Opinion

TUESDAY, AUGUST 6, 2024

AFTER ARTICLE 370

Union home minister Amit Shah

The transformative decision of abrogation of Article 370 and 35A has ushered in a new era of empowerment for marginalised sections and strengthened grassroots democracy in Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh

Monday jitters

The sentiment in the overseas markets will weigh; but no reason to panic, Indian economy remains fairly insulated

THE GLOBAL MELTDOWN in stocks on Monday was not wholly unexpected given the latest data showing rising unemployment in the US whose economy is clearly slowing. There is now much anxiety about a hard landing with the possibility of a recession not ruled out. There were two other factors: The stratospheric valuations of US tech stocks had become unanchored with earnings growth and the carry trade in the yen was damaged after the Bank of Japan raised interest rates and the yen appreciated. Japan's Nikkei shed a staggering 13% to hit seven-month lows, a scale of losses not seen since the 2011 global financial crisis. Whether the sell-off across markets is temporary is difficult to guess. For one, the escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia remain a big concern. While it has resulted in a steep correction in crude oil prices to a seven-month low of sub-$76 per barrel, the consequences of what seem to be prolonged hostilities are unknown. The collapse in prices of metals such as copper — at a four-month low — and also other asset classes such as cryptocurrencies suggest serious risk aversion.

All of this especially the slowdown in the world's biggest economy — which, even a few months back seemed to be chugging along nicely — could continue to keep investors and markets nervous. Economists at Goldman Sachs put the probability of a US recession in 2025 at 25%, up from 15% earlier. Indeed, there are those who believe the US Fed may be behind the curve and predict an emergency meeting to cut rates before the September Federal Open Market Committee meet. The yield on the 10-year US Treasury is hovering around levels of 3.7% as bond traders bet on larger-than-expected cuts. Citigroup and JP Morgan Chase both expect a series of half-percentage-point cuts in September as well as December. Others point out that while an interest rate cut may be needed to help the economy regain some strength, it might send out the wrong signal creating panic in the markets.

The sentiment in the overseas markets will weigh on Indian equities even if the country remains fairly insulated and the macroeconomic fundamentals are fairly strong. However, it is largely local liquidity that has been pushing up stock prices with foreign portfolio investors not participating meaningfully. Of late, they have turned distinctly bearish, which is one reason for the sharp correction in the past two sessions. That said, the fall was probably expected as the rally to 25,000 levels on the Nifty has been fast and furious. Besides, the June quarter earnings season has been lacklustre. Net profits for a sample of 824 companies (excluding banks and financials) have fallen 5% year-on-year on the back of a sales growth of 7% y-o-y. While lower oil prices are a bonanza, the weaker rupee which is nudging 44 to the dollar will make all imports more expensive, adding to inflationary pressures.

Also, the US is a big market for India's exporters — especially software services — and any slowdown would hurt exports. The silver lining is that bond yields are falling. However, the Reserve Bank of India might not be in a rush to cut rates since it wants the 4% target to be achieved on a sustainable basis. For retail investors, there is no reason to panic as Monday's fall is expected to remove a lot of froth from the markets.

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

A WELL-FUNCTIONING GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM IS MAINLY IN THE INTEREST OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Indo-Africa food for thought

JOACHIM VON BRAUN
ASHOK GULATI

Respectively former president, International Association of Agriculture Economists, currently with ZEF, University of Bonn, and distinguished professor, ICRIER

INDIA IS HOSTING the 32nd International Conference of Agricultural Economists ICAE) from August 2-7 in Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the chief guest and agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan will be the guest of honour.

It is interesting to note that the last time India hosted the ICAE was in 1958 in Mysore, with then PM Jawaharlal Nehru as the chief guest. If one digs a little deeper, one finds that the ICAE has its roots in India. The founding president of the ICAE was Lord Elmhirst. Rabindranath Tagore cabled Elmhirst at Cornell in the spring of 1921, requesting to meet in New York. When they met, Tagore told Elmhirst about his concern for the villages around Santiniketan, north of Calcutta, which seemed to be on the verge of disintegration. He said that he had already acquired a farm at the village of Surul that could be used as a centre for assisting the villages, but he had not yet found an appropriate means of doing this. He invited Elmhirst to join him, which Elmhirst agreed to. He arrived about a year later, bringing with him a promise of financial help from Dorothy Straight, his wife-to-be.

Tagore made clear his attitude to the villages: "If I can free only one or two villages from the bonds of ignorance and weakness, there will be built, on a tiny scale, an ideal for the whole of India... Our aim must be to give these few villages complete freedom — education for all, the winds of joy blowing across the village, music and recitations going on, as in the old days... Our people need more than anything else a real scientific training that could inspire in them the courage of experiment and initiative of mind which we lack as a nation."

From those roots, the ICAE has flourished over time. This is perhaps the biggest congregation of agricultural economists committed to the world's food and nutritional security, which is becoming an increasing challenge in the face of climate change and geopolitical conflicts.

India's success in ushering in the green revolution and the white (milk) revolution is well known, but the African continent is still struggling to overcome food shortages. Nutritional security, especially of children below the age of 5 years, still remains a challenge for India and Africa. Given that the African Union was invited to be a permanent member of the G20 during India's presidency, it opens the gates for India and Africa to learn from the global developments in food and agriculture, and also promote South-South collaboration to overcome their food and nutritional security challenges.

In this context, the ICAE has a special session where the experiences of 20 major Indian states are compared with 15 African countries from FY05 to FY20. The two regions have a lot to share. The findings of this unique study show that first, high-debt service ratios result in lower agricultural spending relative to social protection. Second, African countries consistently underfund agriculture compared to Indian states, hampering productivity and efforts to reduce child malnutrition. Third, enhancing public spending on agricultural R&D and extension is crucial, as both regions under-invest in these high-return areas. Lastly, the study suggests reforming subsidies and reallocating resources to infrastructure and R&D to boost agricultural growth and improve child nutrition outcomes. Agricultural investment pays off in poverty reduction and saves on social spending. Food hand-outs have their role in food crises but must not impair growth and job creation in rural areas.

Investment in climate resilience requires adaptation, mitigation, and system transformation, the latter is facilitated by building the bioeconomy that would benefit from investments

At the global level, in the fight against global hunger, the human and financial costs of complacency are alarming. As a result of recent developments — including growing conflicts, the climate crisis, and economic slowdowns — and the lack of concerted global action, achieving the United Nations' established goal of Zero Hunger by 2030 seems increasingly infeasible. A new study from the University of Bonn, Germany, and Food and Agriculture Organization shows that it would require additional investments of $21 billion annually in agriculture and rural areas to end global hunger by 2040.

India's leadership in the G20 last year and the follow-up by Brazil's G20 presidency this year has had a good impact in setting the global agenda focusing on food security and ending hunger and presenting, for the first time, a strategy paper on bioeconomy for G20. This is now followed up by Brazil, and even more concretely with G20 nations. China too recently launched its bioeconomy strategy. It is commendable that India facilitated on-boarding the African Union in G20 during its presidency. It is now all the more important to get to the South-South collaboration. The developed countries of G20 can help to solve problems of food and nutritional security in the global South, by addressing climate change with support for resilience and by sharing science and innovation for food systems transformation. This is what Africa and South Asia, which together account for almost 3 billion people on this planet, can call for. The investment in climate resilience requires adaptation, mitigationm, and system transformation, the latter is facilitated by building the bioeconomy that would benefit from investments, including the Global Climate Fund. The sequence of G20 presidencies over 2022-25 shows indications of food system governance change — for Indonesia, India, Brazil, and next year, South Africa. A well-functioning global food system is mainly in the interest of the global South. It shows when they are in the driver's seat.

We hope the Indian Prime Minister will take this agenda of the South in G20, and also provide dynamism in agri-food relations between Africa and India for the common good of almost one third of humanity.

Views are personal

A piecemeal approach is anti-investment

ARBIND MODI

Former CBDT member and former senior economist at IMF

The proposals for reforming the capital gains tax regime for financial instruments should be part of the comprehensive review of the Income Tax Act

BUDGET 2024-25 MARKS the first of the new political cycle and a good opportunity to pursue tax reforms — a necessary, but a highly unpopular, exercise.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced her intention to undertake a comprehensive review of the Income Tax Act, 1961, within the next six months. The government, in its earlier avatar, had also undertaken this exercise and draft tax codes written by expert committees were available in the very first year of the last political cycle too, allowing abundant time for its implementation. Unfortunately, it adopted a piecemeal approach by making frequent and large-scale amendments to the existing law, thereby adding to its complexity. Despite the announcement of a comprehensive review, it continues to propose substantial changes in this Budget, again in a piecemeal manner. One hopes it will walk the talk this time around.

Taxation of capital gains has been the subject matter of comprehensive review in the Budget. While several changes have been proposed on the subject, I will restrict myself to a few significant changes.

The proposal to eliminate the benefit of inflation indexation for the cost of acquiring a capital asset was long overdue. In principle, capital gains should be taxed on "accrual" basis, but, in practice, it is imposed on "realisation" basis to overcome the problem of valuation, liquidity, and complexity. Consequently, in a world of inflation, there is a "cost" on the taxpayer arising from the erosion in the real value of the historical cost of the asset and an unintended "benefit" arising from tax deferral to the extent there is an erosion in the real value of the accrued tax liability. Therefore, in practice, most countries do not provide for any inflation indexing of the "cost" or the "benefit" since they would cancel out each other. Under the extant capital gains tax regime in India, while the "cost" is adjusted for inflation, there is no corresponding inflation adjustment for the "benefit", thereby conferring double benefit and under-taxation of gains. Accordingly, a correction was necessary. The proposal is a pro-reform measure consistent with the international best practices so the government should not succumb to the unwarranted cacophony.

The proposal to reduce the LTCG rate for bonds is equally flawed. Interest on debt is deductible, unlike dividends, which creates a bias

The proposal to increase the tax rate on long-term capital gains (LTCG) from listed securities from 10% to 12.5% is fundamentally flawed. Taxing LTCG from equity is complex and must consider the cumulative tax burden on profits earned through corporations, dividends, and capital gains. Generally, the tax burden on corporate profits is inter alia guided by two principles: (i) the combined tax on corporate profits, dividends, and capital gains should not exceed the top personal income tax rate; and (ii) dividends and capital gains should be treated symmetrically to avoid tax-induced distortions in corporate behaviour.

In India, the combined tax on corporate profits is estimated at 43.2% for FY24, significantly higher than the top personal income tax rate of 30% (39% including surcharge). This high tax cost of equity investment increases the hurdle rate, making marginal projects financially unviable. The proposed increase in the LTCG rate for listed equities raises the combined rate to 44.5% for FY25. Additionally, the tax on dividends remains high relative to capital gains, disproportionately affecting senior citizens.

With corporate investment already sluggish, raising the LTCG rate will exacerbate the problem. One solution is to impute corporate income tax to the shareholders by allowing a standard deduction of 50% of gross dividends and capital gains from equity, and taxing the remainder at the applicable marginal personal income tax rate. However, the standard deduction should be limited to equities held for more than one year. Besides, eliminating the surcharge on personal income tax (PIT) could further moderate the tax burden, with progressivity addressed through alternative tax instruments like a net wealth tax and an inheritance tax (both with a sufficiently high threshold). These measures could reduce the tax cost of equity investment to around 30%.

The government must revisit this issue and conduct a comprehensive review. In the meantime, the proposal to increase the LTCG rate on listed equities should be withdrawn.

Similarly, the proposal to reduce the LTCG rate for bonds is equally flawed. Interest on debt is deductible, unlike dividends, which creates a bias against equity. Therefore, all gains to bondholders or lenders, regardless of whether they are characterised as "interest" or "capital gains", should be fully taxed and treated symmetrically. Reducing the LTCG rate on gains from bonds will exacerbate this bias against equity and increase the risk of bankruptcy. By maintaining a consistent tax treatment for all forms of gains from bonds, the government can create a more equitable financial environment and reduce the risk of financial instability. Therefore, the proposal should be reviewed to ensure that "capital gains" on bonds are treated in the same manner as "interest" and taxed under the progressive PIT rate schedule.

The proposals for reforming the capital gains tax regime for financial instruments are anti-investment and should be part of the comprehensive review of the Income Tax Act.

AI is getting cheaper. That won't fix everything

FOR A TECHNOLOGY that promises to help businesses cut costs, artificial intelligence has had a big problem with being so costly.

AI's scaling laws, which say that you need more computing power to make more powerful models, have put tech companies on a race to spend billions of dollars building vast data centres and buying powerful chips — costs they can't help passing on to their customers. Google's AI tool for generating documents or emails for office workers is not cheap. It adds $20 to their employer's monthly $6 bill for the company's Workspace suite, per staff member. Microsoft Corp.'s Copilot AI assistant costs $30 a month per worker.

Meanwhile, the cost of deploying AI directly into a company's systems can cost between $5 million and $20 million, according to research firm Gartner, which estimates that 30% of generative AI projects will be abandoned by the end of 2025 in part because of all that expense.

The good news for those customers is that AI costs appear to be coming down, helping to close the gap between benefit and investment. The bad news: That still doesn't address the bigger issue of utility, which will take a few years yet to solve.

The prevailing wisdom in Silicon Valley is to keep spending to get a foothold on the future. On Tuesday, Microsoft announced that its capital expenditures hit a record $19 billion in the last quarter, more than 80% higher than last year. Chief executive officer Satya Nadella said all that investment would continue to "capture the opportunity of AI". Alphabet Inc. CEO Sundar Pichai said much the same in a recent earnings call about Google's results: "The risk of underinvesting is dramatically greater than the risk of overinvesting for us." Investors aren't entirely buying it: Microsoft's shares are down about 2% since its latest earnings announcement, Google's by 5%.

PARMY OLSON

Bloomberg

But even as the cost of training AI has risen over the years, both tech giants' AI services seem to be heading in a cheaper direction. A spokesman for Google says the company's latest Gemini model — which companies can use to automate their customer service operations or summarise internal documents — is more powerful than the last, but close to half the price.

OpenAI's latest model, known as GPT-4o, is faster but also 50% cheaper than its predecessor, GPT-4 Turbo. A spokeswoman told me the cost of accessing its models, which is measured by the processing of tokens (essentially words by its language model), has dropped by 99% since 2022.

Among AI scientists, cutting costs with techniques like "sparsity" and "quantisation" has been a major focus at recent conferences. Neerav Kingsland, an executive at OpenAI rival Anthropic, told me it was plausible that its models could fall to 25% of their current price over the next one to two years, and that the company — which has raised $8.8 billion from investors including Google and Amazon.com Inc. — had already halved the cost of building a recent model through novel research methods.

And cost efficiencies are coming from business users too. Many are realising they don't need the most powerful AI to give their staff a productivity edge, so they're experimenting with open-weight models from companies like Meta Platforms Inc. or smaller models that are cheaper or slower. A customer service chatbot might need a state-of-the-art AI tool that can do real-time inference, but analysing customer calls to improve them? That can be done with less-advanced technology.

Silicon Valley has a history of subsidising prices, with streaming platforms, ride-sharing apps and cloud services all taking a margin hit to grow market share. The goal is to ride out the competition and eventually raise prices, becoming profitable. But here's the sticking point for generative AI: There's still a broad question of how useful it can be to a business's bottom line, which Gartner says is the main reason for its prediction that 30% of projects will be abandoned by the end of next year.

If the technology remains stuck in just dispensing chatbots and summarising text, it might not be worth even the lower price tags. That is the issue tech companies should perhaps grapple with over others, even cost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Boiling Bangladesh

The popular uprising against the government in Bangladesh has forced Sheikh Hasina to resign and flee the country. The trigger for the protests was quota for families of those who fought for independence in 1971. The harsh crackdown on the agitators intensified the protests and hastened her downfall. No doubt she has done a lot to lift millions out of poverty and accelerate GDP growth, but one big mistake she made was making democracy and human rights peripheral to economic growth. She misused state institutions to cling to power. The turn of events in Bangladesh illustrates that "a winner takes all" mentality does not work in a parliamentary democracy. One hopes that the formation of an interim government overseen by the army takes steps for the restoration of genuine democracy.

—G David Milton, Maruthancode

Tax terrorism?

Apropos of "Tax misadventures" (*FE*, August 5), it is not just Infosys that has significant overseas operations and presence. Top information technology firms and those in other sectors have presence too. Will the Directorate General of Goods and Services Tax Intelligence send notices to them? There are rumours that the reason of this notice is the unfavourable comments of Narayana Murthy. The market itself did not regard the notice, as the Infosys shares barely reacted to it. Had it been a private firm, the director would have been questioned for repeatedly sending tax notices that were not tenable, resulting in extra expenses for the government. Infosys is a reputable company. Such notices, even if they come to nothing, damage the reputation of a company.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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{ OUR TAKE }

Lessons from Hasina's debacle

Chaos in Bangladesh shows a regime can't tide over economic and social anxieties with force

The end came swiftly. Five decades years after her father, the founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated in his own home, the curtain fell on Sheikh Hasina's uninterrupted but controversial 15-year-long rule over Bangladesh. She was unceremoniously bundled out of the country in a helicopter, her legacy irrevocably tarnished by the blood of the hundreds of student protesters shot dead over the past three weeks by government forces and ruling party workers. The immediate trigger for the stir may have been a lopsided reservation policy that set aside a third of government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters — a contested category with ample room for corruption — but anger was building over an election widely seen as a sham, the subversion of the democratic process, sweeping suppression of dissent and crippling anxiety among young people over quality jobs and the possibility that they might lead a life worse than the previous generation.

Hasina's fall presents a challenge for India, which is now surrounded by a string of regimes that are either diffident or downright unfriendly in the neighbourhood. The 76-year-old leader had deep ties with India and was considered New Delhi's staunchest friend even as she tried to strike a balance with China. With the country in turmoil, expect Beijing to turn more aggressive in its attempts to fish in troubled waters alongside its old ally, Pakistan. Moreover, the sentiment on the street is currently against New Delhi, seen as an ally of Hasina. When an interim government is created and new elections are called, if at all, it will be key to gauge the foreign policy outlook of the new regime. In sum, even as New Delhi looks to become a global fulcrum between the Great Powers, it will need to carefully evaluate its options in a tricky neighbourhood where it has few friends left and portents of instability cropping up — from Dhaka to Kathmandu.

But there are bigger takeaways at a time when intolerant regimes are mushrooming across the world. Bangladesh's street uprising – among the first such political action by Gen Z anywhere — was presaged by years of slow erosion of civil liberties, accompanied by sputtering growth amid a downturn in every sector except exports. Hasina refused to heed the warnings, believing that repression could quell genuine anger and a popular homegrown protest could be spun as foreign conspiracy. She was wrong and had to flee. The world should take note.

Restoring statehood is J&K's key question

Five years after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution that granted "special status" to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the question to ask is: What are the right metrics to judge the effectiveness of the move? Its proponents point at visuals of normalcy in the Valley, zero incidents of stone-pelting or chants of *azaadi* by mobs, and a sharp rise in tourist footfalls. They also point to the increased penetration of central welfare schemes in the Union Territory (UT). But there's the sense of a task left unfinished. The economic and infrastructure gains from abrogation notwithstanding, restoration of statehood remains the key issue after five years. That alone will fulfil the democratic aspirations of the people of J&K.

Assembly elections — likely to take place by a court-imposed September 30 deadline — will do little in terms of passing the baton to the people if the Centre continues to be firmly in charge. Just last month, it gave the office of the Lieutenant Governor sweeping powers on key appointments and services. If the L-G has the final say on almost everything, including the functioning of the entire senior bureaucracy in the UT as also its topmost law officers, it would reduce any mandate from the people to a mere token.

Till the time the Centre sees governance as a proxy for democracy and not a product of it, hearts and minds, especially in the Valley, can't be won. To be sure, if the Centre sticks to its promise of restoring statehood soon after the election, in effect, displaying its confidence in the people of J&K, it is likely the latter will respond in kind — reposing their confidence in the Union. With a spate of attacks in Jammu already hinting at a revival of insurgency, aided by forces across the border, only this can ensure that the scrapping of Art 370 achieves its desired objective.

Improving Kerala's climate resilience

The state must ban construction and quarrying in the Western Ghats. And a raft of state legislation will need updating to focus on the climate action needed

Extreme rainfall, flooding, and landslides have become a recurring phenomenon in Kerala since 2018 AFP

G Madhusoodanan

Praveena Sanjay

The Wayanad landslides have put Kerala under the spotlight again. Extreme rainfall, flooding, and landslides have become a recurring phenomenon in the state since 2018. Multiple studies point to these being the result of the climate crisis. Kerala is particularly vulnerable due to its complex geology and ecology — a steep valley nestled between the Western Ghats on the east and the Arabian Sea on the west. The Western Ghats are a geomorphic feature of immense global importance. Unfortunately, indiscriminate infrastructure development has degraded this unique and fragile ecosystem.

In 1805, tropical forests covered 50-75% of Kerala's three regions. This had fallen to 36% by 1956 (when United Kerala was formed), and to 12% by 1990. The highest levels of deforestation (65-80%) happened in the hilly districts of Wayanad and Idukki. An added problem was the extensive quarrying from the 1980s and the construction boom. Of the over 5,000 quarries in Kerala (legal and illegal), about 1,700 are in the Western Ghats. They (along with indiscriminate infrastructure development) are major contributors to the landslides and landslips.

About 13,000 sites in Kerala have been identified as prone to landslips, and 17,000 as susceptible to landslides. During the 2018 floods, there were over 5,000 incidents of landslips and landslides, of which 3,000 were in Wayanad and Idukki. In these districts, construction is permitted only on 7% of the land; however, this restriction has not been adhered to. About 70% of the 5,220 kilometre-long rivulets or streams feeding into the Kabini river in Wayanad were encroached and levelled for construction or agriculture.

Paddy fields (wetlands), at over 8.8 lakh hectares in 1980s, captured substantial water run-off during the monsoons. Sadly, around 80% of these have been destroyed for housing or commercial purposes. Further, large-scale encroachment of inland lakes and floodplains such as the Vembanad lake, the largest inland water body in Kerala, has exacerbated flooding prospects. In addition, Kerala's 720 sq km of coastal mangroves (marine and inland), which act as natural bulwarks against storm surges, have now been reduced to a mere 24 sq km (as in 2021). Another challenge in Kerala is the dumping of urban garbage in drains and streams, resulting in clogging during excessive rains.

The ecological destruction and resultant increase in Kerala's susceptibility to climate-related calamities and disasters has led to huge losses to life and property. Thus, a long-term vision for building a climate-resilient Kerala, with particular emphasis on disaster risk reduction, has become imperative.

Kerala's Ecorestoration Policy, announced in December 2021, is a step in the right direction but this needs to see action on the ground. Additionally, some key elements still need to be made part of it. Based on the Madhav Gadgil Committee Report, plantations should be reconverted and nursed back to biodiverse forests. Agro-forestry should be adopted with the cooperation of the locals. All further construction in the Western Ghats should be banned and illegal encroachments removed. Mountain edges sliced for roads need to be sloped, and dense re-wilding done to prevent landslides. The concept of 'limited tourism', followed by Bhutan, should be adopted in key tourist locations.

People living in areas most prone to landslips (Zone 1 in the Gadgil report), such as Wayanad, should be relocated to safer places. Further migration to the hills and quarrying should be fully banned, and a 'catchment area treatment plan' should be prepared for denuded areas of river catchments. The decimation of hills for paddy fields should be stopped or at least minimised. The current method of constructing uniform elevations of concrete walls upto 18 feet high and filling them with soil from destroyed hills for building roads needs to stop. Besides Wayanad and Idukki, hill destruction is rampant in Kannur and Kasaragod. Hills in these districts from where 16 rivers originate should be declared as protected areas.

Erosion by the sea is another major climate-related challenge in Kerala. Many sea walls constructed so far have been swallowed by the sea. The real solution would be mangrove restoration with people's participation.

Except in heavily populated former paddy fields where streams could be carved out to facilitate drainage of flood waters, these wetlands need to be restored by reclaiming them. Most of the rain gauges are in urban or semi-urban areas. They need to be established in areas now known for excessive precipitation, especially in fragile zones. Kerala could also have its own centralised flood monitoring station for real-time alerts.

The government's famous "room-for-rivers" slogan should be implemented in letter and spirit. Kerala did begin successful restoration of some of its water bodies. This has stopped now. Their extensive restoration should be undertaken under the government's job guarantee programmes. Encroachments should be removed and punitive measures for garbage dumping into water bodies should be enforced.

For building climate resilience, it is imperative that policies and plans do not end up being mere roadmaps, but also fuel action to strengthen institutional and financial governance for "preparing and planning, coping, recovering, and importantly, adapting to adverse climate events." Transitioning from being 'environment-friendly' to 'climate-relevant' is the need of the hour. This would entail establishing a multilevel, climate governance framework. The World Institute of Sustainable Energy (WISE), Pune, carried out a study to assess how governance in Kerala needs to be transformed. Based on WISE's findings and the first author's own research to write Kerala's environmental history, the following recommendations are suggested.

Climate action must be mainstreamed into developmental planning, with supporting regulation and adequate enforcement. Promulgation and implementation of a more comprehensive land-use policy would be an integral step forward. In the context of emerging climate challenges, there is an urgent need to update and amend existing Acts, rules and regulations.

Streamlining inter- and-intra-departmental cooperation in and between local and state departments, and working in partnership with non-state actors would ensure inclusive and participatory action for building climate resilience. Creating a climate fund and introducing monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track progress on climate action, assessing the adequacy of funding and its utilisation, and capacity building for climate action, would also be necessary.

G Madhoosudanan is director general of the World Institute of Sustainable Energy (WISE), Pune. Praveena Sanjay is director, Centre for Climate and Sustainability, WISE. The views expressed are personal

Trim the monuments list, not all are worthy

Sanjeev Sanyal

Jayasimha KR

India currently has 3,695 Monuments of National Importance (MNIs) that are managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958. The majority of these were inherited from a colonial-era list of protected monuments, along with a few hundred others from the princely states. Some changes have been made over the decades, but there was no systematic attempt to rationalise the list, that is until now.

In our EAC-PM report titled 'Monuments of National Importance: An Urgent Need for Rationalization' (https://ln.run/tNqeU), published in January 2023, we pointed out that there were many monuments that were simply missing or were unworthy of being on the list of 'national monuments'. The issue of missing monuments has also been raised in Parliament several times. On March 8 this year, ASI issued a gazette notification to delist 18 monuments that have not been found despite years of effort. Suggestions and objections by the public were sought within two months. Now that two months have elapsed, the final notification is awaited. This is the first attempt to delist missing monuments since 1978.

However, there is an equally important problem with monuments that are unworthy of being deemed of national importance. While some of these monuments may be of local importance and should be transferred to respective states for protection, there are many monuments that are simply not worthy of special treatment. As recommended by our report, such monuments need to be removed from the list of MNIs. This would include around 75 graves/cemeteries of British officers and soldiers of neither architectural significance nor cultural importance that are currently protected as MNIs. The good news is that the process of delisting for this category, too, has begun. The initial notification of delisting the statue of John Nicholson, which once stood in Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, was issued in end-July 2024.

Note that the grave of John Nicholson, across from Kashmiri Gate Metro Station, is also an MNI. This brings us to the intriguing question: Who was this John Nicholson in whose memory we grateful Indians have protected two national monuments?

John Nicholson (1821-1857) was a British brigadier-general who played a crucial role in suppressing the Great Revolt of 1857-58. His brutal methods were considered excessive even by the standards of the time. Lord Canning, then governor general, wrote that Nicholson "sweeping the country like the incarnation of vengeance had struck terror into wavering hearts". Nicholson himself made his feelings clear: "I dislike India and its inhabitants more every day". Even colonial apologists like writer Charles Allen have commented on Nicholson's extreme brutality. Another British writer William Dalrymple dubbed him as a "great Imperial psychopath". He was fatally injured while fighting Indian rebels during the capture of Delhi, and died a few days later. He was then buried in a cemetery near Kashmiri Gate which is now called Nicholson Cemetery.

In the early 1900s, the British colonial government erected a statue of Nicholson in front of Kashmiri Gate. They included both the statue and the grave in their list of protected monuments. This list was unquestioningly adopted by independent India. In 1958, on the request of Lord Brookeborough, then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, the statue was shipped to Nicholson's birthplace of County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. While rededicating the statue in County Tyrone in 1960, Louis Mountbatten said that he "well remembered" the statue when it stood outside Kashmiri Gate.

Although the statue was sent abroad in 1958, the spot remains to this day in the list of MNIs! The only sign of its existence now is a memorial stone at the site that pays tribute to other British officers killed in 1858. If one visits Nicholson Cemetery, just a short walk away, the grave is to the immediate right of the entrance. It is well-marked and fenced and has a blue ASI board that threatens dire consequences to anyone who may damage the site. Nicholson's statue and grave are hardly the only examples of unworthy national monuments. Our report has listed several others. The state of Nagaland, for instance, has only four MNIs and three of them are graves of minor colonial officials who had been killed by the Nagas!

The delisting of unworthy MNIs is not merely about de-colonisation but also about solving a practical problem. Being deemed an MNI means that a 100-metre radius is considered a 'prohibited area' where all construction activity is banned. An additional 200 metres is considered a 'regulated area' where special permissions are needed. As one can imagine, this leads to all manner of red tape and rent-seeking, especially in a dense urban area like Kashmiri Gate.

It is good to see that ASI is finally beginning to rationalise the list of MNIs. The removal of several missing monuments can be expected soon. With the recent notification regarding Nicholson's statue, the effort to delist unworthy monuments has also begun.

THE DELISTING OF MONUMENTS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE (MNI) NOT WORTHY OF BEING ON THE LIST IS NOT MERELY ABOUT DE-COLONISATION BUT ALSO ABOUT SOLVING A PRACTICAL PROBLEM. THE TAG MEANS THAT A 100 M RADIUS IS CONSIDERED 'PROHIBITED AREA'

Sanjeev Sanyal is member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) and Jayasimha is Consultant, EAC-PM. The views expressed are personal

In Venezuela, a long night of dictatorship & decline

Hari Seshasayee

For a country facing the world's largest displacement crisis in peacetime, grappling with violent crime and inflation, Venezuela is a tinderbox that can explode at any minute. The recently held presidential elections on July 28 add to this uncertainty and have captured global headlines. It is no secret that the electoral process in Venezuela is marred by irregularities, with numerous presidential candidates jailed or disqualified in the run-up to the elections, and opaque reporting of the results by the National Electoral Council. The incumbent government led by Nicolás Maduro claims they have won the elections, obtaining 51% of the vote, with 44% going to opposition candidate Edmundo González. The opposition asserts they received 67% of the vote, more than double the votes for Maduro. In this polarised environment, there are two narratives in response to the Venezuelan elections.

The first and more dominant narrative is that Maduro's repressive regime needs to go. Maduro is often referred to as an autocrat, one who has co-opted most of the country's democratic institutions, systematically silenced his critics and secured the support of the armed forces by bestowing them with control over the country's critical resources. Consequently, the response from an overwhelming majority of countries has been to either reject the results announced by Maduro's government or call for a transparent count of votes, tabulated and verified by observers. Several Latin American countries have reacted strongly, cutting off diplomatic ties or recalling their diplomats from Venezuela. Maduro has retaliated in equal measure, recalling diplomats from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Panama, and Uruguay. Even the leaders of countries that maintain a cordial relationship with Maduro, like Brazil and Colombia, have questioned the veracity of the poll results. Unfortunately, there remains little hope for a transparent and fair verification of all electoral data.

The second narrative is limited mostly to Maduro's own government and his dwindling number of supporters, and a clique of autocratic countries. The list of countries that have recognised Maduro's victory is small, but it includes two major powers that have a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council — China and Russia. The narrative espoused by the Maduro's officials is far more telling. Venezuela's defence minister, Vladimir Padrino Lopez, a four-star general who has occupied the post since 2014, declared effusively in a televised speech that "we are witnessing a *coup d'état* once again plotted by these fascist factors of the extremist Right, supported by imperial factors, American imperialism together with its stooges and lackeys." The Venezuelan armed forces' continued support of Maduro has not swayed even in the slightest throughout the recent electoral process.

Understandably, the future of Venezuela seems clouded by instability, but three things are unlikely to change. First, Venezuelans will continue to flee in search of greener pastures. A recent poll found that "18% of respondents plan to flee Venezuela if Maduro remains in power after the election." They will join nearly eight million Venezuelans who have already left the country. Second, Venezuela's economy will continue to saunter. Although inflation has steadied from its six-digit highs to only 50% in 2023, jobs are scarce, industries have shut down, and investments are few and far between. Third, political repression will also continue, evident by the recent remarks made by Jorge Rodríguez, president of the National Assembly of Venezuela. Rodríguez referred to the entire opposition coalition using the term 'fascists,' who are attempting to start a civil war and who do not deserve 'procedural benefits.' His recent speech at the national assembly calling for opposition leaders to be jailed was met with fervent applause and a standing ovation.

India will be watching the events in Venezuela with rapt attention. The reason? Venezuela is home to the world's largest oil reserves. A decade ago, Venezuela was the third-largest supplier of oil to India, behind only Saudi Arabia and Iraq. India stopped importing Venezuelan oil in late 2020 due to US secondary sanctions. However, India's largest private oil major, Reliance Industries, received a waiver just last week from the US State Department to import Venezuelan oil. The recent turmoil in Venezuela will perhaps push Maduro's regime to look even more closely at India, which will remain among a select few countries that can refine Venezuela's extra-heavy crude oil, and also have the political appetite to deal with a country heavily sanctioned by the US and the western world. India has already shown its willingness to buy oil from another sanctioned country, Russia, and adding Venezuela to the list may help reduce India's oil import bill.

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EDITOR: KUNAL PRADHAN

OUR VIEW

ISTOCKPHOTO

Should RBI target only core inflation? Bad idea

Inflation targeting is a bigger challenge in India than in America, say, where monetary policy is sensitive to its jobs market, but taking an easier approach would be a cop-out

Inflation targeting works reasonably well in America, but does India need a modified version of it? After all, what drives price instability here differs. It's why members of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) panel for monetary policy are unlikely to take note of a *Mint*+Shine study for the first quarter of 2024-25 that found 95% of all employees in a formal-sector sample on the lookout for a job change, which could suggest a round of salary bargaining. Sure, the government has its own periodic labour force survey, which tracks jobs in every sector of the economy, but even that's only a by-the-way input for RBI's interest-rate policy. Unlike in the US, whose central bank has worked hard to smother its 2022 inflation flare-up with rate hikes and is now watching the labour market closely as it nears its 2% target, inflationary impulses in India tend to arise chiefly from erratic farm supplies. Indeed, commodity data is what Indian policymakers must pore over. This is a significant difference.

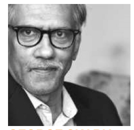
Apart from price stability, America's Federal Reserve, its central bank, also has a mandate to maximize employment. As seen in developed economies, the two are linked. If its labour market tightens, implying rivalry among recruiters, wages get bid upwards and feed inflation. If payroll additions slacken, as is the case right now, then job seekers vying for jobs make it easier to keep a lid on overall price levels too. A mostly formal economy means the US has the luxury of reliable data to plot its trade-off between jobs and prices on a graph. This 'Phillips curve' was shifting its shape even before pandemic supply squeezes and relief money—coupled with geopolitical flux—warped American prices, making it harder to identify a level of employment that's consistent with stable inflation. Today, as US joblessness rises and fresh hiring flags amid softening prices and recession fears, expectations have risen of a rate cut by the Fed. A sudden sense among investors that it might have held rates high for too long may even have rattled stock markets in early trading this week.

In contrast, job conditions in India have no real bearing on retail inflation, which RBI must reduce to 4% but often tracks agricultural output, oil import costs and other readings riddled with exasperating uncertainty. This being so, targeting inflation stripped of volatile fuel and food prices (to its 'core', i.e.) would surely ease RBI's job. While the idea of such a target switch is tempting, it is also inadvisable. Price stability in general is what policy must aim for, after all, so that what the rupee is worth declines along a predictable path of purchasing power. This cannot be assured by trying to pin down a half-measure. Instead, it risks letting the prices of essentials off the hook. This would hurt the poor more than others, of course. But a currency whose real value is unstable where it counts, out in the market, also has another bad effect. It unfairly favours borrowers over lenders (and savers), since inflation reduces the real burden of debt over time, unless loans are kept costly to compensate. Given the structural asymmetry in power between a debt-laden government (and businesses) on one side and ordinary folks (and banks) on the other, a central bank empowered to keep actual inflation in check is worth having. Good governance by the Centre involves not just backing an RBI looking to quell unruly prices, but also exercising fiscal restraint, so that state spending doesn't send excess money sloshing around the economy. All said, we should stick to our retail target. Going after core inflation alone would be a cop-out.

THEIR VIEW

India Inc has space to enhance its global role in climate action

Conditions are ripe for Indian industry to mount an international effort aimed at green leadership



GEORGE SKARIA
is a columnist and co-author of the recent book 'Beyond Three Generations: The Definitive Guide to Building Enduring Indian Family Businesses'.

Sumant Sinha, founder, CEO and chairman of Gurgaon-based ReNew, was recently appointed co-chair of the Switzerland-based Alliance of CEO Climate Leaders. This private sector collective has about 130 global chief executive officers from 26 countries representing 12 industries.

Apart from ReNew, at an institutional level, there are eight other Indian companies that are part of this group. While the Conference of the Parties (CoP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is a confluence of countries, the Alliance of CEO Climate Leaders is envisioned as a parallel body at the level of global corporations.

Last year, Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries was nominated a member of the high-powered international advisory panel of CoP-28 held in Dubai. Additionally, again in 2023, when India assumed presidency of two international forums, the G20 and Clean Energy Ministerial, Indian industry played a key role.

Until now, India Inc and its leaders have largely operated on the margins of global climate action. The few examples given here are exceptions. It is, therefore, time that Indian businesses play a more influential role at the global high-table.

The case for India to do so is strong. Home to one-sixth of the world's population, the country's ambition to become the world's third-largest economy in the coming few years and a developed nation by 2047 make it incumbent upon it to increase its participation in climate action.

Further, there are key goals around climate action that India has set out to achieve and an equal number of challenges that it has to overcome. The two main goals include a target of net-zero emissions by 2070 and renewable sources accounting for half of all energy needs by 2030, by when India aims to have 500 gigawatt (GW) of fossil fuel-free generation capacity.

As India transitions from a fossil-fuel led economy to a renewables-based one, it needs to quadruple the annual installations of wind and solar capacity to meet its 2030 target and adopt green hydrogen for diversification.

Finally, with greener transportation on the rise globally and despite India reaching 2 million units of electric vehicles across all categories in 2023, according to Bloomberg NEF estimates, Indian industry faces a number of challenges, including funding, high costs and infrastructural enablers. All these strengthen the argument that Indian business needs to stretch its playground beyond national boundaries to the global landscape. How can that be done?

An Indian agenda for global action: First, even though China is the world's largest polluter in the world, it is also, paradoxically, a global leader in clean-tech products and services like electric vehicles, renewable energy infrastructure and energy solutions.

With the West's growing apathy towards China, from which some nations are looking to decouple in favour of alternatives, India should fill in that void as a global manufacturing hub for clean-tech products. But to do that, India would need to acquire a competitive advantage.

At the same time, India's renewable energy market is finding traction with foreign investors. Both these ambitions would require Indian industry to lobby with trade bodies in the EU and US and engage with global corporations that are looking to invest in India.

Second, the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022 poses some risks. Apart from US protectionism under this law, it could hamper technology transfers to other countries. For India to grow its renewables industry, it will need advanced climate technologies currently unavailable in the country, especially technological advances that are under patent protection.

A 2023 paper by Vyoma Jha and Sameer Kwatra of the climate change research organisation NRDC India argues that existing platforms like the US-India Strategic Clean Energy Partnership, US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies and US-India Hydrogen Task Force should be strengthened to support India's clean energy transition. Further, India needs to leverage its relationship with the US and other countries on the economic and political diplomacy fronts too, quite like it has done for the defence sector.

Third, India's industry associations need to step up further with a global perspective even as they seek to inform policy formulation on clean energy. While the Narendra Modi government in the last 10 years has made reasonable strides in the formulation of policies that support climate action, such as the country's green hydrogen policy, electric vehicle policy, various subsidies and exemptions on import duties, more needs to be done to bring Indian policies in consonance with those overseas.

Finally, oil and gas companies in the country, and those in heavy industries like steel and cement, need to transition from their legacy operations. These industries can draw lessons from global corporations that have travelled farther along the path towards a decarbonized future.

10 YEARS AGO

mint

Rates on hold as RBI looks ahead

MINT METRIC

by Bibek Debroy

Cars with 0-3 kg weight,
Rajasthan's transport department hardly straight.
Car with seating capacity of fifty,
CAG didn't find this nifty.
Some light vehicles really heavy weight.

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

Roll out a measured red carpet for Chinese investment

AJIT RANADE

is a Pune-based economist.

In 2021-22, India received its highest foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow of $84 billion. Two years later, that number was down by nearly half to $44 billion. The reasons are both external and internal to India. Net FDI after subtracting outgoing investment is down 62% to just $11 billion, a 17-year low. The government's ambition is to reach FDI worth $100 billion every year. This will still represent less than 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) and not even one-tenth of the industrial and economic investment that is needed to take GDP growth to a higher orbit. A bulk of the investment will continue to be funded by domestic savings.

FDI is important not just for the dollars flowing in, but also because it brings know-how, cutting-edge technology and management best practices, even as it helps India plug into global value chains. It also helps improve India's human capital, thanks to an osmotic effect, increasing productivity as well as competitiveness. Before the recent decline of FDI, it was on an upward path. The average annual inflow for the past five years is still around $70 billion. This needs to rise to $100 billion. An economy that promises high growth and a large domestic market can surely do so, but it has to roll out the red carpet for FDI from all over the world.

Globally, one of the biggest FDI sources is China, which last year alone poured $148 billion into other economies, the world's third highest, at a time when global aggregate FDI flows were falling. China today represents a sizeable part of the world's savings and investible surplus, of which nothing comes to India. Even before the Galwan clash, India had issued its Press Note 3, restricting FDI from China. Countries without land borders with India have automatic entry, but Chinese investments are scrutinized case-by-case by the home ministry for national security risks. Since April 2020, when this rule came into effect, the government has received 526 proposals from Chinese investors, totalling $11.6 billion worth of FDI. Of these, 201 were rejected and 200 are still pending. Meanwhile, some of that intended equity investment has entered disguised as long-term debt, while the rest has gone away. Of the cumulative FDI received since 2000, India approved only $2.5 billion from China, less than 1% of the total.

In contrast, trade flows between India and China have grown healthily. At the turn of the millennium, bilateral trade was nearly balanced, with total trade being less than $4 billion. But that grew to $120 billion by 2023-24. China has been India's largest trading partner (not counting flows through Hong Kong or Taiwan) in the past 10 years, except for a year or two when the US or UAE edged ahead. The growth of bilateral trade has had a spectacular compound annual rate of 17% in dollar terms, much faster than the GDP growth rate of either economy. In 2001, India was ranked destination No. 19 for exports out of China. In the next decade or so, it jumped to sixth rank, illustrating the size of India's domestic market and its importance to Chinese exporters. Of course, the trade growth is quite skewed, with a large deficit that is adverse to India. Despite sustained efforts, including trade remedies like anti-dumping duties, Chinese imports continue to grow. But India enjoys a large surplus with the US, which balances other deficits. India's current account deficit is below 1% of GDP.

Compartments for different aspects of bilateral ties can yield benefits without raising security risks

The deficit with China can be partly offset by capital inflows to India. Even if 1% of China's vast foreign exchange reserves are deployed in India's infrastructure, it will substantially wipe out the trade deficit. Investments in sectors such as infrastructure, automotive, renewable energy and electric vehicles (EVs) cannot be seen as threats to national security. The *Economic Survey* recommends that India become more receptive to Chinese FDI because it will boost our presence in global value chains, manufacturing competitiveness and exports. There are industries where China has assumed global leadership and there is no way to cut ourselves off from those supplies. Chinese imports are important as inputs for crucial industries in India such as pharmaceuticals, specialty chemicals, electronics assembly, telecom equipment, solar energy and EVs. India is proud of the success of domestic iPhone assembly, but that requires at least three critical Apple vendors with a Chinese connection. Two of them have recently been bought out by the Tata Group. A possible roadmap for future Chinese investments into India could use the template of MG Motors, a Chinese automaker which sold 38% of its shares to JSW, an Indian business group.

India must pursue a compartmentalized approach in its ties with China, with trade, investment, cultural and scientific exchange in one compartment and border issues and geopolitics in another. Even though China unilaterally changed the *status quo* on the border, it is possible to combine realpolitik with trade relations. We can learn from the US approach of a "high fence, small yard."

India cannot ignore China's $7 trillion consumer market as a tremendous export opportunity. And there are many areas where Chinese dollar flows will not jeopardize national security. There could be bilateral investment deals that bypass the dollar currency risk as well. This calls for a hard-headed, open-eyed and nuanced strategy, which uses not just a military or security lens, but also economic and sociocultural considerations. Three billion people who are neighbours on this planet cannot be cut off from each other for too long.

THEIR VIEW

Future generations may well be shocked by today's inequalities

The world needs to evolve a consensus on transferring money from the rich to the poor without hurting economic incentives

KAUSHIK BASU
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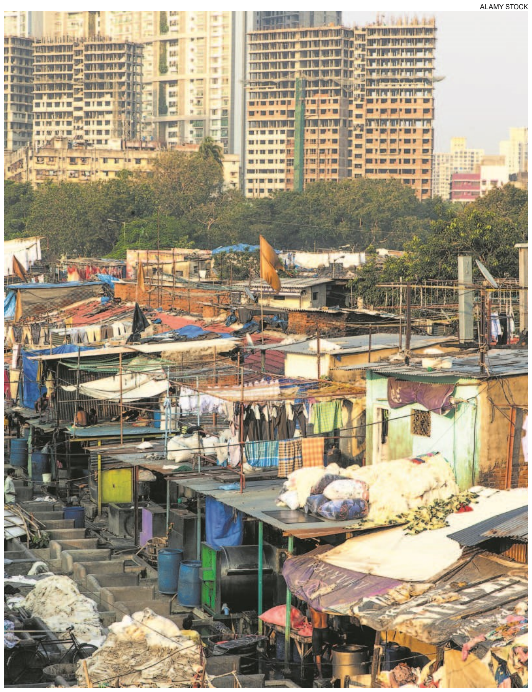
ALAMY STOCK



While there are many ways to measure economic inequality, key metrics consistently show that disparities are getting worse. According to a recent United Nations report, 71% of the world's population now live in countries where inequality has increased.

Unsurprisingly, this includes India and China. A recent paper by Thomas Piketty and his co-authors shows that the income share of the top 1% in India has risen to its highest level since 1922, the earliest data that they have, when the country was still under British colonial rule.

At the same time, global inequality remains extremely high. While billionaire wealth has reached unprecedented levels, the World Bank estimates that 712 million people worldwide survive on less than $2.15 per day.

Future generations will likely be shocked that we have tolerated such extreme levels of inequality, just as we are horrified by our ancestors' acceptance of slavery. But as David Hume argued in the 18th century, moral imperatives ('ought') cannot be derived from objective facts ('is'). In other words, problems like inequality cannot be resolved through science or reason alone. Instead, we must highlight their moral implications to persuade people to act.

Two key aspects of global inequality deserve particular attention. First, economic disparities are set to worsen both within and across countries. As technological advances like artificial intelligence (AI) reduce demand for human labour, working-class households around the world could become increasingly impoverished. Meanwhile, those who own the machines and run the largest corporations are expected to amass unprecedented power and wealth. The US—home to nearly 38 million people living below the poverty line despite being one of the world's richest countries—provides a glimpse into this bleak future.

Second, extreme inequality poses a mortal threat to democracy, enabling billionaires and moneyed interests to influence elections, capture traditional and social media, and shape public perceptions. Regrettably, judging by social-media chatter and trolling, some of the strongest opposition to progressive taxation and redistributive policies comes from poorer segments of society, largely on account of misinformation and manipulation.

The toxic combination of extreme inequality and AI-powered misinformation is also a factor fuelling pressure on liberal democracies and the rise of authoritarian forces around the world. By enabling a few wealthy individuals to wield disproportionate influence, today's global economy increasingly marginalizes and disenfranchises much of the world's population, effectively.

To be sure, misguided attempts to reduce inequality also carry significant risks. For example, trying to achieve perfect egalitarianism would be unwise, because some disparity is necessary to create incentives. Similarly, concentrating all wealth in the hands of the state, as the Soviet Union did, would lead to mismanagement of demand and supply and, ultimately, cronyism.

Instead, what we really need is a progressive tax system that redistributes incomes from the rich to the poor while preserving incentives. Fortunately, there is significant scope for such measures. In my recent book *Reason to Be Happy*, I propose a tax regime that I call the 'accordion tax,' which aims to narrow the income gap by taxing high earners and transferring the revenue to those with lower incomes.

While this model essentially functions as a progressive tax system, its strength lies in its micro structure. Beyond a certain point, the super-rich no longer seek to earn more to buy things. Simply put, after the fifth yacht, the sixth is merely a status symbol aimed at outdoing other wealthy individuals.

By taxing all incomes above a certain threshold and transferring this money to those earning below it, governments could reduce inequality without harming incentives. The richest person will remain the richest, and the second-richest person will work just as hard to reach the top. But the incentives of the middle and working classes, whose members work primarily to make ends meet rather than try to surpass their neighbours, will remain intact.

Although the accordion tax could act as a powerful tool for reducing inequality at the national level, today's globalized economy poses significant implementation challenges. If a government taxes high incomes too aggressively, it risks triggering capital flight.

Thus, reducing global inequality requires multilateral agreements. While the United States is well-positioned to lead this effort, its ability to do so depends on the outcome of November's presidential election. Vice-President Kamala Harris, the presumptive Democratic nominee, offers hope for greater distributive fairness. By contrast, a victory for former President Donald Trump will likely cause inequality to worsen. We can only hope that American voters make the right choice this November.

MINT CURATOR

Trump's poll campaign against Harris has grown even harsher

The US Vice-President's emphasis on unity over division is a relief

NIA-MALIKA HENDERSON
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Kamala Harris has had to shrug off a volley of racist and sexist remarks AP

The Republican approach to US Vice-President Kamala Harris is terrible. Compared to Harris's upbeat, future-oriented campaign, Donald Trump's looks stuck in a doom loop. While House Speaker Mike Johnson has urged his caucus to focus on policy and not personality, Trump and his allies look ready to ignore this good political advice. This will damage his campaign (and the US), but it seems like the only way Trump knows how to run. Racism and sexism are very powerful forces in American politics and have often worked to great effect. Aware of this, Trump and his allies have trotted out their greatest hits of tropes that amplify both.

The problem? Voters have heard it all before. Specifically in 2008 (Barack Obama) and 2016 (Hillary Clinton).

'Make America Great Again' Republicans mispronounce Harris's first name on purpose. Been there, done that with Obama's middle name, Hussein. Trump calls her a "nasty woman," just like he did with Clinton. (It's women—strong and powerful ones —who are always the nasty ones). He and his supporters also seem obsessed with her prior dating life. And they label her an unqualified DEI (diversity, equality and inclusion) candidate who plays the race card, though she has more experience in public office than Trump and his running mate Senator J.D. Vance combined.

Speaking of Vance, during a recent trip back to his hometown of Middletown, Ohio, he suggested that Harris doesn't quite get how wonderful her country is.

"Not everything's perfect. It's never going to be. But you, if you want to lead this country, you should feel grateful for it," Vance said. "You should feel a sense of gratitude. And I never hear that gratitude come through when I listen to Kamala Harris." This, of course, hearkens back to 2008 when Republicans suggested that former First Lady Michelle Obama wasn't proud of her country. And it's clear that Harris's Jamaican and Indian ancestry is fuelling much of that rhetoric. It hasn't taken long for Trump's base to start their birtherism crusade, an old favourite of theirs, against the American-born Harris.

Vance also evidently has a problem with women who haven't birthed children. A 2021 clip of Vance naming Harris among the "childless cat ladies" who shouldn't run the country resurfaced, drawing the ire of many, including celebrities such as Jennifer Aniston. Harris has two step-children, but apparently, step-children don't count.

And the strategy doesn't stop at predictable sexist and racist tropes. In a memo from the National Republican Senatorial Committee, GOP senators were urged to play up "weird" aspects of Harris. Her laugh, love of Venn diagrams and electric school buses made the list, along with wanting to ban plastic straws and supposedly wanting to ban eating red meat.

Of course, Trump will also run against Harris based on her record. His campaign will continue calling her the "border czar" who failed to do her job. They will highlight her tack to the left during the 2020 Democratic primary, her prosecutorial record and negative aspects of the Biden administration's record. But even then, [the truth of his message will be doubtful]. He and his supporters already claim that she hates Jews, which would be news to her Jewish husband, Doug Emhoff.

In sum, Trump will argue over the next 100 days that Harris, the nation's sitting vice president, is a "radical crazy person" and a "radical left lunatic," as he said at a rally in North Carolina.

"We're not ready for a Marxist President, and Lyin' Kamala Harris is a RADICAL LEFT MARXIST, AND WORSE!" Trump posted on his social media platform last week.

Even as Republicans try to focus on Harris's record, Trump knows that presidential elections are mostly about emotions. So he has (again) resorted to fear and anger. But his broken-record rhetoric actually helps Harris make the central point of her campaign, which is this: Trump represents the past—grievances and division. Harris represents the future—hope and unity.

Harris has chosen Beyoncé's song *Freedom* for her campaign. It's a rousing anthem, and in her first video ad, Harris says: "We choose freedom. The freedom not just to get by, but to get ahead. The freedom to be safe from gun violence. The freedom to make decisions about your own body."

There's a great line in the song that sums up Harris' approach to Trump's whirlwind: "Tell the storm, I'm new."

Indeed, this is a different moment. And an African-American and South Asian woman could be the perfect candidate to finally grant the country freedom from Trump. America needs freedom from chaos agents and open peddlers of old and divisive lies.

MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

The East is ahead of the West on facial recognition tech

SIDDHARTH PAI

is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

In 2020, Microsoft, Amazon and IBM announced they would halt the sale of facial recognition technology to police forces. Ethical concerns and the potential for racial bias in these systems primarily drove this decision. I had written back then that while these Big Tech firms were responding to pressure in the wake of the Clearview AI scandal, work on facial recognition tech would continue unabated (*bit.ly/4c82BQv*). To jog your memory, Clearview AI, without specific permission, was accessing all platforms, like Facebook, Instagram and others, that may have had images of our faces.

At the time, Microsoft extended its moratorium on selling facial recognition tech to police indefinitely, emphasizing the need for government regulation before resuming these sales. Amazon initially placed a one-year moratorium on police use of its facial recognition technology, Rekognition, and has since extended this ban. IBM took a clearer stance by exiting the general-purpose facial recognition market, shifting its focus to more specialized applications such as visual recognition for specific industrial purposes. These companies have largely adhered to their promises, but they continue to develop and deploy facial recognition tech in other sectors.

Meanwhile, other companies have filled the gap. International markets, particularly in countries with less stringent regulations, continue to see enthusiastic development and deployment of facial recognition tech. A wag once told me that due to facial recognition and advanced location technologies, at least three governments and possibly 5-6 Big Tech and probably several startups always know precisely where you are. Given the value and convenience that this technology offers ordinary people, this is a good thing.

However, when it comes to racial differentiation, the story is very different—and this is an issue that crops up more often in multi-racial societies, like the US, which explains Big Tech's skittish stance. The issue is that studies have consistently shown that commercially available facial recognition systems are significantly more likely to make errors with faces with skin tones that are not Caucasian. This discrepancy can lead to severe consequences, such as wrongful arrests and prejudice reinforcement.

US government research indicates that facial recognition systems are 10-100 times more likely to misidentify individuals with darker skin tones (*bit.ly/3WObwCn*). In the hands of law enforcement, such error rates can be dangerous; this highlights the need for improved accuracy and bias mitigation in these technologies, which was why Big Tech firms pulled back. In Microsoft's case in 2019, its software had almost ten times more false positives for women of colour than men of colour (*bit.ly/3WNbJFM*), while some years prior, Google's technology was labelling African people as gorillas (*bit.ly/3Wrf7Vz*). It was wise to exit.

India and China may have seen its accuracy improve while error anxiety kept adoption down in the US

Despite the problems observed in the US, India and China have continued to implement this technology extensively, often with claims of high accuracy. This may be because there is less racial heterogeneity in these countries, but there are other reasons as well, primarily governmental support for its use. The accuracy rates claimed by facial recognition systems in India are generally high, supported as they often are by integration with national identification systems such as Aadhaar.

China has invested heavily in facial recognition technology, with claims of high accuracy rates supported by large-scale data collection and integration with various surveillance and identification systems. The Chinese government reports accuracy rates as high as 99%, though these figures are not always independently verified and may be influenced by Beijing's investment in state control and surveillance programmes. In China, independent verification and the ethical implications of these technologies remain areas of concern.

Several factors might explain high accuracy claims in India and China that contrast with America's experience with facial recognition. Government backing of projects, with significant funding combined with access to governmental resources, for example, could have made a difference. India and China both have much larger populations than other countries in the world, so their access to vast databases of images allows for more comprehensive training of facial recognition algorithms, improving their accuracy. Moreover, combining facial recognition with other identification methods (such as national ID systems) can enhance the overall accuracy of these systems. Regulatory frameworks in India and China also tend to be less stringent than in the US, allowing for more flexible and widespread deployment and iterative improvement of facial recognition technology. At least in India, this has offered citizens convenience, such as faster security checks during air and rail travel.

Microsoft, Amazon and IBM's commitments to stop the sale of facial recognition technology to police forces have been widely endorsed in the US, reflecting a response to ethical and societal concerns. Despite this, the development of facial recognition technology has continued unabated, as I had predicted. While racial bias remains a significant issue in the US, India and China continue to advance their facial recognition systems, claiming high accuracy rates. To my mind, this accuracy will increase. And in India, its use cases have so far been of great value to people at large.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Justice delayed

Chief Justice of India highlights frustration over court delays, calls for urgent reforms to address pendency

The Chief Justice of India has voiced a growing concern shared by many: the prolonged delays in Indian courts are causing immense frustration among the public, turning the judicial process into an unwelcome ordeal. In a recent statement, the Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud remarked, "People get fed up with protracted court proceedings, the process becomes a punishment." This stark observation brings to light the urgent need to address the pervasive issue of case pendency in India's legal system. The Indian judiciary is grappling with an overwhelming backlog of cases, which has long been a subject of public discontent and legal scrutiny. The Chief Justice of India's recent statement underscores the severity of this issue, highlighting how extended court delays are not only hindering justice but also eroding public trust in the legal system. As of recent estimates, over 40 million cases are pending across various levels of the Indian judiciary and may take 300 years to clear it at the going pace. This staggering number includes civil, criminal, and administrative cases, many of which have been unresolved for years or even decades.

The backlog creates a bottleneck that prevents timely justice, leading to prolonged legal battles and increasing costs for the litigants. Extended delays can lead to a lack of confidence in the judiciary, with people perceiving the legal process as slow and inefficient. When cases languish in the courts for years without resolution, individuals begin to doubt the effectiveness and reliability of the judicial system. Knowing that legal proceedings are likely to be drawn out, many individuals may avoid seeking justice through the courts altogether. This reluctance is particularly pronounced among those who cannot afford prolonged litigation or who need prompt resolution due to personal or financial constraints. The inordinate delays can drive people to seek alternative, and often extrajudicial, means of resolving disputes. Moreover, businesses and investors rely on a robust legal system to enforce contracts and resolve disputes. Addressing these delays is crucial for maintaining the integrity and efficacy of the judicial system and ensuring that justice is accessible and timely for all citizens. Several factors contribute to the chronic issue of case pendency in India. A significant number of judicial positions remain unfilled. The legal procedures in India can be highly complex, often leading to unnecessary delays. Many courts lack the necessary infrastructure and technological support. But the biggest source of delay is the practice of frequent adjournments, often granted for frivolous reasons. A Bollywood film dialogue 'tareekh pe tareekh' sums it up succintly. Some issues have been dealt with in the amendments to the Indian penal code which are now called 'Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita' but a lot more needs to be done to expedite justice and establish a rule of law! As the saying goes, "Justice delayed is justice denied," and the legal system must cope with the needs of a fast-paced society that we have today.

PICTALK

People take a dip before performing rituals on the occasion of 'Aadi Amavasai', in Rameshwaram PTI

Grim prospects for peace in West Asia

UMANG **KOHLI**

The killing of Hamas leader threatens to derail any hopes for a ceasefire in Gaza further complicating efforts for peace in the region

Israel seems to have eliminated Hamas leader Haniyeh, using an airborne guided projectile in an early morning attack. Haniyeh was in Iran for the Iranian president's swearing-in ceremony as a state guest and was staying in one of the residences for veterans. The events in the Middle East are shaping dangerously, the things as they are turning out to be, it's not out of the scope of imagination that soon Iran may be part of a major regional conflict.

We have already seen that a confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel is underway in Lebanon. However, Israel has still not taken responsibility for the strike. Israel has been accusing Iran of harbouring Hamas leaders like Haniyeh and has openly vowed to kill them. Israel not taking responsibility for the attack shows that it does not want a direct confirmation with Iran right now. It remains to be seen how things play out, there is also a section in Israel that is suspicious of Iran's state media's claim that Haniyeh has even been killed.

Having said that there are little or no takers of the version that Israel is not responsible for the killing of Hamas's political leader. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa has condemned the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh and termed it a violation of the entire international rule of law. The act is a grave violation of Iran's sovereignty and the supposed security bubble of the Iranian capital. This is likely to have far-reaching consequences in the short and the long term. Haniyeh, normally based in Qatar, had been the face of international diplomacy for Hamas. He had been an important part of internationally brokered indirect talks on reaching a ceasefire in the Palestinian enclave. This killing appears to set back chances of any imminent ceasefire agreement in the 10-month-old war in Gaza and Lebanon.

Vowing to retaliate, Iran declared three days of national mourning. Iran has blamed the U.S. for providing Israel with the missiles that have been fired, and hence holding it directly responsible. The US itself has accepted that the risk of escalation is certainly up right now.

The killing of Haniyeh has made the task of de-escalation, deterrence and dissuasion towards war, which is the goal of the UN and the international community, much more complicated. It has given a reason for those who want things to escalate on both sides to scuttle chances of peace and also provided them with the fodder to fuel further attacks on each other with impunity.

> HEZBOLLAH WILL FIND LEGITIMACY IN TAKING ON ANY POSSIBLE TARGET IN ISRAEL, CIVIL OR MILITARY. IRAN WOULD FIND IT CONVENIENT TO DIRECTLY USE SOME OF ITS MISSILES AGAINST ISRAEL AND THE YARDSTICK TO JUDGE ITS EFFECTIVENESS WOULD BE THE NUMBER OF CIVILIANS KILLED

The immediate consequences of this escalation, Netanyahu will get support from the far right in Israel and he may push for attacks deeper into Lebanon. Hezbollah will find legitimacy in taking on any possible target in Israel, civil or military. Iran would find it convenient to directly use some of its missiles against Israel and the yardstick to judge its effectiveness would be the number of civilians killed. The Houthis will attack commercial ships in the Red Sea even more, leading to loss of business and livelihood across the world. Palestinians would cry on the streets for lack of food and medicine even more, but like always would only get lip service.

Oil prices will go up and some people will make even more money.

More arms would be sold and better technology would be used to kill more people in less time. More and more areas may become dangerous even for the media. Schools and hospitals may be targeted even more since all the terrorists are hiding there only.

In the US leaders would keep blaming each other for the escalation with each side doing what is required to be done to get votes. UN is likely to look even more helpless in the days to come.

Apart from this humanity would be disgraced for it does not feel ashamed of any act of inhuman violent behaviour anymore. Aircraft carriers from the US will be deployed to safeguard the territorial integrity of Israel. There will be calls for people to join hands in the name of religion, and they will, only humanity will be divided and more people will die.

Some people in India may find this killing of Haniyeh a great act of bravery, and they may even ask the political hierarchy to take lessons or even replicate this kind of attack.

Little do they realise that Israel has been fighting for existence, and are not at peace with themselves, peace has eluded them since their existence. However, we as a country are at peace and no one can dare challenge our existence, and hence we should never think of acting whimsically.

(The writer is expert on geopolitics and international Affairs. The views expressed are personal)

Handling disrespect and finding inner peace

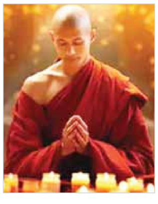
SANJAY **CHANDRA**

We should recognise the value of pausing and reflecting, to determine whether our reactions to perceived insults are genuinely justified

I read a beautiful story by a well-known Indian author about a middle-class household. The lady of the house locks herself in an earmarked dark room whenever she feels unloved and uncared for by her family. We too retreat to our inner self, the equivalent of our dark room, sometimes in our lives.During a recent vacation, my wife's friend compared me to a beast of burden.

The adjective is also often used by parents admonishing their good-for-nothing sons. The word is probably also applicable to all husbands. I sulked till a couple of hours later, I gave it back to her.

This time my wife objected, forcing me into another sulk. They had probably expected a better sense of humour. I was not amused. A friendly neighbour objected to my entrance to attend a meeting in a rather loud stage whisper for reasons I was unaware of. I was asked to wait outside. It turned out that he was retaliating to an earlier fight with another neighbour. He had probably expected



me to empathise with his unexpressed anguish. I felt insulted.Another time, a neighbour acting as an observer in society elections, got up rather aggressively, started shouting at me, and asked me to get out, on the grounds of some rules not mentioned anywhere.

A couple of hours later, he came out and shook hands with me. I tried to mend fences by putting on my best smile. He rudely turned his face away, telling anyone who cared to listen, "He is a writer; he does not even know the rules."

I could not understand the relationship between a writer and knowledge of unwritten rules. Rationally thinking about the incident a day later, I thought he was probably venting his frustration about inadequate writing skills. It was no consolation.

I faced several unpleasant events in my professional life. I took them in my stride. One such incident happened within a few weeks after I had joined my first working post in the railways.

I sat in the senior foreman's office after my usual morning round of the maintenance shed, when I was interrupted in my discussions by the entry of 30 odd staff led by a union leader. Listening to the problems, I was startled by the landing of an earthenware teacup on the table.

They were trying to gauge my reaction. I took it as a management challenge, not an insult.I witnessed a catfight between two young ladies in an upmarket shop in Delhi. One lady had tried to get ahead of the other at the payment counter.

I was relieved that it remained a verbal duel, rather than turning into a fisticuff. In another incident, a mother trying to help her teenage son choose clothes was rudely snubbed by the latter, "Do not talk like a fool." The mother had tears in her eyes as she surreptitiously looked around, and then fussed some more over her child. I too looked the other way, embarrassed at the rude snub in public to a mother's affection.

There are many such incidents that we face in our lives. We take a few more seriously than the others, while others we shrug off. The line between a perceived insult and rational logic is often blurred.

It is easy to cross this line without even realising it.It may save a visit to the inner dark room, if we do not react, but pause, reflect, and remember the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, "It is not he who reviles or strikes you who insults you, but your opinion that these things are insulting."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOOD SECURITY VS RISING PRICES

Madam — Apropos "Modi reaffirms India's role as Vishwa Bandhu, Aug 4. According to him, Inda has become a food surplus country and second largest producer of foodgrains, fruits and vegetables etc. But the high prices of cereals, pulses, edible oils, vegetables and fruits etc. has indeed impacted households across the country and made them beyond affordability of many.

According to the Economic Times, since November 2023, food inflation in the country has persisted at around 8% year-on-year. The Opposition too raises repeatedly about high food inflation. Percapita consumption of pulses, fruits and vegetables in India are one of the lowest in the world. Low consumption of them affects overall health, leading to deficiencies in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and accordingly Indians are deficient in them, particularly in children it is a grave concern. Vegetarianism is a major dietary choice in India, therefore, plant-based food must be available at affordable prices in adequate quantities for a healthy nation.

O Prasada Rao| *Hyderabad*

INDIAN HOCKEY TEAM EXCELS

Madam—Who could have asked for more intriguing and a close contest in Sunday that added yet another unforgettable moment to India's hockey history that snatched victory from the jaws of defeat that once loomed large.

After surprising world class Australia in a span of 52 years , India continued their winning streak by defeating England 4 2 in a nail biting finish in Olympics Hockey that kept millions of fans glued to their t.v. sets. With this resounding win , India enter into the semi finals.

The national game of India Hockey is again in the limelight as India produced a real fitting spirit especially at a critic moment when the odds are stacked against them as they were reduced to 10 . This also could not dampened their spirit as Veteran Goalkeeper P.R Sreejesh saved one goal after to showcase her prowess that even saved penalties to see India remain in contention for a medal. This achievement has added yet another feather in the cap of Indian hockey since the 1972 Munich Olympics that India reached the semifinals in back to back games, followed the bronze medal in Tokyo.

The English team could not penetrate the Great wall of India as Indian players fought like warriors throughout the match and took it to the penalties. It seems that the golden era of Indian hockey is returning . No matter what the outcome of the forth coming matches, but one positive is the world class overall performance and team coordination , cooperation , fighting spirit until the last, hard work has really won hearts of millions.

Vijay Singh Adhikari | *Nainital*

Quota within quota

This refers to the news report, "Apex Court Upholds Quota Within Quota" (August 3). The Supreme Court's historic verdict now allows states to sub-categorize Scheduled Castes (SCs) for reservations. This sub-categorization is crucial as many SCs, particularly marginalized groups like the Balimiki in North India, Madiga and Arunthathiyar in South India, and Mang in Maharashtra, have been left behind in accessing benefits meant for SCs. Previously, states struggled to ensure their share of benefits due to an earlier Supreme Court judgment in the EV Chinnaiah case. However, the recent Supreme Court ruling has highlighted the political dilemma faced by parties. During the assembly elections in Telangana last year, Prime Minister Modi announced a committee to examine the Madigas' demand for sub-categorization.

Implementing this sub-categorization is challenging in many other states, as it faces opposition from NDA ministers like Chirag Paswan and Ramdas Athawale. Sub-categorisation could affect the interests of dominant castes such as Paswan in Bihar, Mahars in Maharashtra, and Jatavs in UP, Rajasthan, and Delhi. Will the BJP risk losing Paswan's support in Bihar? Additionally, the BJP is seeking to gain Jatav votes in UP, traditionally supporters of the BSP. Therefore, it will be interesting to see the BJP's stance on the Supreme Court's decision.

Manoj Parashar | *Ghaziabad*

SMOKING IS INJURIOUS TO HEALTH

Madam —A bulletin issued by the World Health Organization explores the increasing smoking among women and its health effects on children or unborn babies. A shocking reality has come to light. Children's lungs are affected by women who smoke. Also, such children have weak immune system and children suffering from diseases like asthma are struggling with lung related diseases throughout their life. In adolescence and old age, such children's immunity decreases. It has been found.

Women are also suffering from various lung diseases due to the addiction of v-cigarettes and e-cigarettes. The major disease in these patients is asthma. It has been observed significantly. Also, children in such households are constantly sick due to various reasons. Increasing smoking among women affects the infant and children born with smaller lungs and weak immune system. It has been found that India has Also, the warning given by the World Health Organization must be taken seriously. The problem of babies born with small lungs due to smoking is a big challenge.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar | *Mumbai*

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THE HINDU

On the edge

While protecting Israel, the West must also rein in Netanyahu

The killings of Fuad Shukr, a senior Hezbollah commander, in Beirut, and Ismail Haniyeh, the political chief of Hamas, in Tehran, within hours on July 30 have taken West Asia to the brink of a wider war. Israel has claimed the strike on Beirut that killed Shukr, but has neither confirmed nor denied its role in the assassination of Haniyeh, a standard approach about its operations inside Iran. Israel's northern border with Lebanon has remained tense ever since the Gaza war broke out last year with Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces exchanging fire. After Shukr was killed, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said Israel had breached a red line, and the group has launched dozens of rockets over the past week, heightening the tensions. A bigger risk is the expected Iranian retaliation against Israel. When Israel bombed Iran's embassy complex in Damascus on April 1, Iran launched hundreds of drones and cruise and ballistic missiles towards Israel, most of which were shot down by a U.S.-led coalition. If Iran carried out such an attack in response to an Israeli strike on its embassy in a third country, it is unlikely to ignore a direct Israeli attack on its capital that killed an ally who was in Tehran to attend the presidential inauguration.

To be sure, by killing Haniyeh in Tehran, Israel has demonstrated its capabilities to pull off sophisticated operations even in hostile territories and exposed Iran's security and intelligence vulnerabilities. Israel has also sent a strong message to Hamas, which carried out the October 7, 2023 attack, that none of its leaders is safe. Yet, this unchecked militarism of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could turn out to be counterproductive for Israel in the long run. It is now apparent that Mr. Netanyahu is not serious about peace. The killing of Haniyeh has come at a time when both Israel and Hamas were making progress in talks for a hostage-ceasefire deal. Haniyeh, who was living in exile in Doha, was a relatively moderate voice within Hamas who pushed for a ceasefire. By taking him out, Mr. Netanyahu is telling the world that he wants the war to continue. And, by carrying out the attack in Tehran, which is a flagrant violation of Iran's sovereignty, Mr. Netanyahu is practically challenging the Islamic Republic to retaliate. If a direct war breaks out between Israel and Iran, the U.S. could be dragged into it, which is what Israel wants. The Biden administration avoided such a disastrous outcome in April by reining in Israel after Iran's retaliation. But that did not stop Israel from launching another provocative attack against Iran, taking the region back to the brink again. As West Asia braces for Iran's retaliation, the U.S. and its allies should work together to make sure that the impact of its response on Israel would be minimal, and then put in place new rules of the game for Israel so that it does not threaten regional security again as it did on April 1 or July 30.

On target

Indian shooters lived up to expectations in Paris Olympics

Ever since Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore won the silver medal in the men's double trap shooting at the Athens Olympics in 2004, Indian shooters have always dealt with the pressure of expectations. The stress quadrupled when Abhinav Bindra won the gold in the 10m air rifle category in the 2008 Beijing Games. This success was replicated in the 2012 London Games with Gagan Narang winning the bronze in the 10m air rifle shooting while Vijay Kumar did one better, seizing the silver in the 25m rapid fire pistol competition. And then followed the inexplicable drought in shooting during the subsequent editions at Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo. Cut to the latest Paris Games, where all doubts pertaining to whether the shooters would hit bullseye were emphatically laid to rest as 22-year-old Manu Bhaker became the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal in shooting. It was also Manu's turn to exorcise the ghosts of the past as in the previous Tokyo Games she faltered as an equipment malfunction affected her performance. First up, Manu claimed the bronze in the 10m air pistol. Later she combined with Sarabjot Singh to win another bronze in the mixed 10m air pistol segment. A hat-trick though proved elusive as she finished fourth in the 25m pistol final.

Manu's success is a testimony to the rapid strides that Indian shooting has made besides being a tribute to an efficient system that the sporting fraternity has established. Manu is following the path that predecessors Anjali Bhagwat and Suma Shirur, presently a head coach too, had carved. Those were days when funds were meagre and, at times, awkward questions were asked about carrying firearms at airports as the knowledge of shooting as a sport was low. Anjali and Suma did not win an Olympics medal but they inspired their juniors to follow the sport with passion. Manu linking up with her former coach Jaspal Rana, an ace shooter himself, helped add a new dimension. Shooting demands still hands, a sharp eye and a zen mind, and finally Manu revealed that she was in the zone while aiming at the target. Her traits were evident in Swapnil Kusale too as he won bronze in the men's 50m rifle three positions event. Equally, Arjun Babuta's fourth-place finish in the men's 10m air rifle final was a pointer to shooting's razor thin margins that split ecstasy and agony. There was more grief too in archery, as India continued to fail at the Olympics with Deepika Kumari and company often stumbling at the business end.

The social benefits of stock market speculation

Prashanth Perumal

The Government of India, in its Budget, raised taxes on both short-term and long-term capital gains made in the stock market and also raised the securities transaction tax on derivatives transactions.

The fundamental belief behind the idea of imposing higher taxes on stock market profits is that gains from stock market speculation are akin to gains from gambling. In fact, the Economic Survey released a day prior to the Budget argued that unlike developed countries, a developing country such as India cannot afford to waste its limited savings on stock market speculation. Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan even noted that capital gains could be taxed at higher rates as it is currently the fastest-growing income class.

Capital gains made in the stock market are somehow seen as easy profits earned by investors without providing any useful service to society. Similar disdain is also shown when the owner of a piece of real estate profits from a rise in the price of his or her property – as is evident in the removal of indexation benefits for real estate investors in the recent Budget. This is not surprising because many believe that when an investor buys an asset and sells it at a higher price in the future, he does not add any value to society in the process. In fact, capital gains are seen as a major reason behind growing inequality and taxing such gains is deemed good for society. The truth, however, is very different from this belief.

How capital gains occur

To understand why, one must first consider how capital gains occur in an economy. In a world where investors could perfectly forecast the future cash flow from different assets, there would be no capital gains because it would then be impossible for any investor to buy an asset at a price that is cheaper than its fair value. Here is an explanation, with a very simple example. Suppose investors knew very precisely that a business (or any other asset) would yield a one-time cash flow of ₹110 a year from now and they wanted a minimum annual return of 10%. Competition among investors to purchase the business would ensure that any buyer would have to pay ₹100 for it or risk losing it to other potential buyers. In such a Utopian world, there would be no opportunity for any investor to purchase the business for, let us say, ₹50 and sell it later at its fair value of ₹100 to earn a profit (or capital gains) of 100%.

The real world, of course, is far from perfect as the future is often uncertain. Hence, forecasts about the future cash flow of businesses can, at times, vary a lot. This basically means that investors may end up over-investing in certain businesses when compared to the likely future cash flow of these businesses, leading to overvaluation. They may also under-invest in other businesses, leading to undervaluation. Investors who put their money in undervalued businesses have the chance to earn capital gains when other investors finally recognise the fair value of these businesses and bid up their prices. So, an investor who makes capital gains is essentially one who deploys his capital efficiently into businesses whose future cash flow justifies the investment. An investor who suffers capital losses, on the other hand, is one who misallocates capital into businesses whose future cash flow does not justify the investment.

This lesson has important social implications. An economy that allocates a large part of its capital inefficiently would be poorer than another economy that allocates its capital more efficiently. This is because the way capital is allocated also determines how scarce resources are allocated towards satisfying different ends of society. Imagine if, during a pandemic such as COVID-19, investors in a country allocated most of their capital into building cruise ships and passenger aircraft which very few people want during a pandemic rather than building new hospitals and testing facilities that are in high demand. Such a country, where investors misallocated capital, would be directing its resources in an inefficient way than another economy where investors correctly prioritised health care over less important sectors. While a uniform tax on capital gains across all businesses may help prevent such resource misallocation, higher tax collections will still affect private incentives and the size of the overall economic pie.

The issue of 'gambling instincts'

Now, some may dispute that the argument above, for the benefits of speculation, does not apply to most of the buying and selling that happens in the stock market. When a retail investor buys a share of a business, they rightly say, the investor's cash often does not actually go into the balance sheet of the business but into the hands of the previous owner. What these critics do not understand, however, is that in many cases, early investors may not even be keen in investing in a business unless there is an active market such as the stock exchange where they could readily sell their shares to potential buyers in the future. The Centre says it wants to encourage long-term investing in companies by raising the tax on short-term capital gains. But it does not understand that without traders with "gambling instincts", who regularly buy and sell stocks in the short-term, there would not be sufficient liquidity in the market for many long-term investors to easily sell their stocks.

Further, a highly liquid market also ensures that the shares of businesses are priced as accurately as possible. The efficient pricing of the shares of companies can help ensure that companies with promising prospects are able to raise funds more easily than companies with shaky prospects, thus aiding the efficient allocation of resources.

It is worse for derivatives

Meanwhile, gains that speculators make from derivatives such as futures and options suffer an even worse reputation than the more straightforward capital gains made from trading shares. But again, disdain towards derivatives speculation also comes from a lack of understanding of its social benefits.

Derivatives are contracts that allow investors to buy or sell an underlying asset such as a stock at a predetermined price in the future. In other words, these instruments allow one group of investors to offload the risk associated with changes in the price of an asset onto another group of investors who are willing to assume the risk. So, derivatives basically help in the transfer of risk among investors. It should be noted that without derivatives, many investors would simply not be willing to make many investments at all. A great example is of a farmer who may have the skills to produce agricultural output but not the skill or the risk appetite to forecast the future prices of his produce. In the absence of futures contracts that can assure the farmer a certain price for his produce in the future, the farmer will likely be discouraged from producing any output at all due to the risk of potential price fluctuations.

Derivatives trading can often look like pure gambling. This is particularly so in cases where neither party to the contract has any intention to ever actually buy or sell the underlying asset but purely wants to bet on changes in the price of the asset. Such bets on the price of an underlying asset can seem to be no different from bets placed on the outcome of a game of cricket or football. But note that such pure speculative bets in derivatives are not very different from much of the trading that happens in the cash market, where both the buyer and the seller of a stock may – unlike fundamental investors – trade without any long-term interest in the underlying business. We have seen that such active trading in stocks can be socially beneficial as it offers crucial liquidity to long-term investors who want to buy or sell based on fundamentals. Similarly, traders who bet in derivatives for purely speculative reasons help improve the availability of these instruments to fundamental investors who want to manage risk.

A better understanding of these benefits of stock market speculation can lead to better public policy.

A better understanding of the benefits of stock market speculation — erroneously viewed as akin to gambling — can lead to better public policy

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The issue of institutional violence, addressing it

Mathangi Swaminathan

the founder of Parity Lab, a first-of-its-kind feminist accelerator for survivor-led-organisations fighting against gender-based violence. She is an Echoing Green Fellow, an Acumen India Fellow, a World Economic Forum Global Shaper, and an alumna of the Harvard Kennedy School

India's electoral process presents a dichotomy. Six hundred and forty-two million voters, more than half of whom were female, cast a vote in the largest democratic process in action in the world. Yet, in a country where 90 rapes are reported everyday, very few among the 2,823 candidates who stood for elections, had women's safety on their electoral agenda. For those that did, all were sporadic and none tackled the underlying institutional violence that millions of survivors live through everyday.

This dichotomy is real: nearly 50% women face domestic violence and two out of three Dalit women face sexual violence in their lifetimes. Yet, not just political parties ignored this. Even voters did not seem to demand it.

Prolonged and worse

Gender-based violence is incorrectly presumed to be one specific act of violence, often by an intimate partner at the household level, that politicians cannot address. However, in a white paper developed through 200-plus hours of interviews and discussions with lived experts, we found that the institutional violence on survivors is often prolonged and worse than the specific act of gender-based violence itself. This is where voters and politicians can make a vital difference.

Institutional violence against survivors starts even before the reporting process, influencing their decision to come forward. For example, a report published in 2019 by J-PAL, a global policy think tank, showed that 39% of officers in India think that complaints of gender-based violence are usually baseless. With a brutal police system, a decades-long traumatic judicial system and no hope of justice, a vicious cycle of violence is maintained.

Women only seek justice when their circumstances become unbearable. Despite one in two women facing intimate partner violence, India has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world at 1%. A report estimated that 77% of women in India remain silent, even to their closest relatives, about the violence they endure.

"A woman once approached us with bleeding veins," said Ranjita, Founder of Samarthya, a Denotified Nomadic Tribal youth and women-led organisation. "We accompanied her to the police station to file a complaint, and the cops told us to step aside so they could talk to her alone. They tried to dissuade her from filing the report and sent us around to different police stations. When she still wanted to report, they accused us of coercing her... Now, they tell us that since she comes from the neighbouring State of Karnataka, this case is out of their jurisdiction. These are the challenges we face with the justice system."

Problems in rural India

In rural India, male and upper-caste dominated panchayats add an additional set of barriers for women to seek justice. Divorce is almost never an option: India has a backlog of 40 million court cases and this particularly impacts survivors of gender-based violence, even more so survivors from marginalised communities with pre-existing systemic inequities due to their caste, literacy and geography.

"Getting justice in India can lead to a lot of injustice," says Ranjita.

We, as a country, have lost hope. This is where bureaucrats and elected leaders can come in and make a difference by creating survivor-centric institutions.

For years, social impact organisations have been taking up this responsibility to train police and members of the judicial system to adopt a trauma-informed lens. For example, Vanangna, a women-led organisation in Bundelkhand trains government officials, including the police and law enforcement, on women-centric and survivor-centric processes. We need to adopt these learnings at a national level, and we need the wisdom of survivors of violence, especially those from historically marginalised communities, to help us design and validate a just system.

Strong laws, weak implementation

India has strong domestic violence laws, yet, implementation has been a colossal failure due to inept officials and archaic processes. This is unsurprising because the officials come from the very society that has condoned violence. We need a national reimagination and improvisation of our justice institutions by leveraging the learnings of organisations such as Vanangna, to make them trauma-informed and focused on healing.

We also need more data and more stories to be shared publicly. For decades, institutional violence has been amplified by a lack of data. It is impossible to truly understand how often and how many women are being denied access to justice.

Granted, the recent updates to criminal law procedures heavily focus on timeliness and ease of access through digital means. However, this needs to be accompanied by gender-sensitive training and monitoring and evaluation measures to ensure staff have a trauma-informed approach when working with survivors of violence.

Voters and politicians have the power to shine a light on the issue and make a massive difference. For example, with the widespread government campaign to promote education of girls, we have seen a massive national shift in enrolment of girls in school.

For such a shift to happen in the small and large institutions of our country where survivors of violence no longer fear the repercussions of accessing justice, we, as voters, must demand our rights.

Our women deserve safety and dignity. We must fight for it.

Voters and politicians have the power to highlight the issue and make a difference

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Yamini Krishnamurthy

With Yamini Krishnamurthy's passing, we have lost someone who was possibly the most outstanding Bharatanatyam dancer in recent times. I recall that I was responsible for bringing her to Delhi and presenting her to Delhi audiences. When the newly built Ashoka Hotel was ready, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had specifically said that we should have a strong cultural wing so that it becomes more than just a hotel — rather, a cultural centre for the capital. It was in this context that we invited Professor Krishnamurthy and his daughter to come to Delhi. Her advent created quite a sensation. The sheer energy that she put into her *jatis* with her intricate footwork was a joy to see. Happily she stayed on in Delhi for several decades and received three Padma Awards, going up to the Padma Vibhushan. Her Kuchipudi was also superb and in fact along with Raja and Radha Reddy whom we also presented at Ashoka Hotel, they introduced this second great South Indian classical dance form to Delhi audiences. Unfortunately, her health faded towards the end and she has passed away. But her memory will always remain with people who had the privilege of seeing her dance for several decades.

Karan Singh,
New Delhi

Bangladesh crisis

The unprecedented turmoil in Bangladesh, which has led to the fleeing of the Bangladesh Prime Minister, clearly indicates public wrath that has been brewing for some time. The volatile situation in a neighbouring country should be a cause for concern given the bonhomie between New Delhi and Dhaka. As of now, it should be a wait and watch policy for India. Politicians in India should be aware of the state of the youth given concerns about unemployment in India.

G. Ramasubramanyam,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

The instability in Bangladesh — though it has different dimensions — resonates with the turmoil that Sri Lanka underwent a couple of years ago. Such instability in India's immediate neighbourhood causes innumerable threats which may have spillover effects. With the burial of SAARC, there is concern over stability in the region.

M. Rishidev,
Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hasina's ouster

Authoritarian govt gets its comeuppance

MASSIVE anti-government protests have forced Sheikh Hasina to step down as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and flee the country in the wake of widespread violence that claimed over 300 lives in just three weeks. A democrat who turned into a dictator, Hasina had it coming. She chose to ride roughshod over the people's aspirations and took them for granted. The dramatic turn of events has happened barely seven months after a controversial general election that was boycotted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other Opposition parties. Hasina had stormed to power for the fourth time in a row, but the allegations of rigging and strong-arm tactics tainted her victory. Desperate to drum up support for herself and her government, she visited India and China in recent months, even as trouble was brewing at home.

The Hasina regime grossly mishandled the agitation launched by students in protest against 30 per cent reservation in government jobs for relatives of freedom fighters who won independence for Bangladesh in 1971. The Supreme Court slashed the quota to 5 per cent, but the government's reluctance to release the arrested student leaders enraged the protesters, who upped the ante against Hasina. The public anger was exemplified by a mob vandalising a statue of her father, 'Bangabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who spearheaded the country's liberation movement.

The developments are reminiscent of the 2022 protests in Sri Lanka that led to the ouster of the Rajapaksa brothers. The next government in Bangladesh will have to address the burning issues of high youth unemployment, economic stagnation and inflation. New Delhi, which enjoyed good ties with Hasina-ruled Dhaka, will have to recalibrate its strategy in view of the colossal churn in the neighbouring country. With the return of Pakistan-aligned BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami imminent, India needs to be wary of adverse headwinds in the subcontinent.

Protect the voiceless

Wildlife crime cases surge in northern India

THE alarming increase in wildlife crime in northern India is a stark reminder of the ongoing battle between conservation efforts and illegal activities. Over the past five years, a staggering 683 wildlife crime cases have been reported across Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chandigarh. This data, obtained from the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), reveals the grim reality facing our nation's biodiversity. Uttar Pradesh, with 425 cases, and Uttarakhand, with 152, are the epicentres of these crimes, highlighting the severe threats to local wildlife. These cases include poaching, forest fires, encroachments and the smuggling of animal body parts. Notably, Himachal reported cases involving the trafficking of snow leopard skins and bear gall bladders, underscoring the diverse and valuable wildlife targeted by poachers.

While the WCCB's efforts, including cyber-patrolling and training enforcement officers, are commendable, they are not enough. The decline in cases in UP from 158 in 2019 to 19 in 2023 may suggest some progress, but it is also an indicator of the work that remains. The data points to the fact that while some states have seen a reduction, others continue to struggle, and emerging trends like the trafficking of exotic species at airports show that poachers are adapting and finding new ways to circumvent the law.

The urgency to address wildlife crime cannot be overstated. Protecting our wildlife is not just about preserving individual species; it's about maintaining the ecological balance and ensuring a sustainable future for all. This fight requires a multifaceted approach, including stricter enforcement, public awareness campaigns and robust international cooperation. If investigative and enforcement methods do not evolve and stay ahead of poaching syndicates, India's richly diverse ecosystems will suffer the consequences. We must safeguard the natural heritage for future generations.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 1924

Lord Chelmsford's speech

WE have said that it was unfortunate that it should have been left to such a man as Lord Chelmsford to befriend the cause of India in the recent debate in the House of Lords, in which so many ex-Indian views and sympathies took part, and in which sentiments of a most pernicious character were expressed. Even a cursory examination of the ex-Viceroy's speech will suffice to show how ill-fitted he was for the task thus entrusted to him. There was not in the whole speech a word of rebuke to either Lord Inchcape or Lord Harris or Lord Ampthill for the views expressed by them on the question of Indian self-government, views which, Lord Chelmsford could not but be aware, would, if left unchallenged, do great mischief in India. Nor was Lord Curzon's equally provocative reference to Lord Olivier's recent speech in which he had asked the House to take a common sense view of Mr Das' attitude in the matter of the Saha resolution handled with anything like the strength and earnestness which were imperatively demand. If anything, Lord Chelmsford was clearly apologetic. "I wished it was sufficiently realised," he said, "how difficult it is at this distance from India to form a sound judgment on some problems like those raised by the utterances of Mr Das which had been so often quoted in that House. Lord Peel might form one inference from the facts before him and Lord Olivier form another from what was before him." This was not facing but fighting shy of the real issue. Distance had nothing to do with the matter; nor was the question merely of different persons drawing different inferences from the facts before them.

Lured into a life-killing rat race

Civil services aspirants should stop mythologising the jobs of IAS/IPS officers

AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

TRAGIC: The death of three IAS aspirants in New Delhi is symptomatic of the rot plaguing our education system. PTI

ENOUGH has already been said and discussed about the tragic death of three IAS aspirants in New Delhi. It is like realising the implications of the all-pervading civil services myth, the agony of the perplexed/exploited generation, the crude business of India's black education system — the demonic coaching industry — and above all, the unholy alliance of the merchants of education and corrupt government functionaries. Imagine the callousness and corruption — a fancy and well-advertised IAS coaching centre running a library in the basement of the building, and feeling quite at ease with this illegal act. Think of the way these aspirants bargain with the gang of brokers/property dealers for finding an accommodation in tiny/dark cells that characterise the lanes and bylanes of Old Rajinder Nagar in Delhi — supposedly the 'sacred' sites for aspiring civil servants. Think of the monsoon malady and the pathetic drainage system in the area. And think of the intense flow of rainwater entering the basement library, and three youngsters dying a terrible death. Everything, it seems, is possible in this soon-to-be Viksit Bharat!

Even though I understand the agony of these IAS aspirants, I feel like urging them to go deeper, question the myth that seems to have completely hypnotised them, rethink the meaning of 'success' and their life projects, and reflect on the price they pay — financial, mental and existential — for pursuing a goal that has often been imposed on them. To begin with, they need to understand the shallowness in the arguments they often make: "We want to become civil servants in order to serve the country." Well, IAS/IPS officers do not monopolise patriotism. One who collects the garbage from our houses and keeps the 'gated societies' clean is no less a patriot. Moreover, only a naïve person would say that our bureaucrats are saints and altogether free from the influence of the hugely problematic politics-business nexus.

The IAS myth has such an overwhelming impact on this generation because it promises officially 'legitimised' power and privilege. Anyone who has lived in a small town or village in India knows how the power/aura of the district collector, the superintendent of police, or even the block development officer tempts the aspiring class. For many, it is a path towards upward social mobility. Yes, accept it — it is not essentially the unconditional love for the country, but the 'will to power' and associated privileges that fascinate these youngsters — from engineers and doctors to PhD holders, or from history/anthropology graduates to even political activists. The result is the life-killing rat race. Imagine more than 10 lakh aspirants appearing in the UPSC prelims exam, and eventually 1,000 or a little more getting selected for IAS/IPS and allied services! Yet, the power of the myth is so strong that most of these aspirants try repeatedly, spend a huge amount of money (say, Rs 1.75 lakh only for general studies), end up wasting five or six years of their youthful lives, and eventually carry the stigma of 'failure'.

> The harsh reality cannot be escaped simply because we love to see the much-advertised smiling faces of the UPSC exam 'toppers'

Is it time for these youngsters to come to their senses, and debunk this myth? Think of the intensity of the damage it causes to them. For five/six years, what do they do? They shop around the overpriced coaching centres, and get attracted by the 'star strategists' (I do not regard them as teachers because meaningful teaching has a higher purpose) who instruct them how to prepare for general studies, history, psychology or Hindi literature, or 'motivate' them through their carefully crafted discourses. And from early morning to late night, they keep consuming the 'notes' or 'success manuals' through which the coaching centres colonise their lifeworld. Accept it, dear aspirants: In this highly mechanised and dehumanised process, there is no light, there is no joyful learning, and there is no serious engagement with even the 'skills' a future civil servant needs to cultivate. Possibly, after this tedious journey and endless drilling, most of these aspirants realise the utter meaninglessness of this process. If, for five years, you study history, literature or physics with creative joy, and under the guidance of great professors, you grow as a thinker/researcher. Or, possibly, you evolve as a mature and intellectually awakened human. But this rat race for some sort of mythical success kills one's soul and causes severe mental fatigue. This harsh reality cannot be escaped simply because you and I love to see only the much-advertised smiling faces of the UPSC exam 'toppers' — the brand ambassadors of the gigantic coaching industry.

Is it, therefore, possible for these aspirants to widen their political and intellectual horizons, and raise their voice against the way schools/colleges/universities across the country have been allowed to decay, and the political/economic establishment has promoted and encouraged the mushrooming growth of coaching centres for almost everything — from the Mathematics Olympiad to board exams, or from standardised tests like JEE, NEET and CUET to the civil services exams? Have they ever thought why their college/university education should not be sufficient to do well in the UPSC exam? Have they reflected on the systematic decay of government schools and public universities and raised their voice against this onslaught on education? Or, for that matter, have they ever thought that corruption is ingrained in the very process of preparing for this sort of examination?

Dear aspirants, it is high time you began to stop mythologising the jobs of IAS/IPS officers. If you wish to free yourselves from this life-killing trap, you need to realise that your real success is your inner growth and creative fulfilment; it has nothing to do with the official power/privilege associated with IAS/IPS officers.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The secret in education lies in respecting the student. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

As loud as it gets on the roads

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

THE car windows were vibrating as if they would break. And my eardrums felt as if they would be punctured. The 'sonic boom' was not because of an Su-30 taking off from Palam airport but from a *Dak Kanwar* on the highway. Though I had been stuck in the traffic jam for over an hour, it was now that I was right next to one of these.

For years, the *kanwar* was carried by the devout from the Ganga to their villages on foot. The pilgrimage, as all pilgrimages, was a physically testing one. The idea presumably being that the religious merit gained is directly proportional to the physical hardship faced by the pilgrim. I recall as a child seeing a lone *kanwar yatri* hobbling along the road, evoking a mixture of awe, pity and reverence.

Dak Kanwar, for the uninitiated, is a recent invention. The idea behind this is not to punish oneself, but instead make the pilgrimage a celebration. It starts typically with a bunch of youngsters seeking donations from the neighbourhood for bringing the *kanwar*. Next, a truck is ornately decorated to look like a *jhanki*, like the one usually taken out on Dasehra day. On the sides of the truck are huge banners displaying photos of the destination and the prominent donors. A sound system with gargantuan speakers is placed at the top and back of the truck to ensure that all and sundry can gain some residual religious merit. Interestingly, recent years have seen a new class of professionals oddly called 'DJ Sound'. No birthday party, wedding or even a satsang is complete without hiring one.

The truck serves as a resting place for the youngsters who are carrying the *kanwar*. The idea is that the *kanwar* is carried in a relay with each person running with it for a short distance before passing it to the next one and then hopping on to the accompanying motorbike to take the 'baton' after some time. A couple of people would be on another motorcycle, clearing the way. This they do by blowing a whistle and, if need be, by not so gently using a baseball bat or a hockey stick.

It is estimated that about 30-40 lakh people undertake this pilgrimage every year. As an Internet meme puts it, 'Our girls (from Haryana) are bringing medals while all that our boys can do is bring *kanwars*'!

This enthusiastic religiosity causes mayhem on the roads. The month of *Sawan* is traditionally a cause for celebration since it is when the earth rejuvenates. Not for hapless commuters like me, though. For us, it brings hours of sitting in the traffic with devotional songs (set to tunes of popular film songs) blaring from a *Dak Kanwar*.

But as with everything, this too has a silver lining. A friend of mine, whose brother is in the police, told me that the cops are normally relieved at this time. The reason is simple — the rate of petty crime comes down, presumably because some of the offenders are busy getting the *kanwars*!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hasina won't be missed

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country on Monday amid widespread protests. An interim government is being formed in the neighbouring country that has been roiled by massive demonstrations for several weeks. Hasina's ouster comes as a ray of hope for a brighter future for Bangladesh. The death of around 200 protesters in indiscriminate firing by the security forces last month was the final straw for Bangladeshis. The gunning down of the agitators showed that the Awami League-led government had turned a blind eye to the concerns about quotas for government jobs raised by various student groups and had scant regard for their lives.

JAKIR HUSSAIN, KANPUR

Hold polls in J&K on priority

With the deadline to hold Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir set by the Supreme Court, September 30, fast approaching, it is imperative that the Election Commission of India and the local authorities take steps to ensure a smooth and timely conduct of the polls. The political landscape in the region has changed drastically since the abrogation of Article 370. While the Centre makes tall claims of an improved security situation in the region, a spate of terror attacks and a delay in the restoration of statehood continue to keep the residents on edge. Holding free and fair elections will be a step towards rebuilding the residents' trust and restoring stability in J&K.

VARSHITA BHURA, ZIRAKPUR

No let-up in terrorism

Apropos of the editorial 'J&K at a crossroads'; the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019, was expected to help rein in terrorism in the region. But five years on, it is clear that the move has failed to achieve its objectives. Pakistan continues to export terrorism into the state-turned-UT. The sense of normalcy, if any, was shattered by a spate of terror attacks carried out in recent months. Why is the Centre now dithering to restore the statehood of J&K? The longer it takes, the more alienated the local residents will feel.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

An avoidable political row

While Indian athletes are slugging it out in the Paris Olympics to finish at the podium, a political row has broken out here at home between the AAP-led state government and the Centre over the denial of political clearance to CM Bhagwant Mann to attend the Games. While it is true that Mann should have been allowed to cheer for the Indian hockey team, which has 10 Punjabi players, he should not have used the occasion to play petty politics. If the Punjab Government indeed wants to promote the sport and boost the morale of the players, it should ensure that the athletes get more funds and sponsorships. The AAP-led government has an opportunity to groom world-class players. It must not go to waste.

VARINDER PAL SINGH, PATIALA

Mann gets snubbed

With reference to the editorial 'Politicising sports'; the denial of clearance to Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann to attend the Paris Olympics is unfair. The decision smacks of a political vendetta. Mann was keen on cheering for the Indian hockey team. He was even willing to cover his expenses. Petty politics has once again prevailed over national unity. So many players in the team hail from Punjab. Mann's presence in the audience would have boosted their morale. The snub to Mann is yet another case of stepmotherly treatment being meted out by the Centre to an Opposition leader.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

Focus on preventing calamities

Apropos of the article 'Learn lessons from Wayanad tragedy to combat climate change'; landslides and flash floods have been wreaking havoc in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Many lives have been lost. The visuals of the trail of devastation left behind and the plight of the affected families being flashed across the nation are heartbreaking. The authorities concerned must expedite the relief and rehabilitation efforts. Besides, the powers that be must come up with long-term measures to prevent a recurrence of such avoidable tragedies.

NITIKA BANSAL, ZIRAKPUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**