancient glories and moral superiority — through which the dominant party had cast the efficacy and truth-value of its governance strategy have become ragged. There is the exhaustion of repetition, with repetition depleting the original power of the narrative. Simultaneously, the Leader of the Opposition has discovered that myths have no monopolists, and their potency lies in developing the appropriate languages of invocation.

Perhaps, the Speaker was expressing some mixture of bemusement and concern at the turn of events.

The writer is British Academy Global Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The New Popular Front's program should be considered a pragmatic, socially democratic set of proposals aimed at reducing inequalities and preparing for the future. There is nothing radical in this agenda.” — THE GUARDIAN

Nine internal security challenges

Because a country projects its strength at the international level in direct proportion to its internal cohesion



PRAKASH SINGH

THE DUST of elections has settled. The NDA government is firmly in the saddle. The Prime Minister has a formidable list of achievements to his credit. At the international level, India has prestige, which it probably has never had since Independence. Our economy is on an upswing. China has, for the first time, realised that it can no longer bully India and beyond a point, India would not shrink from a bloody confrontation.

The government should have a well-orchestrated plan for the next five years. On internal security, the following nine points should merit serious attention.

One, internal security doctrine. Ideally, the country should have a national security doctrine (NSD). The National Security Advisory Board has, from time to time, worked on it and prepared drafts. Those were never approved. All significant powers have an NSD through which they describe the internal and external challenges facing the country and prescribe policies for dealing with them. If there are any problems in developing the NSD, its internal security component at least, which is simpler, could be worked out. There is too much ad hocism in dealing with internal security challenges, especially with a change in government.

Two, Internal Security Ministry. The Ministry of Home Affairs has become much too heavy and unwieldy. Internal security matters, which demand immediate attention, quite often do not get the prompt and thorough attention they deserve. It is high time that a young, junior minister working in the MHA is given independent charge of internal security. Rajesh Pilot showed what a difference such an arrangement can make.

Three, Jammu and Kashmir. The state is far from normal despite the Home Minister's claim that terror incidents are down by 66 per cent since the abrogation of Article 370. Terrorists recently struck at four places in the Jammu region. Obviously, they are desperate to end the separatist narrative of “Naya Kashmir”. We cannot be complacent about the objectives of the Pakistani deep state. The government must take early steps to reorganise the security grid, restore statehood to J&K and hold elections for the Assembly.

Four, the Northeast. The Prime Minister has called the Northeast “a piece of our heart”. The beating of the heart is unfortunately not healthy. A Framework Agreement signed with the rebel Nagas in 2015 had raised great hopes, but these remain unfulfilled because of the NSCN (IM)'s insistence on a separate flag and constitution. The government should meanwhile insist on rigorous implementation of the suspension of operations agreement and ensure that the rebels do not engage in extortion and forcible recruitments. Manipur has been a disaster. Ethnic conflicts continue to simmer with occasional outbreaks of violence. The Home Ministry's formation of a multi-ethnic peace committee has not been productive; it is time for the PM to take charge of the situation himself. The problems of illegal migration, drug trafficking and arms smuggling would require a

comprehensive approach.

Five, the Naxal problem. The Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, in a statement made in the Rajya Sabha on February 7, claimed that the implementation of the “national policy and action plan” had resulted in a consistent decline in violence and shrinkage of the geographical spread of left-wing extremists' (LWE) influence. Violence and the resultant deaths had declined by 73 per cent from a high in 2010. Rai further stated that the number of police stations reporting LWE-related violence had come down from 465 police stations across 96 districts in 2010 to 171 police stations across 42 districts in 2023. So far, so good. With Naxals on the backfoot, it is now time for the healing touch. The government should offer them the olive branch, declare a unilateral ceasefire for a month, persuade them to come to the negotiating table, address their genuine grievances, and bring them into the mainstream.

Six, Intelligence Bureau/CBI. The two premier central police organisations, the Intelligence Bureau and the CBI, require restructuring. The IB was set up through an administrative order on December 23, 1887. It is high time that it is given a statutory basis, with safeguards to prevent the misuse of intelligence to bolster the party in power. The CBI was set up through a resolution passed on April Fools' Day in 1963, and it derives the power to investigate from the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946. It is an anomalous arrangement and, as recommended in the 24th report of the parliamentary committee, “the need of the hour is to strengthen the CBI in terms of legal mandate, infrastructure and resources”.

Seven, state police. The Prime Minister wants the PMO to function as the People's PMO. Indeed, it should! But of greater value and more relevance would be the transformation of the “Ruler's Police” that we have inherited from the British into the “People's Police”. Robert Peel, former British prime minister, is remembered to this day for having reformed the country's police. It is a great opportunity and also a challenge for our Prime Minister.

Eight, Central Armed Police Forces. The CAPFs with an overall strength of more than a million are beset with serious internal problems of unplanned expansion, haphazard deployment, inadequate training, falling standards of discipline and criteria for the selection of top officers, friction between cadre and All India Service officers, etc. The government would do well to appoint a high-powered commission to go into these problems for their long-term solution.

Nine, technology. There is enormous scope for technological inputs into the functioning of police in the country. These inputs would act as force multipliers. As suggested by the PM at the DGPs' conference held in Lucknow in 2021, there is a need to set up a high-powered technology mission to recommend the adoption of the latest tech for the new challenges which the police are facing or are likely to face in the future.

A country projects its strength at the international level in direct proportion to its internal cohesion. Its ability to resolve differences between human rights abuses in India, especially against minorities and in Kashmir. Meanwhile, India has been unhappy with the surge in pro-Khalistan sentiments in the UK. How the Labour balances these factors could determine the future of India-UK relations.

The writer was formerly Director General of BSF, DGP UP and DGP Assam

Rights of the new worker

Karnataka bill provides framework to bring gig work into regulatory ambit of labour



YAMEENA ZAIDI AND ANUPAM GUHA

ON JUNE 29, the government of Karnataka released the Karnataka Platform-Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2024 inviting public suggestions. If passed, this would make Karnataka the second Indian state, after Rajasthan, with legislation for gig workers. This draft bill has the potential to extend to gig workers key rights that the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 failed to provide.

One criticism of the Rajasthan law is that it does not acknowledge the expanding view of various legal and economic scholars like Evgeny Morozov, Moritz Altenried, and Julia Tomasetti who argue that platform-based gig work is employment while courts in the Netherlands acknowledging that the drivers and platforms have a “modern employer-employee relationship” while courts in the UK and Spain consider associates “workers” but have not stated that the employer is the platform. The Rajasthan law does neither, it does not consider the plat-

form worker an employee or the platform the employer, but declares a separate category called “gig worker”, which it does not define in how it differs from that work. The Karnataka bill while continuing to refer to platform companies as “intermediaries” does provide a clearer definition of gig-workers and creates mechanisms for a formal contract between platform companies and workers. Details of what this contract will look like remain unanswered. This potentially provides an enabling framework to bring platform-based gig work into the regulatory ambit of labour.

One concrete issue plaguing gig workers is that their employers, the platform companies, arbitrarily and often terminate their access to the platform, in effect, terminating their jobs. Since these companies refuse to acknowledge they are employers, this is framed as blocking access to a service. The Karnataka bill draft refuses the platform companies, arbiters of what this contract will look like remain unanswered. This potentially provides an enabling framework to bring platform-based gig work into the regulatory ambit of labour.

This bill also expands the role of the welfare board beyond overseeing the disbursement of social security, to include consultation with gig-worker associations and empowers the board to make social security schemes for women and people with disabilities. Thus, the draft accepts the socialised nature of platform-based gig work

instead of an atomised transaction between a service provider and an “associate”. It creates a grievance redressal mechanism for gig workers; however, they can only be raised about provisions of the draft bill. It however mandates that gig-workers be compensated on at least a weekly basis. Notably, the draft bill states that gig-workers have the right to raise disputes through the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 and therefore in an indirect, however significant, manner empowers them to make use of existing Indian labour laws and potentially brings gig workers out of regulatory lacuna. These developments indicate that even indirectly, the draft bill brings collective bargaining for gig workers back on the agenda and reflects the impact of the growing strength of gig worker unions in India. For platform-based gig workers, this is a promising development, though the recognition of gig work as employment remains to be won.

Zaidi studies at Simon Fraser University and Guha is assistant professor at Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A FALSE CLAIM

THIS REFERS TO the article, “Attack on RSS is a self-goal” (IE, July 3). The article argues that Rahul Gandhi's attack on Hindutva in his Parliament speech is a product of pseudo-secularism is unwarranted. Claims that the RSS is not political are unconvincing since it's the BJP's parent organisation. However, no other political party has the RSS's reach. Its avowed objective of Hinduisation post the Mughal era to enable Hindus to regain their cultural identity and liberate them from a victim complex, raises a pertinent point about the need to reconcile caste inequalities.

I R Murmu, New Delhi

JUSTICE CALLS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “Syndicate vs law” (IE, July 2). The incidents of brutality reflect a stifled approach in a civilised society. Law must take its course and administer justice. Time and again, we witness such horrendous clashes, yet there's no straight jacket formula to prevent it. We need a strong-hold on the bureaucratic setup to maintain law and order across the nation.

Rajesh Raj, New Delhi

INDIA-UK TIES RESET

THIS REFERS TO the article, “Delhi & a new London” (IE, July 3). Days before the UK vote, it sent important signals suggesting that it wants to reset relations with India. The Labour Party is likely to come to power. Its outreach bodies well for London-Dehli ties. Under the former leader, Jeremy Corbyn, the party criticised alleged human rights abuses in India, especially against minorities and in Kashmir. Meanwhile, India has been unhappy with the surge in pro-Khalistan sentiments in the UK. How the Labour balances these factors could determine the future of India-UK relations.

SS Paul, Nadia

OPPOSITION'S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “The first battle won” (IE, June 2). As strong Opposition to a democracy facilitates effective and relevant debate. This election legitimised a strong opposition. This should be utilised by both the Opposition and the ruling party to actively participate in debates rather than chasing personal vendettas. Opposition parties should try to focus on issues of people's welfare.

Harish Rao, Hyderabad

OUR VIEW



Adani-Hindenburg saga: Side roles come to light?

Short-seller Kingdon and a Kotak set-up fund are in the arc-lights of this market drama. The general lesson, though, is that high-profile listed companies ought to be widely held

The list of *dramatis personae* in the drama that unfolded after Hindenburg's report of 24 January 2023 on the Adani Group has grown. Online searches for 'Kingdon Capital Management' and 'Kotak India Opportunities Fund Class F' surged this week on news of the American short-seller's reaction to a show-cause notice sent by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). The market regulator had dubbed Hindenburg's report sensationalist, asking it to explain its allegedly unfair efforts to profit from a crash in Adani stocks that followed its allegations of fraud, stock manipulation and more, all of which were denied by Adani even as the market value of its listed firms shrank. Kingdon, a US-based hedge fund, was named by Sebi's notice as Hindenburg's sole investor. Its role? It began betting against Adani shares a fortnight before that report was published. In its public response, Hindenburg accepted Kingdon as an "investor partner," but sought to highlight the role played by Kotak Mahindra Bank in setting up an off-shore fund—a 'Class F' spinoff of an existing fund—that was used by the hedge fund for acts of short-selling under Sebi's scanner. This has dragged yet another name into a story that has kept market watchers agog for over 17 months.

Do these actors merit a spotlight in the long arc of the Adani-Hindenburg saga? To distance itself from controversy, Kotak has denied foreknowledge of Kingdon's link with Hindenburg and of the latter's report. The bank said it did not know that the US hedge fund would act on the basis of price-sensitive information, given that it had confirmed it would operate solely by what was publicly known. Kotak's Class F unit was a shell company registered in March 2022

and bought by Kingdon in December that year. According to Sebi's timeline, the US hedge fund purchased it about a month after getting a draft of the Hindenburg report that would batter Adani stocks. Since Sebi was probing a market bout of short-selling, it had good reason to focus on the actual sellers—or direct profit makers—more than their investment vehicles. Unless evidence emerges of Kotak collusion with Kingdon, it is the latter's association with events that's far more likely to endure.

The story isn't over. Sebi was asked last year by the Supreme Court to investigate not just proximate causes of the volatility in Adani stocks (which have largely recovered since), but also to probe the Adani Group in the context of Hindenburg's allegations. This January, the court said that most aspects of Adani's conduct had been looked into by Sebi and its investigation "inspired confidence," but two parts were pending, as Sebi awaited inputs from foreign regulators to conclude the process. While we await this conclusion, a larger lesson from the episode can still be drawn. Recall that Adani stocks saw steep drops even before Hindenburg took centre-stage, with those investor jitters attributed to the companies' allegedly unclear compliance with Sebi's 25% free-float rule, seen as exposing them to distortive swings in market value. In general, markets for such assets work best when they have sufficient depth of trading, with a sizeable volume of stocks being bought and sold daily at prices determined by a wide interaction of demand and supply. The more widely a firm's equity is held, the better its share price captures its true value, thanks to a broader blend of views. It would serve everyone well if all high-profile listed companies took note. It would make stock-rigging charges hard to level.

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE

Residents of ultra-slums should have access to welfare provisions

Food, water, health and education are basic needs that nobody living in India should be deprived of



ANURAG BEHAR
is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

live nearby believe that the shanties house hooch-makers, drug-peddlers and other petty criminals. But if you do not judge from the high banks and brave a descent into the gorge, you will meet the typical poverty-stricken Indian. A labourer, traffic signal-vendor or a beggar, doing what it takes to survive. There must be a few criminals amid them, but unlikely to be any more than in the swanky high-rises that are visible from parts of that gorge.

Why do these families live there? Because nobody chases them away. Not the police, not land sharks, not even the good Samaritans who want to keep the city clean. The sewer is their sanctuary. Anywhere else in the city—under a fly-over, on footpaths, beside a railway line, or anywhere else—someone or the other bounds them because land is gold in the city. But why live there at all? Because back in their villages, they can't even eke out that one meal that fend off starvation.

Majestic is the expanse of our holiest river. It is visible from that elevated highway. Its waters are not like the sewer's, but the devout likely tread sin for disease when they wash in it. The water is clean, but its banks are not—even a thousand kilometres upstream at one of the country's sacred pilgrimage centres. From another gleaming highway, we can see muck-laden banks with familiar plastic-metal-wood shanties. Poverty chased the inhabitants of these out of their villages, but no one chases them off these mucky banks, so long as they voluntarily vacate every time a *melao* or fair is held, major or minor. A piety-fuelled construction boom in the vicinity gives them some daily-wage work. Or at least they have the safety net of alms from the everyday thousands who come to take a dip in the holy river.

Children don't go to school, neither from the sewer zone, nor from the mucky banks. They are not given admission, and if they are, it's too dangerous to cross the busy railway line or highway. Families don't have ration-

cards—which means they have no access to the public distribution system of grains. Most have no documents to access India's public health schemes. Water to drink is a daily struggle and acquiring it takes away their earnings or work-hours or both. Temples are out of bounds. Births are fraught, with no access to the public health system, and private delivery unimagnably beyond reach. Death demands funeral dignity, often resulting in a slide deeper into poverty for family members left alive.

Two thousand kilometres south of this place of pilgrimage, from another spanking highway hugging another drain of urban waste, one can see a series of the same plastic-metal-wood shanties. It's just another mid-sized city, where the precarity of livelihood is less (if only infinitesimally so) than in their villages, yet sufficient to offer them the hope of a higher chance of survival. Which is the case across all our cities, and why these shanties are everywhere.

What was once a phenomenon of our large cities has spread to most small and mid-sized urban centres. But these are not slums. Perhaps ultra-slums, much further down the precipice of life. If we don't create enough decent jobs and livelihood opportunities, and ensure they're distributed evenly across India, the core problem will not be addressed. It doesn't appear that we know how to do that, not only as a nation but even globally. Acknowledging that we don't know may be a start for the kind of deep efforts that are required on every dimension—from research and policy to action on the ground and business.

But this doesn't mean that in the meanwhile we don't do the most basic of things for the poorest of our people. If we can have high-speed highways for our cars, why should they not have food, water, basic health and education? We have welfare systems for most of these, but residents of ultra-slums have almost no access to them. We must change that. Sewers need not be sanctuaries for fellow citizens.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.

JOSEPH JOUBERT

GUEST VIEW

Parliamentary debates form the essence of democracy

SANJEEV KHOKHAR



is deputy secretary in the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, Parliament of India.

The just-concluded general elections have once again proven the vitality of Indian democracy. The democratic process has established that the democratic institutions of this country are more than capable of giving all sections of society a voice, especially the marginalized. With the formation of a new government, parliamentary processes have kicked in. With that, the formal process of political communication between electors and the elected has also begun. Parliamentary debates are an important element of this. Elected representatives of the people make their position on various issues official by engaging in debates on the floor of the two Houses of Parliament.

There is no denying the fact that in this day-and-age of electronic media, both conventional and social, there is no dearth of instruments available for political messaging. This has led some political commentators to question the relevance of parliamentary debates. They contend that these often repeat what has already been said in the

public sphere by political campaigners, party spokespersons and Members of Parliament (MPs), and there is nothing new that these debates offer in terms of either political positions or information. They also question the 'deliberative effect' of such debates, since instances of a climbdown or revision of a previously-held position by an opponent in the light of what German political thinker Jurgen Habermas called "the better argument" are few and far between.

This might be true to an extent, as parliamentary debates are no paragons of Habermasian virtue—which aims for an 'ideal Speech Situation', where participants are swayed by reason and reason alone. Politics being 'essentially contested,' such a situation is neither feasible nor desirable. But what such opinions ignore is the unique ability of parliamentary debates not only to provide a multi-perspective view on political issues, but also impart authenticity to the positions taken by national political players by making them official. This kind of validity is not available to expressions and assertions of a political stance in other mediums such as the news media. Positions taken in Parliament are what act as a record for the electorate to assess the conduct of political representatives. In the absence of such clarity, it

would be difficult for the electorate to evaluate their work and vote accordingly. Statements and assertions made elsewhere, though important, do not serve as concrete indicators to help a voter reward or punish a representative. Moreover, political statements and assertions made by political players elsewhere run the risk of being lost amid vast waves of media messages.

As for the other purpose of parliamentary debates, critics are not entirely off the mark when they say that these discussions are not deliberative, as they neither influence opponents to revise their positions, nor help in reaching a consensus. Critics argue that such debates are almost entirely strategic and thus partisan in nature, and that their real aim is to influence the electorate outside the House rather than help make better legislative decisions within Parliament, which is anyway done by voting on motions. In other words, numbers rather than arguments determine enactments. This view, though largely true in its observa-

tions, underestimates the beneficial effects of such debates on the country's electorate despite their partisan nature.

Politics is a contest for political power, and, by presenting an all-round perspective on a political issue and reflecting all shades of opinion across the political spectrum, parliamentary debates help voters make up their mind. This is essential to democracy, which demands not just voting but 'informed voting' for it to function as well as envisaged.

Observers might also contend that these debates, though televised, are not keenly followed by the larger electorate and therefore the idea that they are educative is far-fetched. In response to this, it can be said that important debates that matter more are widely shown on air by various news channels and also widely reported. The sharp political positions taken in these debates are also disseminated to voters at large through press conferences and political speeches. In short, what is important in these debates for the electorate

somehow reaches it, directly or indirectly, helping voters decide their preferences.

Just as Parliament is the most visible symbol of our democracy, parliamentary debates are the most obvious examples of 'democracy in action.' In the words of James De Mille, "A parliamentary debate, when carried on by able men, is one of the finest exhibitions of the powers of the human mind that can be witnessed." Thinkers like Habermas observe that a communicative society is much better placed to resolve its conflicts than a non-communicative one, as the former provides institutional structures for flagging issues and raising concerns as well as discussing and resolving them.

Houses of Parliament are core sites of deliberation where national issues can be discussed and solutions found through argument. To paraphrase Robert E. Goodin, talking is a good 'discovery procedure,' while voting is a good 'decision procedure,' and talking before voting is always good for democracy. What makes Parliament unique is its special ability to combine elements of aggregation and deliberation that can confer higher political legitimacy on participants.

For all these reasons, we must give parliamentary debates their due and remain hopeful that we will have plenty of them.

They keep voters in the loop of formal positions taken and also foster deliberative law-making



| MY VIEW | UNCOMMON SENSE

MINT CURATOR

Get your meetings right: Time is too valuable a business resource

A goal-oriented and value-maximizing approach to meetings can help leaders boost the productivity of their organizations



HARSH MARIWALA & ABHEEK SINGHI

are, respectively, founder and chairman of Marico, and the chair of practices at Boston Consulting Group India.

Time is the most scarce resource for any leader, influencing not only her individual performance but also the organization's culture and strategic direction. Leaders, therefore, must be strategic in how they spend their time—with themselves, and in one-on-one as well as group meetings. Time alone allows leaders to both respond and react, but more importantly, step back, reflect and strategize. Some CEOs, for instance, block off parts of their day to focus on these solo tasks, recognizing the importance of uninterrupted time for high-level thinking.

Meetings are a significant component of a leader's time expenditure. One Harvard study showed that CEOs spent 72% of their total work time in meetings, while another MIT Sloan article concluded that the average executive spends about 50% of his or her time in meetings. At the same time, whether it is in the sitcom *The Office* or Dilbert cartoons, or in our conversations, there is a clear view that many group meetings are run poorly. This article focuses on what could help improve the effectiveness of meetings.

Meetings are essential for decision-making, aligning a team and fostering collaboration. However, to be effective, group meetings need to be well-structured. This includes having a clear agenda, defined objectives and ensuring the right people are in attendance. Avoiding unnecessary presentations and focusing on dialogue and decision-making can make them productive.

But even before getting to 'how best to run a meeting,' we think it is important to answer two key questions.

The first is whether there should be a meeting at all, or can the objective be met through an empowered individual (with inputs from others) or even in a group setting via email? This is even more relevant for recurring meetings, which start off with the right intention but then inertia takes over.

The second is clarity on the desired objective of the meeting—it is to generate ideas, challenge solutions, take decisions, seek alignment or communicate with a broader group? Meetings can be set for any of these, but there needs to be clarity on what outcome is expected.

It is crucial to implement structured processes to increase meeting effectiveness. Based on our experience across organizations, there are seven practical principles that can help leaders run meetings more effectively.

Define the agenda sharply: This is easier said than done but the most important step nonetheless. Clearly outline the meeting's objectives. Distribute necessary material in advance to allow every participant to come prepared. This can save time and lead to more meaningful contributions and outcomes.



Deliberate participation: Invite only those who can contribute value or benefit from the discussion. This helps keep the meeting focused and prevents it from becoming unwieldy. Tesla's chief Elon Musk has gone one step further; he suggests that those who feel they are not contributing enough should leave the meeting.

Avoid PowerPoint presentations: Use the meeting time for discussion and decision-making, rather than lengthy presentations. This approach keeps participants engaged and the conversation dynamic. In a previous article, we talked about the famous Amazon memo that everyone reads at the start of a meeting—rather than sit through a presentation—for discussions to be held on it.

Insist on punctuality: Start meetings on time to respect everyone's schedule. Turning up late for meetings (regularly) indicates either lack of control and/or disrespect for others' time, neither of which is a trait one would look for in a leader. We know of some organizations that implement penalties on latecomers, if necessary, to discourage tardiness. But, ultimately, it is the leader (or the one chairing the meeting) who must lead by example.

Encourage balanced participation: Ensure that all voices are heard and not just the dominant ones. The chairperson should facilitate a wide discussion, giving quieter members an opportunity to speak. In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain makes a powerful case for listening to introverts.

Summarize key points: At the end of the meeting, recap the main points and decisions. This ensures clarity and alignment on the next steps. While well begun may be half done, true value is realized only when there is action and follow-through.

Actionable minutes: Record minutes of the meeting in a format that clearly states 'who' will do 'what' and 'when' (the VWW format). Circulate these minutes within two days of the meeting to maintain momentum and accountability in the group. For a recurring meeting, start by reviewing the previous meeting's action items, as this helps ensure that previous decisions are acted upon.

Implementing all these practices can transform meetings from time sinks into valuable sessions that drive decisions and align strategies. As leaders strive to manage their most precious resource, time, running meetings effectively becomes a critical skill. By adopting a disciplined approach to time management in pursuit of organizational goals, leaders can enhance their own productivity as well as the overall performance of their organizations.

Citigroup's climate sensitivity made it a target for protestors

Companies that make progress tend to attract even more protests



BETH KOWITZ
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering corporate America.



Environmental protests are often aimed at firms that are expected to listen. **BLOOMBERG**

Employees at Citigroup's New York headquarters are facing multiple indignities. Not only does a growing contingent now have to be back in office full time, but to get to their desks, they must walk through a throng of protestors who have been camped outside the bank for much of June. Activists are calling the campaign the "Summer of Heat," vowing to show up outside Citi "week after week" and "month after month" to protest its funding of the fossil fuel industry. The protests have gotten so disruptive that Citi put out a statement Wednesday advising employees "to keep our cool" and "avoid engaging."

You might think Citi ended up in the spotlight because it's the worst offender in the financial sector. The bank is far from it. Citi is the sixth-largest provider of loans to oil, gas and coal since the 2015 Paris agreement, according to analysis by Bloomberg News, and its fossil fuel lending has steadily declined in recent years; so far in 2024, it's the 12th biggest provider of loans to the fossil fuel sector.

Citi's progress is likely what in part made it a target. It has shown that it cares about its sustainability reputation and the activist group is capitalizing on that. Protesters have said as much, noting on their website that they are going after Citi because "we know we can push them to do the right thing." On her first day as Citi CEO in 2021, Jane Fraser said the company would reach net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions in its financing activities by 2050, and has committed \$1 trillion for financing sustainability efforts by 2030.

Researchers call it the "target enhancing effect": Companies investing in climate action or other social initiatives are attractive targets for activists. Charlotte Moore, managing director at Sigwatt, which tracks and collects data on activism directed at corporations, told me people are always surprised to learn that the most targeted energy company is not Exxon Mobil or Saudi Aramco. Rather it's usually a European firm like Shell or TotalEnergies, because they are willing to change or be seen as changing. "The idea is that you get a lead company in the space to move on something, it changes the industry expectations and consumer expectations and everyone else has to fall in line," she says.

There are limits to how effective this kind of pressure can be. Researchers have found that the best-performing companies from an environmental standpoint have very little incentive to do more because it only further raises this threat of environmental activism. And in general, Moore

told me applying public pressure "makes companies more reluctant to put their heads above the parapet." She adds: "If the move you make is seen as not good enough or genuine enough, then you do open yourself up to targeting and criticism." ESG politics has only gotten more complex. Not only are firms being attacked by activists on the left, they also face a backlash from the political right. Citi, for example, is among a group of banks that has been punished by Republican states for its "boycotting" of the fossil fuel industry and "discriminating" against the gun industry. These dynamics have shifted the peer effect that activists hope to exploit—the idea that top managers are more likely to take action if they see a competitor being targeted by activists.

Instead, companies have become even less eager to lead on these issues. CEOs are saying and doing even less on ESG and DEI out of fear that they will become a target of the anti-woke mob. The Walt Disney Company, for example, became a favourite punching bag for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis over its opposition to the state's Don't Say Gay Bill. Or take Target and Anheuser-Busch, which faced boycotts from conservative consumers for their LGBTQIA+ solidarity.

Over at Citi, it's turning into the "Summer of Heat" in more ways than one. Activists are attacking the bank at a delicate moment for its CEO. "The clock is ticking on Jane Fraser's Citigroup Turnaround," read a *Wall Street Journal* headline, with the piece noting that its profitability and stock performance are lagging behind its US rivals. The protests are giving Fraser a headache, which climate activists would argue is the whole point—disrupting business as usual to force companies to face such an urgent cause.

But in doing so, they risk making one of their allies even more vulnerable. The Summer-of-Heat crew should let things cool off at Citi and go light a match under a truly bad actor. Or better yet, consider switching tactics. In this charged environment, it may be more effective to work behind the scenes with companies that are ready to engage. As the "greenhushing" trend has shown, there are firms that are open to improving their policies, but don't want to talk about it. **BLOOMBERG**

| THEIR VIEW

Class action lawsuits are unicorn-like: Worthy but rare

SRINATH SRIDHARAN & SAKATE KHAITAN



are, respectively, a policy researcher and corporate advisor, and senior partner at Khaitan Legal Associates.

Class action suits in India are like unicorns—legendary, promising and rare. Provisions permitting class actions/representative actions existed in the statute book for over a century in the Code of Civil Procedure of 1908. Similar provisions have been incorporated in the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 and the Competition Act of 2002. Further, class action suits are often clothed as public interest litigation (PIL) under Articles 32 and 226 of the Constitution. However, none of these statutes specifically covered shareholders as a class.

In a landmark move, India introduced shareholder class action and derivative action lawsuits through Section 245 of the Companies Act of 2013. Surprisingly, for 11 years, this provision has remained largely theoretical, with only two cases—Jindal Poly Films and ICICI Securities Ltd—being filed.

A class-action suit, or representative action, allows a large group of people with similar interests to collectively bring a claim to court. This collective group is known as a

'class.' Class action suits have immense potential to protect minority shareholders, depositors and investors from corporate wrongdoers. Fighting as a class enables them to secure better legal representation, share litigation costs and pool their knowledge and experiences to build a strong case. In a country where lawsuits are expensive and lengthy, minority stakeholders are often at a disadvantage against the formidable legal and financial muscle of corporate houses. In such cases, a class action, backed by the strength of many, is likely to be taken seriously by businesses and courts.

The biggest challenge remains the high cost and slow pace of litigation, coupled with the apparent reluctance of Indian courts to award substantial damages and penalties.

Over the past few years, the Indian stock market has witnessed a significant influx of retail investors. This surge is complemented by an increasing number of businesses getting listed for their shares to be traded publicly. Shareholder activism, aimed at better corporate governance and involving the scrutiny of management actions, has been rising too. This usually happens when shareholders believe the company is being poorly run, potentially leading to financial losses or societal harm. Shareholders whose rights

have been infringed upon, or who believe the company is being managed in a way detrimental to their interests, may initiate a class action lawsuit. Such suits offer a vital remedy for breaches of minority-rights by enabling collective legal action against corporate misconduct. The existence of the provision, thus, promotes higher standards of transparency and accountability in corporate India.

While such lawsuits can help level the playing field, for them to be truly effective, the provisions for class action should include all categories of minority stakeholders affected by mismanagement.

Two amendments have allowed class action to inch forward. A 2016 amendment of the Companies Act simplified procedures and eligibility criteria for filing class action suits. In May 2019, new thresholds for defining a 'class' under Section 245 were notified. An eligible class can now comprise 5% of members holding 5% of the issued capital in an unlisted company or 2% of the issued capital in a listed company,

or 100 members, whichever count is lower. Similarly, 5% of the total number of depositors or total deposits, or 100 members, whichever is lower, would constitute a class. However, creating a pool of 100 is still a challenge. Borrowing from Western practices, India could further simplify these requirements.

For instance, the US does not insist on a minimum number to form a class; Australia requires only seven, while Canada permits a single shareholder to file an action. Introducing 'contingent fees' for lawyers, to be paid if the suit succeeds, would create an incentive for them to gather 100 persons for a class action. This would require deviation from the currently permitted remuneration structure

for lawyers, under which a contingent fee is not allowed. Further, to mitigate the risk of exploitation by an errant lawyer, all contingent arrangements should be disclosed and monitored by the Bar Council.

However, to strike a balance and disincentivize frivolous class actions, the judiciary

must also levy exemplary penalties on litigants in such instances and also on lawyers with contingent-fee deals.

On the whole, the courts and government must adopt a more accommodative approach to class action lawsuits. Without significant legal reform, true class action will remain limited to stray cases where someone assumes leadership and financial responsibility.

Class action suits in India have the potential to democratize access to justice and hold powerful entities accountable. Yet, so far, class action suits have not been embraced with the enthusiasm they should be. For minority shareholders to achieve justice, especially, class action suits could offer a speedy legal process. Implementing fast-track judicial processes for class action suits would reinforce the faith of citizens in the concept as well as overall judicial system.

The urgency of embracing class action suits in India cannot be overstated, particularly as the Indian economy expands further and integrates itself more deeply with the global economy. Effective class action mechanisms can significantly enhance corporate accountability, thereby boosting investor confidence and attracting more investments from overseas.

Collective legal action against mismanaged businesses can raise standards of corporate governance

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Innocent lives lost

Stampede at a satsang in Hathras kills at least 121, highlighting the urgent need for stronger regulations

In a tragic and devastating incident in the Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh, a stampede during a satsang resulted in the deaths of at least 121 people. Although the exact cause of the mishap will be determined after a detailed investigation, eyewitness accounts reveal that the stampede occurred when devotees surged forward to seek blessings from Narayan Sakar Vishwa Hari, also known as Bhole Baba. The devotees rushed to touch Bhole Baba's feet and attempted to gather soil from his path, a customary practice that led to the chaos. Many people fell into a nearby drain. Some eyewitnesses reported that after the satsang concluded, many followers rushed toward Bhole Baba to touch his feet or catch a glimpse of him as he departed in his car. People wanted to get his *darshan* and collect soil from the road on which his car left the venue. As the satsang ended, people started leaving in groups. Due to the rain, many slipped, and others fell on top of them, leading to a crushing cascade. Others maintain that people started rushing out due to the humidity when the incident occurred, and many followers, most of whom were women, felt suffocated.

The incident exposes many disturbing facts, ranging from the negligence of the administration to the unchecked influence of godmen over innocent people. Bhole Baba is reportedly absconding. First of all, the number of attendees far exceeded the permitted limit. The chief sewadar (organizer) of Baba's program estimated an attendance of around 80,000 people, but the actual number was significantly higher. Indeed, this breach of the permitted

capacity likely exacerbated the situation, leading to overcrowding in a venue that was inadequate. Now, after this horrific incident, the government is in damage control mode. Compensation for the deceased has been announced, and the Chief Minister is expected to visit Hathras. Additionally, a team has been set up to investigate the cause of the incident. However, in all probability nothing will change and that this incident will soon be forgotten like many before. As we mourn the loss of 121 lives and support the injured and their families, it is imperative to learn from this tragedy and implement effective measures to prevent such incidents in the future. We must prioritise safety, preparedness, and responsible management to ensure the safety of the people. Moreover, shouldn't there be a check on the activities of mushrooming godmen who exploit people's faith and endanger their lives? Many such godmen become so powerful that they are able to dictate terms to the administration and have considerable political clout which gives them power. However, the lack of awareness among people and their sense of helplessness contribute to the proliferation of these godmen who thrive on the ignorance and innocence of the people.

PICTALK



Farmers carry paddy saplings for plantation in an agricultural field, in Nadia

Pademonium in Parliament

As the Modi Govt navigates a new power dynamic, the increased presence and assertiveness of the Opposition suggest a challenging path ahead

The 18th Lok Sabha has the potential for positive functioning. The Modi government said they wanted consensus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought agreement and criticised the Opposition for causing problems. Modi stated that in his third term, his Government would aim to build consensus. The Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, also emphasised the importance of the Opposition's role in representing the 'voice of the people' in the House. But at the start of the session, they couldn't agree on important issues. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi wrote in an editorial recently in an English daily that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was 'preaching consensus, provoking confrontation.'

Sonia Gandhi criticised Prime Minister Modi for not acknowledging the electoral outcome and for promoting confrontation over consensus. She expressed disappointment with the first few days of the 18th Lok Sabha, pointing out that there's no sign of a changed attitude from the Prime Minister. The 18th Lok Sabha is a significant shift in Indian politics, marking the first time in a decade that Modi is leading a Parliament from a less dominant position. This shift in power dynamics requires him to navigate a coalition and contend with a more assertive opposition. The Modi government now relies on crucial support from two key allies - JD(U) and TDP. This means the NDA allies could significantly influence the Government's plans and actions, a departure from the substantial majority the BJP enjoyed in 2019 and 2014. The increased presence of the Opposition in various parliamentary panels is likely to generate greater engagement. The first session of the current Lok Sabha began with a strong Opposition asserting its rights. Before the session started, there was a dispute over the appointment of BJD M.P. Bharti Mahabir as the protem Speaker to administer. The Congress and the INDIA



bloc members felt that Congress MP Kodukunni Suresh, elected eight times, should have been given the position. However, the BJP argued that they followed the rules. Mahabir was elected to the House seven times in succession, while Suresh lost two elections. This appointment is significant as the Speaker plays a crucial role in the Indian parliamentary system as the head of the Lok Sabha, responsible for maintaining order, conducting debates, and ensuring the House's smooth functioning. Secondly, Rahul Gandhi said he would back Om Birla, the NDA candidate, but only if the Deputy Speaker position, usually given to the Opposition, was assured. While Thambi Durai of the AIADMK, a BJP ally at the time, served as the Deputy Speaker from 2014 to 2019, the position remained vacant from 2019 to 2024. Article 93 states two Lok Sabha members will be selected as the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. Om Birla has been re-elected as the Speaker of the 17th Lok Sabha, bringing continuity and stability to the House. After being congratulated, the newly elected Speaker took out a paper and read a resolution against the 1975 Emergency imposed by

late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This surprising move caught many off guard and caused tension with Congress, as the Emergency was declared on the same date in 1975. This led the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, to lead a group to the Speaker to express their objection to a political statement from the chair. Fourthly, some opposition parties thought the president's inaugural speech to a joint session of Parliament ignored the country's most serious problems. Also, the Opposition called for removing the Sengol, which the Prime Minister had installed with much fanfare before the Election. Fifthly, Rahul and other Opposition MPs proposed discussing the leakage of the NEET question paper first. The Speaker, however, insisted that a discussion on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address, a significant issue, should be held first. The first week's confrontation shows despite the decrease in numbers, the BJP is unlikely to change its working methods. An enraged opposition will also be belligerent. The proceedings in Rajya Sabha also saw disruptions as Opposition members raised slogans demand-

ing a discussion on the NEET question paper leak issue. There was also a heated argument between the Chairman and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge. The functioning of the House lies with the Speaker, a position of utmost importance in maintaining order and ensuring fair debates. The Rajya Sabha Chairman presides over the Upper House. A functioning House is necessary and a prerequisite for a healthy democracy. The need for constructive cooperation between the Government and the Opposition cannot be overstated. The House functions effectively in addressing the pressing issues facing the nation. Both sides must recognise the truth and collaborate to make Parliament more organised. After all, the Government is accountable to Parliament. The parliamentary system emphasises collective responsibility, accountability and flexibility. As former President Pranab Mukherjee said, its functioning is based on Debate, Dissension, and Decision.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CYBERCRIME ON THE RISE

Madam — Despite warnings, people are losing huge amounts of money to cyber criminals via stock market investments and online purchases. Fraudsters generally target the middle-aged and the elderly but youngsters are not spared. People are lured by attractive advertisements on social media platforms like WhatsApp, telegram, Instagram and facebook. When innocent citizens are asked to pump money through websites, they fall in line because the 'profit' accrued by similar investors is prominently displayed in the common group. Furthermore, the fraudsters 'train' the investors in stock market intricacies. Unsuspecting investors are unaware that another victim's money is transferred to his/her 'account' to show profit. Duped investors sense something is amiss when they are asked to cough up a substantial commission and when their genuine queries go unanswered or are vaguely shrugged off. However, only when the scamster swindles the hard-earned money out of a person does the latter go to the cyber police. Since most states, if not all, have cyber crime helplines, it is vital to report the fraud very quickly because the cheaters are known to waste little time in hoodwinking the law. It is always a good practice to ask SEBI or RBI licence from the opposite party. Fake websites can always be checked. Sharing one-time password(OTP) is never a good idea.

Ganpathi Bhat | *Kolaka*

RAHUL GANDHI MUST INTROSPPECT
Madam — Rahul Gandhi's recent speech in Parliament was nothing short of a disgraceful spectacle. His attempt to lecture on Hinduism was an insult to the intelligence of the nation. By clumsily parroting platitudes about Hindu philosophy, Gandhi not only displayed his profound disconnect from

Tragedy strikes Hathras



Rajesh Kumar Singh said the incident occurred at a 'satsang' in Pulrai village. The people had gathered large numbers for the event. The stampede occurred due to overcrowding. Sikandara Rao police station SHO Ashish Kumar said Victims, dead or unconscious, were brought to the Sikandara Rao Trauma Centre in trucks and other vehicles. The bodies were laid outside the health centre as people milled around them. One video clip showed a woman crying, sitting among five or six bodies in a truck. Another Ashish Kumar showed a man and a woman lying lifeless in another vehicle. Eyewitness Shakuntala Devi said that the stampede took place while people were leaving the venue at the end of the 'satsang'. With this the tragedy struck at the Hathras.

Bhagwan Thadani | *Mumbai*

CONCERNS ON NEW CRIMINAL LAWS

Madam — The editorial on the three new criminal laws(2-7-24) is welcome. In the name of extending justice, the government has hurried through at every stage, keeping all democratic norms aside. The Bills were introduced after suspending around 140 opposition members in the parliament and were passed with the least discussion. Such an important Bill should have been placed before the public for widespread discussions and debates and the opposition members who are also elected by the people should have been involved in the process, besides consulting the luminaries in the field. Nothing is done. How such a law is going to ensure justice? Moreover, it may take quite a long time for all those in the legal field to get themselves familiarised with the new versions. It looks to be a case of smashing a mountain to catch a small rat.

A G Rajmohan | *Anantapur*

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Modernising Govt IT: Imperative shift to a multicloud future

This will ensure that services are not only delivered effectively but also in a cost-efficient and secure manner as it bolsters cybersecurity

From cybersecurity threats to uncurated data management complexity to systems outages, outdated IT hinders the government's ability to provide important services in the safest and most efficient manner possible.

Our technology infrastructure should receive the same attention and investment as our roads, bridges, energy, and broadband infrastructure. Instead, current policies deter government IT leaders' ability to choose the best solutions to meet modern challenges. Public agencies are too often using outdated technology and face too many barriers to effectively modernize their systems. With modern technology and data availability, the government will be able to better track life-threatening illnesses, while policymakers would be armed with relevant data to chart robust policies for prevention and treatment.

According to a Deloitte research report, BFSI sector is also investing more on cloud to transform systems.



Federal and state agencies have been slowly upgrading IT infrastructure over the past decade by shifting to a public cloud computing model. This is primarily driven by the promise of increased efficiency, lower costs, and improved continuity to enhance the services they offer to the public. While many government organizations have taken advantage of the flexibility public cloud computing offers, given privacy, compliance and security concerns, this approach does not work in every situation. It is critical that IT leaders have flexibility to choose the most cost-effective solutions. Government agencies should consider a multicloud by design approach,

where you use cloud services from multiple public and private cloud providers. While a single-cloud strategy might seem simpler, it limits service offerings and often commits organizations to a single vendor, which often costs more in the end.

A multicloud approach to cloud computing is used for better data control, allows access to the best services from each provider, and offers more flexibility as IT leaders can optimize workload placement based on workload requirements. While government agencies - and ultimately taxpayers - that adopt multicloud approaches can also have greater control over cost, which is critical at a time when research firm IDC estimates that nearly two-thirds of organizations are spending more on cloud than initially budgeted. Policymakers need to make this multicloud modernization process a reality by investing in the technology modernisation fund allowing government agencies to replace legacy equipment with upgraded multi-

cloud computing solutions that will ensure agencies can provide critical services quickly and securely. This will require that all agencies conduct multi-cloud computing readiness assessments through an evaluation of current IT infrastructure, processes, and policies to determine the best path for adoption. The assessment should look at things like are the agency's applications considered cloud-enabled, what is the cost of migration, do cloud computing solutions meet security and compliance requirements, as well as what is the impact on civil service employees. We cannot fight off cyber attacks and provide the best services possible in the digital age with inadequate and outdated IT infrastructure. Adopting a multicloud approach will help securely manage critical data, cut costs, and allow for the government to use the solutions that are most effective to meet our citizens' needs. (The writer is Lead Solution Architect, Dell Technologies India, views expressed are personal)



SRINIVASCHARY

The Statesman

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Tragedy in Hathras

The tragic stampede in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, which claimed lives of more than 120 people, predominantly women, is a sombre reminder of the critical importance of crowd management and public safety at large gatherings. This incident, occurring at a religious event hosted by self-styled preacher Narayan Sarkar Hari, known as Bhole Baba, underscores several systemic issues that need urgent attention to prevent such disasters in the future. First, there was blatant disregard for safety regulations and permissible limits on the number of attendees at public events. Reports indicate that the gathering far exceeded the venue's capacity, creating a highly dangerous situation. This over-capacity, coupled with a lack of adequate crowd control measures, set the stage for chaos. The administration's failure to enforce these limits and ensure proper arrangements is a glaring lapse in duty. Effective crowd management requires meticulous planning, including designated entry and exit points, clear signage, and trained personnel to manage the flow of people and respond to emergencies. Moreover, the tragic outcome highlights the need for stringent protocols and accountability. In this case, the local administration and event organisers must be held accountable for their negligence. It is imperative that investigations be conducted to determine the immediate causes of the stampede but also identify the lapses in planning and execution. The findings should lead to actionable recommendations and the establishment of stringent guidelines for future events. Such measures are vital to ensure that the safety of attendees is never compromised for the sake of convenience or expedience.

Additionally, the role of religious and spiritual leaders in organising mass gatherings must be scrutinised. While such events play a significant role in the social and spiritual lives of many, the responsibility for ensuring the safety and well-being of participants cannot be overstated. Religious leaders must work closely with local authorities to adhere to safety regulations and ensure that adequate infrastructure is in place to handle large crowds. This collaboration is crucial in mitigating risks and preventing tragedies. The government's response to the incident, including the announcement of compensation for the victims' families and a promise of a thorough investigation, is a step in the right direction. However, financial compensation alone cannot address the underlying issues. The investigation must be swift, transparent, and result in concrete policy changes. The formation of an investigative committee, as announced, should not be a mere formality but a rigorous process aimed at uncovering the truth and preventing recurrence. Public awareness and education also play a crucial role. Attendees at such events should be informed about safety measures and protocols to follow in case of emergencies. Building a culture of safety and preparedness among the public can significantly reduce the impact of such incidents. Best practices in crowd management must be followed – the Tirumala temple is worthy of emulation – to ensure that the enthusiasm evoked by religiosity does not lead to hysteria. The Hathras stampede is an event that highlights critical failures in crowd management and public safety. Such tragedies must not recur.

Unity's Challenge

The formation of South Africa's new unity government under President Cyril Ramaphosa has ushered in a wave of cautious optimism. With the inclusion of Mr John Steenhuisen from the Democratic Alliance (DA) and of other opposition parties, the new government aims to rejuvenate economic and social landscape. This unprecedented coalition, formed out of necessity after the African National Congress (ANC) failed to secure a majority in the May 29 election, has been met with mixed reactions, highlighting both potential and pitfalls. The decision to bring the DA, known for its centre-right, pro-business stance, into the fold could be a game-changer for South Africa's economy. The inclusion of key ministers with backgrounds in public works, environment, and basic education under the DA leadership is seen by many as a step toward much-needed economic reform. Business leaders have expressed their readiness to collaborate with the new administration, hoping for policies that foster growth and stability. However, this optimism is tempered by significant concerns. The expanded cabinet, now larger to accommodate coalition members, has raised eyebrows. Critics argue that increasing the number of deputy ministers to 43 is an unnecessary burden on the state's resources and contradicts previous calls by the DA itself for a leaner government. This expansion could dilute the efficiency of governance, making it harder to achieve the intended reforms. Moreover, the merit of these appointments has been questioned. The Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) and other observers say that political considerations seem to have overshadowed the need for technical expertise. In an economy struggling to recover from a decade-long slump, appointing leaders based on political allegiance rather than their ability to address the nation's urgent needs is a risky gamble. The absence of outside experts in key portfolios could hinder the coalition's ability to implement effective policies and drive meaningful change. The new government's success will largely depend on its ability to balance the economic imperatives with the coalition's economic imperatives. While the inclusion of the DA has been welcomed by the business community, the coalition must not squander this goodwill. Swift and decisive action is needed to tackle issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Ensuring that meritocratic guides appointments and policy decisions will be crucial in maintaining credibility and public trust. In this delicate balancing act, President Ramaphosa and his cabinet face a formidable challenge. They must navigate the complex dynamics of coalition politics while delivering on their promises of revival and progress. Failure to do so could deepen public disillusionment and exacerbate existing socio-economic divides. As South Africa stands at this crossroads, the new unity government has an opportunity to chart a course toward a brighter future. By prioritising expertise and efficiency, and fostering genuine collaboration across political lines, it can harness the potential of the coalition to drive the country forward. The coming months will be critical in determining whether this government can rise to the occasion and deliver the change that South Africans desperately need.

Azm-e-Istehkam

Post the pull-out from Afghanistan the strategic stakes that allowed Pakistanis to have a 'blank cheque' or remain 'unanswerable' for their misconduct, have diminished considerably. For once, the Pakistanis need the United States more desperately than the other way round given the dire economic mess they are in. The United States is now in a position to extract some semblance of accountability, commitments, and corrections from Pakistan



There is a proven dogness when it comes to security matters with Pakistan. Be it the underlying intent, policies, misuse of weaponry, or even matters pertaining to the infamous nuclear proliferation saga Islamabad has routinely covered itself with ignominy. But Pakistan was able to continue with its duplicitous machinations because it invariably served the 'larger interests' of the topical global powers that be.

These included traditional ally the United States of America (which conveniently looked the other way during the genocide of 1971 or during the dark 1980s with the 'Charlie Wilson' affairs in Afghanistan); affluent Arab countries under the garb of being 'brother Muslim countries'; China (which invested in its patent 'military-industrial complex' with its CPEC imperatives), and even rogish nations like North Korea and Libya (with the shady Dr AK Khan nuclear side deals etc.).

It took an unrestrained Donald Trump to call out the bluff of Pakistani ways when he slammed the broken promises and misuse of 'aid' by tweeting, "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools".

While there was an uproar in Pakistan over the embarrassing fact, the United States soon continued its own equation with Pakistan (despite temporary hiccups), as it needed Pakistani support in Afghanistan, amongst other geopolitical considerations.

However, post the pull-out from Afghanistan the strategic stakes that allowed Pakistanis to have a 'blank cheque' or remain 'unanswerable' for their misconduct, have diminished considerably. For once, the Pakistanis need the United States more desperately than the other way

round given the dire economic mess they are in. The United States is now in a position to extract some semblance of accountability, commitments, and corrections from Pakistan.

Today, serendipitously, the interests of the United States, China, Arab countries and international multilateral agencies (and even India) converge, in hoping that Pakistan is able to renege from its duplicitous past dalliances with religious extremism and terror with its latest commitment to Operation Azm-e-Istehkam.

It is not a new militaristic operation given the multi-lititude that Pakistan has already undertaken (without substantial success), as it has always played a double game with terror.

In the 1980s, during the Afghan mujahideen days, it diverted a lot of US-Saudi 'aid' for non-Afghan purposes (including towards India). In the 90s it harboured proxies in the Kashmir Valley e.g., the Hizbul Mujahideen faction, and in Afghan swathes, e.g., the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and of course, the Taliban.

In the subsequent US-led 'War on Terror', it patronized the Haqqani faction to the discomfiture of Washington. Misusing religion and patronising the terror industry has always been too tempting for Pakistan to resist, whatever be the public stated position.

But perhaps for the first time, it has a real sense – and filled body-bags – to know for a fact that it has overlaid the religion card, and that terrorism and extremism are its natural by-products. Islamabad can no longer laser-guided terror towards Afghanistan, India, or Iran.

Extremism and terror eventually backfire, as playing out with the Pakistani military's unprecedented number of fatalities. So, to that limited extent, perhaps the fight against terror by the Pakistani state was never so persuasively and startlingly poised. It could be the first time that it truly seeks international help to cleanse itself of religious extremism and terror, the murky past history notwithstanding.

Traditionally, Pakistan had sourced advanced weaponry like the F-16 fighters from the United States, ostensibly towards fighting 'terrorism', even though it was the worst kept secret that it was for India-centric posturing (nuclear weapon carrier in favour of India, and deployment).

Many of the armaments that were CIA secured towards fighting the Soviets/Russians in the 80s, found their way to the hands of terrorists in the Kashmir valley.

Even as late as 2022, the Biden administration decided to upgrade the F-16 fleet with the implausible insistence of their exclusive use towards fighting along the Durand Line – unsurprisingly, this aircraft was used in the recent aerial skirmish with India, violating the terms of sale/refurbishment by the United States.

However, the recent request for small arms by Pakistan has to be seen in the context of its historical and less-than-reliable commitment towards agreed usages and the fact that for once, the Pakistani military is truly under pressure to fight terrorists.

Islamabad cannot escape the fate of sniggers from Delhi that it is crying wolf yet again, as they have earned the notoriety

of consistent misuse and undependability.

However, what is sought this time towards Operation Azm-e-Istehkam is sophisticated small arms and communication equipment which can only be used for restrictive (anti-terror operations) combat and does not threaten the Indo-Pak balance of power, dramatically.

The plea to seek strategic 'investment' by the United States also has the additional element of potentially weaning Pakistan away from the exclusive clutches of the expansionist Chinese, which comes with its own pitfalls.

The Americans could peg some conditions to the 'aid' wherein an element of push-back to the Chinese footprint is inherent.

As if such a pegged deal does come about, not only does it tantamount to tackling religious extremism in favour of India, but if the same does entail lessened Chinese presence, that too would be welcomed by Delhi.

The half-sincere past of the United States in the region notwithstanding, there is almost a consensus on tackling religious extremism (especially in the global terror nurseries within Pakistan) that binds Washington DC, Beijing, and Delhi.

Only from this circumstantial perspective and lay of the land, Delhi ought not to get overly worked up on the thaw and limited 'aid' (in terms of small arms et al) by the Americans. It is a calculated risk and consequential leap of faith that India must take in encouraging both Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, as also the return of the United States in the internal affairs of Pakistan.

In any case, the future stakes and pivots that India affords the United States will remain unimpaired (vis-a-vis Pakistan) and if peace and decriminalisation does return to Pakistan, India could only welcome the same.



THE WRITER, L. C. GANESH, FORMER IAS OFFICER, AND AUTHOR OF 'NORICOR ISLANDS AND PUBERTY'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Work together

SIR, Kalyani Shankar's insightful and thought-provoking article "Can we expect discourse without acrimony?" negates the possibility of much-needed consensus between the BJP-led NDA government and the Congress-dominated INDIA alliance amidst the changed dynamics in the Lower House post the recent parliamentary electoral results.

The saffron party's diminished mandate has no strategic effect on its approach in dealing with a resurgent Opposition. Despite PM Modi's stress on parliamentary cohesion in running the country and the LoP Rahul Gandhi's positive response, the opening session of the 18th Lok Sabha started on a discordant note.

It was glaringly marked by the shadow of their strained relationship over the election of the Speaker, allegations of paper leaks in NEET-UG and UGC-NET examinations, appointment of the Pro-tem Speaker, repeated critical references to the Emergency, the recent railway accident in West Bengal, unemployment,

price rise, and food inflation. Recognising the use of political reality, both the government and the Opposition should rise above petty politicking and observe constraints of political morality and ethics to restore the high standards of polity. For that, the ruling elite should shed arrogance, antagonism, arbitrariness and character assassination, refrain from stifling dissenting voices and make room for compromises and adjustments to ensure that parliamentary proceedings are conducted peacefully and constructively. While providing necessary checks and balances on the government, the Opposition should also maintain decorum, dignity and sanctity of the august House and develop a culture of constructive, principled and sensible criticism. A spirit of bonhomie and cooperation between the Opposition and the Treasury benches can build a consensus over crucial national issues such as the CCA, the NRC, Manipur violence and the Agnipathi scheme, and strengthen our democratic set-up.

Yours, etc., D S Kang, Hoshiarpur, 1 July.

PROTECT THE PEOPLE

SIR, Going by your newspaper reports today, I am shocked to find that my native state, West Bengal, is bleeding through a thousand cuts but no effort is being made to heal the wounds either by the ruling party or by the opposition. What can be more heartbreaking than the reports, "Shooting at Nimta", "Clash over illegal house case in Howrah", "Police rescues BJP woman activist's statement after 5 days in Cooch Bihar", and last but not the least "Chopra Incident".

Where are we heading? We have an elected government both at the Centre and at the state. What are these governments doing to arrest the politics of violence, rape and murder in this state? Why are criminals and anti-socials becoming so active in this state? Are these mafias and hoodlums getting political protection? All the incidents reported in your esteemed daily clearly point to protection from politicians. The most dreadful incident is that which occurred in Chhota where a woman allegedly to have had an extra marital affair was beaten up ruthlessly with her male accomplice in broad daylight. Is West Bengal under Taliban or ISIS? What was the police doing? What is the use of keeping police officers at Islampur Police Station with taxpayers' money? Why should these officers not be put behind bars for their negligence? If the ordinary citizens are not taken cognizance of by the administration and human rights continue to get violated in this way, the day is not far when ordinary people will unite to fight against these hoodlums. My sincere appeal to the law enforcement authority is to uphold the fundamental rights of citizens.

Yours, etc., Purushottam Chatterjee, Kolkata, 1 July.

LONELY LIVES

SIR, This refers to the write-up, "Being lonely" by Manish Nandy, published in today's edition of The Statesman. This piece written by Mr Nandy is a reflection of the larger picture that is present across our nation. I know many elderly couples who are helplessly stuck in this painful situation where they have to lead a lonely

life, without their children staying with them. I have spoken to most of them and realise how difficult it is for them to pass each day with such heavy hearts. Yes, many amongst them are financially supported by their children, but the isolation and agony of solitude at their age grows by the day. This wasn't the case decades ago, when two generations used to live together and helped each

A MEMBER OF THE
ASIAN VOICES

Viet Nam needs to develop domestic medicinal resources to reduce reliance on imports: expert

Recently, the healthcare sector has faced difficulties with the bidding process, drug supply, as well as the procurement of medical supplies and equipment. Shortages of medicines have also occurred in the traditional medicine sector, causes mainly related to the bidding and procurement processes.

Specifically when hospitals organise bidding for traditional medicinal herbs, the prices are mostly lower than the market prices. However, no suppliers or businesses in the medicinal materials participated in it. This is because the prices of medicinal materials depend on planting, caring and yield of medicinal plants. If there is a crop failure, the prices will be higher and vice versa.

The current issue is that the bid prices for medicinal materials approved at public healthcare facilities are much lower than the market prices. When the bid prices are lower, the suppliers do not participate because they cannot sell the medicinal materials at a loss. Meanwhile, the prices of traditional medicines have increased with the general price inflation in the market. Additionally, as the quality of medicinal materials and the quality of the medical examination and treatment have increased, the prices should also be able to increase.

In principle, traditional medicine can use interchangeable medicinal herbs. For example, the group of blood-tonifying herbs, there will be

seven or eight types.

Therefore, when one of these herbs is in short supply, the doctor can prescribe a different herb as a substitute. The doctor can be flexible in this way without affecting the herbal formula used to treat the illness.

Many herbs, however, are irreplaceable so they still have to be imported. Meanwhile, there are no regulations for foreign traders exporting to Viet Nam; many countries in the world, including China, still have their own standards that are not compatible with the regulations. The Department of Traditional Medicine has advised the Ministry of Health to submit to the Government a proposal to amend the decree regulating this issue so that it is in line with the standards of other countries. The department has also been proactive in implementing the directives of the Ministry of Health to advise and has issued many documents such as Circular 38, Circular 39 regulating the quality of medicinal herbs, or Circular 32 on regulations for processing and manufacturing.

The department has been revising circulars related to the management of traditional medicines. Essentially, the legal normative documents do not have any problems. Amendments have been made, closely following directives of the Government, so the supply of medicinal herbs and traditional medicines to hospitals has begun to stabilise. The Department of Traditional Medicine and the hospitals have begun to bid for various types of medicines, combined with the reserve of medicines, so they have partially ensured the supply of medicines for patients. However, the focus is on revising regulations on the bidding and procurement of traditional medicines at healthcare facilities, as well as regulations on the export and import of medicinal materials. The need to focus on local supply, investing in the cultivation of medicinal plants at home and quality of medicinal materials.