

Across
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Mr Narendra Modi and, because of him, the BJP, seem to have overcome the shock of 240 seats against the goal of 370 for the BJP and 400+ for the NDA. They tried to celebrate but the rank of file was in no mood to celebrate. The 'minority' tag will haunt the BJP's leadership, and they will make every effort to get rid of it...

THE RESULTS of the elections to the 18th Lok Sabha threw up a formidable parliamentary Opposition that was missing in the 16th and 17th Lok Sabha. In the previous two elections of 2014 and 2019, the Congress was the main Opposition party with just 44 and 52 seats, respectively, and it could not win the position of the Leader of the Opposition. All other non-BJP parties won fewer seats. The Opposition's voice was drowned out by the numbers and noise made by the BJP, its pre-election allies and the undecleared allies (YSRCP and BJP).

The BJP did not pause to consider how, given the imbalance in the numbers, the hallowed traditions of Parliament could be maintained. As it transpired — and the Opposition parties repeatedly complained — the traditions were not observed. According to many impartial observers, the two Houses of Parliament became dysfunctional.

The LS elections of 2024 have given an opportunity to both the Treasury and the Opposition to revive the great traditions of Parliament. Not just the form but the substance of a parliamentary democracy. The Opposition is firmly in place with 236 seats. The Opposition should bury the Arun Jaitley thesis that obstruction of the House is a legitimate parliamentary instrument and is in 'favour of democracy'. That was a piece of fiction, the opposite is true.

NOTABLE PROMISES

The Opposition could begin with the Congress Manifesto 2024. Nitya Patra, that contained the following promises:

■ We promise that the two Houses of Parliament will meet for 100 days in a year and the great traditions of Parliament that prevailed in the past will be revived and scrupulously observed.

■ We promise that one day in a week will be devoted to discuss the agenda suggested by the Opposition benches in each House.

■ We promise that the presiding officers of the two Houses will be required to sever their connection with any political party, remain neutral, and observe the age-old norm that the Speaker does not speak.

The LNDIA bloc may consider adopting these promises and fighting resolutely to fulfill them.

The BJP cannot have any valid objection to 100 days of sittings, one day a week for the Opposition's agenda, and neutral presiding officers.

PREVENT DEFECTIONS

Mr Narendra Modi and, because of him, the BJP, seem to have overcome the shock of 240 seats against the goal of 370 for the BJP and 400+ for the NDA. They tried to celebrate but the rank of file was in no mood to celebrate. The 'minority' tag will haunt the BJP's leadership, and they will make every effort to get rid of it...

Opposition and opportunity

The tempting targets are YSRCP (4 members), AAP (3), RLD (2), JDS (2), AGP (1), AISU (1), HAM (1) and SKM (1). Not even JDU (12) is safe. Some of these parties are already part of the NDA but that will not deter the BJP (remember what happened to the Shiv Sena). The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution has gaping holes in which MPs of smaller parties can fall and disappear. The Congress Manifesto 2024 had an elegant formulation that will forestall BJP's plan:

■ We promise to amend the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution and make defectors (leaving the original party on which the MIA or MP was elected) an automatic disqualification of the membership in the Assembly or Parliament.

The Opposition must bring an amendment to the Tenth Schedule. The Treasury Benches will be damned in the eyes of the electorate if they oppose the Amendment Bill.

PUSH JOBS AGENDA

The BJP is most vulnerable on the issue of management of the economy. While none can quarrel with fiscal prudence or infrastructure development, all economic policies must aim to achieve the twin goals of creating millions of jobs and containing inflation. BJP-NDA failed on the two counts and paid the price in the LS elections. Whether the BJP's leadership will change course will be known in the President's Speech and in the Budget. Meanwhile, the

Congress and the LNDIA bloc must press the following jobs agenda (taken from the Congress Manifesto 2024):

■ We are opposed to monopolies and oligopolies and crony capitalism.

■ We will ensure that no company or person arrogates to itself or himself the financial or material resources or the business opportunities or the concessions that ought to be available to every entrepreneur.

■ Our policy preference will be in favour of business enterprises that create a large number of jobs.

■ Fill the nearly 30 lakh vacancies in sanctioned posts at various levels in the central government.

■ Create a new employment-linked incentive (ELI) Scheme for corporates to win tax credits for additional hiring against regular quality jobs.

■ We will launch an urban employment programme guaranteeing work for the urban poor in reconstruction and renewal of urban infrastructure.

■ Provide jobs for low-education, low-skilled youth by launching a Water Bodies Restoration Programme and a Wasteland Regeneration Programme that will be implemented through village panchayats and municipalities.

The Opposition parties must act as if they were the government. They must seize the opportunity and set the narrative for the government. It will be interesting to see how the short-of-majority BJP responds to the new and energized Opposition.

Fifth
COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

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Let higher
education go

FIRST, A confession. I regret that I have not written much about the role of higher education that has been revealed in shameful detail in recent days. I should have done so because I believe deeply that the reforms most urgently needed are those in higher education. In school education as well. But that is a whole other story. It disappoints me that the Prime Minister has not done anything by way of real education reforms in the past ten years.

My disappointment began when he made Smriti Irani his first education minister. I had hoped he would find a minister with some understanding of academia. But I went anyway to meet her and suggested that the best thing she could do for higher education was to disband the University Grants Commission (UGC), and allow colleges and universities full autonomy to govern themselves. She paid no attention. She was more interested in trying to sack the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, who was showing signs of independence and imagination.

The liberation of higher education from the clutches of officials and politicians is a cause I have been passionately interested in almost since I first started writing this column nearly forty years ago. This was a cause inspired by observing how almost every major political leader tried to start his own private college. Not out of altruism. But for power, patronage and land-grabbing. I also know from non-political friends who run fine colleges and universities about how much interference they face from politicians who try their best to grab these institutions for themselves. If they succeed, they sell off the land to make a fortune from the real estate business.

The Minister of Education, Dharmendra Pradhan, showed contrition at his press conference last week and accepted responsibility for the catastrophic way the National Testing Agency has been functioning. He promised action against those who have been responsible for the horrific corruption in the NEET entrance exam. This has ruined the lives and dreams of hundreds of thousands of young people. Will the Minister arrange to compensate them for destroying their dream of becoming doctors?

Will he consider real reforms in higher education? Real reforms will mean giving full autonomy to our colleges and universities. The United States is today the country with the best universities in the world and the reason for this is that the government does not meddle at all in their functioning. Not even the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), that students need to score well in to get into the best universities, is a government test. There is no such thing as a National Testing Agency in the United States. And officials do not poke their noses even into state-run universities and colleges.

In India, officials interfere to an extent that is almost farcical. They decide which professors should be hired and what their salaries should be and interfere in which courses should be taught and how. Is it any wonder that Indian universities have gone from bad to worse over the years? Rahul Gandhi is currently making a huge noise about how higher education has been destroyed in the past ten years because of the meddling by the RSS. This is not the whole truth.

He appears not to remember that in the old days there was just as much interference by a powerful Leftist lobby that wanted total control of academia. It was the likes of the likes of the welfare Bhaktiyar Khajji also played a part in Nalanda's decline. Their impact, however, is often overstated.

It seems illogical that more than five-hundred-year-old traditions of Nalanda died of a sudden men and their end by an attack. Kumar wrote, in fact, he says, there is ample historical evidence that the 'mega-monastery of Nalanda continued as a functioning institution of Buddhist education well into the thirteenth century'.

Ultimately, the decay of Nalanda was due to the decline in Buddhism as a whole in the subcontinent. Kumar wrote, 'It seems that the partial destruction of structure by attack or fire, or political chaos, and later the lack of support, transformations in Buddhism, and deterioration in moral and academic life led the campus deserted.'

It is hard to understand why Modi, with his 'mission' to make India a Vishwaguru again, has done so little to urge his chief ministers to improve government schools in their states. Most of them are so bad that even the poorest parents try to send their children to private schools in the desperate hope that they will at least learn to count and read.

Savarna parties have once
again isolated Dalit voicesDalitality
SURAJ YENGDE

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COMMENTATORS And political party leaders seem to habitually attack Dalits for exercising their right to vote and choosing whom to support. These offhand remarks are usually made to psychologically pressure Dalit voters to get agitated with their leaders. The mistrust, clubbed with critiques of opponents, is a sure way to ensure that Dalit politics is doomed and, thus, a better option is to choose between the lesser evil.

The lesser evil is a system that benefits people with certain last names and their cabal. They are found in all political parties and social movements. It is this hidden state that the Ambekarite political sphere can decipher, for they have seen first-hand how exploitation is managed by the iron fist of handlers who now claim political leadership.

The success of the 2024 general elections was the return of coalition governments. Dalit-led parties that fought as coalition partners like the Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi, Lok Janshakti Party and Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) made gains in their vote share and even have their leaders in Parliament.

However, two parties suffered major electoral setbacks: the Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and an experimental Maharashtra-based Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) led by Prakash Ambekar. Both parties had been expected to lead the agenda and Savarna parties. They did not win the mandate but circumstantially established their impetus. Ironically, both are absent from popular social movements. There are many reasons for their defeat. Besides distancing of urban middle-class Dalit voters, acquiescing to unfavourable parties and attitudinal drawback of the leadership, propaganda against these parties also played a role.

Dr Ambekar envisioned a non-hegemonic force that could act as a power broker and force the ruling dispensation to act in their favour. The Scheduled Caste Federation's Manifesto before the 1952 polls resolved to not have an alliance with 'Congress, Hindu Maha Sabha, R.S., Communist Party and Jan Sangh'. In 1956, the Republican Party of India's foundation

was also based on similar ideals. Kanishi Ram famously interpreted this as 'mazboot nah, majboor sarkar chahiye (we need a helpless government, not a strong one)'. The logic was that this would force the majoritarian party to act in self-indulgence. The purpose of Ambekarite parties has been to protect their interests and rule the country. This is against the belief of the political class, which prefers a subordinate leader as opposed to an articulate one.

The Congress, with its divisive agenda, has once again isolated independent Dalit political voices, calling them second-rank subalterns of the BJP. The very Congress that was against Ambekar and preferred Jagjivan Ram as an ideal opponent now acknowledges the former's credibility. With that, it has taken upon itself to become the custodian of Ambekar and his people — like a new convert trying hard to denounce anyone and anything that appears inconsistent with their newfound religion.

Slandorous epithets directed against Ambekarite parties are a testimony to the similar interests embraced by the Congress and BJP. Their records demonstrate their agenda to establish a feudal-Brahminical model that leverages the human resources of the backward classes, Dalits and Adivasis to meet their goals. To this, they also need unquestionable loyalties of reserved seats. They did not treat BSP or VBA with desirable respect in seat-sharing or make enough attempts to bring them on board. The consequence of which they're suffering now.

The BJP and Congress's far tactics triumphed because Mayawati and Prakash Ambekar failed to convince Muslim and backward class voters they relied on. Then, there is their working styles, both vastly different. The BSP is pathetic when it comes to communication and its reliance on old style of 'bhai-bhai' politics that has ceased to exist. The lack of innovation and creativity to get influential masses on its side has isolated leaders from those who speak louder.

Though attachment to the Ambekar family lineage still draws the rural masses, the people have interacted with in political circles and urban voters have expressed dismay over Mayawati and Prakash Ambekar's politics and nature of interactions. However, by using the Vanchit Bahujan formula of the 'nagnath-saapnathi' referencing, Prakash Ambekar seems to have embraced Kanishi Ram's radical vision. Will the setback lead the party leadership or will they invent new ways to blame the Opposition and the government?

Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality. Has returned to Harvard University

history
HEADLINE
ARJUN SENGUPTA

EARLIER THIS week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the campus of Nalanda University. Roughly 12 km away from the extant university campus lie the ruins of the eponymous Nalanda mahavihara — one of the greatest centres of knowledge in the ancient world.

What likely began as a small vihara (Buddhist monastery) before the Common Era, became a mahavihara ('great monastery') by the 5th century CE. At its peak, it housed thousands of students and teachers engaged in the study of subjects ranging from philosophy and religion, to logic, grammar and medicine.

The history of Nalanda has primarily been written based on Buddhist manuscripts, and travelogues by Chinese and Tibetan pilgrims. Since the early 20th century, modern archaeological evidence has been used to corroborate (or challenge) these literary sources.

Most quoted among these literary sources is the travelogue of 7th century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who travelled across India from 629–645 CE and spent roughly five years in Nalanda. Tracing Nalanda's history to the Buddha's time, he wrote that 500 monks bought the land on which the mahavihara would eventually stand for 10 lakh pieces of gold, and presented it to the Buddha, who preached there for three months. According to Xuanzang, the first vihara was built at the site in the 1st century BCE.

It would take another half a millennium for Nalanda to become a great hub of learning. Chinese monk Faxian, who journeyed through Magadhi in the beginning of the 5th century CE, did not even mention Nalanda in his travelogue. The earliest archaeological evidence for the ruins of Nalanda — a coin inscribed with the name of Shakraditya (Kumargupta I in non-Buddhist sources) — dates back to circa 415–55 CE, when Shakraditya reigned.

By the time Xuanzang arrived in the 630s CE, Nalanda mahavihara was in its heyday. He claimed that 'priests, belonging to the convent, or strangers residing therein always resort to the number of 10,000...'. This is likely to be an exaggeration. Chinese pilgrim Hsueh, who stayed in

Travelogues tell us the
story of Nalanda's rise

The main Stupa at Nalanda, also known as the Sariputta Stupa. Wikimedia Commons

the mahavihara from 675–685 CE, mentions that 'over 3,000' people lived in Nalanda. In Nalanda, Situating the Great Monastery, historian Fredrick M. Asher argues that the number of rooms that have been excavated in Nalanda, and their small size, is such that either far fewer monks lived there than what Xuanzang claimed, or the Nalanda site was many times larger than numerous excavations have discovered and what the pilgrim himself describes.

And yet, Nalanda was undoubtedly impressive for its time. In fact, much of the pilgrims' descriptions have been corroborated by excavations. As Huiji wrote, 'The whole establishment is surrounded by a brick wall... One gate opens into the great college, from which are separated eight other halls, standing in the middle of the Sangharama (monastery)... The observatories seem to be lost in the vapours of the morning.'

Invoking a legend of the likes of the welfare Bhaktiyar Khajji also played a part in Nalanda's decline. Their impact, however, is often overstated.

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Ultimately, the decay of Nalanda was due to the decline in Buddhism as a whole in the subcontinent. Kumar wrote, 'It seems that the partial destruction of structure by attack or fire, or political chaos, and later the lack of support, transformations in Buddhism, and deterioration in moral and academic life led the campus deserted.'

Lakshmi, Ganesha, Shivalinga and Durga'. Royal patronage likely began with the Gupta dynasty in the 5th century CE and continued into the reign of the Palas (8th–12th century CE).

Over time, however, royal patronage gradually declined, in no small part due to competing monasteries that came up during the Pala reign. Moreover, socio-political changes contributed to Nalanda's decay. 'In the eleventh century Islam replaced Buddhism as the greatest trading religion of Asia while the agrarian world within India was gradually lost to the Brahmins', historian Pintu Kumar wrote in *Buddhist Learning in South Asia*.

The Buddhism that did survive veered sharply towards more tantric and esoteric versions, which borrowed majorly from Brahmanical religion, not the Mahayana Buddhism that Nalanda propagated. Invoking a legend of the likes of the welfare Bhaktiyar Khajji also played a part in Nalanda's decline. Their impact, however, is often overstated.

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She
SAID
RINKU GHOSH

FOR A long time, the clubhouse in my society had been trying to sell me a session of aqua workouts over the weekend. Though we have an Olympic-sized pool, come Saturday, it resembles the Maria River full of jostling wildebeest as each and every resident dives in, determined to shed their weekly woes and the calories they couldn't get rid of with 10,000 steps. I certainly couldn't be conned into getting kicked and punched around under water.

Finding Jane Fonda, under water

exercises you give up at the gym as a 50-plus woman with a plus-sized body can be done easily under water without feeling pressure on your joints or muscles. Since you are buoyant, the floaty feeling eases your limbs and helps them move fluid-like, smoother than they would on land. That's why squats, which might hurt and stress your knees on land, are doable in water, as are lunges.

The last time I had a trouble with aerobics was as a late 80s' teen practising on Jane Fonda home videos. Fonda herself continues a sedate version of her aerobics at 85, while I have trouble doing Zumba. Could I do aerobics again?

When it came to the pool, I had a pool manager and arranged for a pool diver from one of her older swimming clubs. 'I will get you students provided you rope us off at the deep end for an hour on Saturdays,' she said.

Deal struck, our weekend classes began with Aman the instructor and Ranjana aunty, the under-water Fonda, all sprunk in a striped pink swimsuit. He gave us the science: 'The resistance of the water is about 14 per cent more than on the surface. So if you do cardio exercises in water, you're working your muscles more.' She made it fun, encouraging us to do jumping jacks as we bobbed up and down, splashing water on the parapet and pool chairs, flapping and flailing our arms in circles, like geese waiting to fly. Science or not, the jumps

pumped up our endorphins and made us giggle, a motley group of women between 50 and 75, rediscovering a moment worth living in the middle of a dreary day.

Ranjana aunty has lost her husband to autoimmune disease, is an empty nester and lonely. Yet there is such peace writ on her face when she floats face up, letting her body go. I now love jogging end to end under water, springing up and down, with the toes barely touching the pool floor. Aman has helped me improvise sport jogs, twisting my waist each side to strengthen my core. I love it because it reminds me of dancing. There's a Seema, a school teacher who has seen rough days after her husband's business failed to take off and is looking to find her equilibrium. She cycles her legs with her back against the pool wall, hands on the parapet, sometimes

kicking the water sideways, letting her rage ripple away.

None of us are great swimmers but hopping, jumping and splashing together have made us challenge our physical and mental limits. Even the stentorian Aman now allows us to break rules and be ourselves, often devising a routine according to individual preference. One of the ladies has got her daughter's boom box so that we can do aerobics exactly the way we did in the 80s to disco beats. The water has not restored our youth, which we mistakenly attribute to our chronological age, just reminded us of its spirit. Fat is youth is a state of being that's preserved by the choices we make. The water has just washed away every excuse we women make to deny ourselves the right to unalloyed fun. The guilt of ageism is really on us.

Pushed into graves

Goals for Education ~ I

The NEP launched in the second half of 2020 aimed at overhauling India's education system, but the pandemic situation turned the academic calendar topsy-turvy. It is time to review how far the NEP can be made relevant to the new normal in education. A UNESCO report explained the scenario: 'Education systems responded with distance learning solutions, all of which offered less or more imperfect substitutes for classroom instruction'



Whereas the private expenditure on education (PFCE) increased from Rs 86.5 crore in 1951-52 to Rs. 50996.1 crore in 2018-19 and to Rs 728197.6 crore by 2022-23, public expenditure increased from Rs 64.5 crore to Rs 73687.9 crore in 2018-19 and to Rs 909859.4 crore for the same periods. It goes without saying that the government's intent on faster digital integration and creating a high-quality and

The NEP launched in the second half of 2020 aimed at overhauling India's education system, but the pandemic situation has thrown the education industry topsy-turvy. It is time to review how far the NEP can be made relevant to the new normal in education. A UNESCO report explained the scenario: "Education systems responded differently to the challenges of all of which offered less or more imperfect substitutes for class-

(To Be Concluded)

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ASIAN VOICES

Living in a furnace: Is there any way to beat the heat?

Stepping outside in Dhaka these days feels like venturing into a furnace. A scorching sun beats down on a city choked by concrete, and temperatures routinely surpass 35 degrees Celsius – a far cry from the balmy days many of us remember. This relentless heat isn't just uncomfortable; it's a growing public health crisis. Studies by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr, b) paint a grim picture: rising temperatures are linked to a surge in heatstroke and dehydration cases, particularly among vulnerable populations like the elderly and children.

The culprit behind this urban heat island (UHI) effect, Dhaka, like many other cities in the developing world, has prioritised development at the expense of green spaces. Lush parks and verdant gardens have been replaced by towering buildings and sprawling infrastructure, all constructed from heat-absorbing materials like concrete and asphalt. This transformation has significantly altered Dhaka's microclimate. The city now acts like a giant heat sink, absorbing and trapping solar energy throughout the day. With limited vegetation to provide shade and cool the air through evapotranspiration, these heat-soaked surfaces radiate heat back into the air long after sunset, creating a microclimate significantly warmer than surrounding rural areas. This urban heat

The Daily Star
island effect not only exacerbates the discomfort of daily life but is also overburdening our healthcare system due to heat-related illnesses.

Dhaka's predicament is far from unique. Similar stories of scorching cities are unfolding across the globe. A 2019 study published in the journal *Science* found that the average temperature in the UHI effect in Beijing, China, could be as high as 8 degrees Celsius warmer than surrounding areas. This extreme heat contributes to a rise in respiratory problems, with a direct correlation between UHI intensity and hospital admissions for asthma and other respiratory illnesses. In Ahmedabad, a 2012 study documented how the UHI effect could raise nighttime temperatures by as much as 7 degrees Celsius compared to rural areas. This dramatic rise in nighttime temperatures translates to a significant increase in energy consumption as residents resort to air conditioners for relief. The overburdened power grids struggle to meet this surge in demand, leading to blackouts and further exacerbating the heat crisis.

The crisis isn't limited to just scorching temperatures. The UHI effect also disrupts natural weather patterns. A 2020 study by the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi found that increased heat island intensity in Delhi led to a decrease in monsoon rainfall by up to 10 percent. This translates to water scarcity, impacting not only residents but also agriculture in surrounding regions, further straining food security. Globally, countries are grappling with the consequences of unchecked urban sprawl and diminishing natural resources. The science is clear: the UHI effect is a real and growing threat to our health and well-being.

Fortunately, there's hope. Cities around the world are implementing effective policies to combat UHIs. We in Dhaka can follow suit with a multi-pronged approach, starting with a greening transformation. Singapore, a global leader in urban sustainability, offers a compelling example with its "City in a Garden" programme. This initiative has demonstrably increased the city's green cover from 30 percent to over 50 percent in recent decades, transforming Singapore into a model metropolis.

Yours, etc., Jakir Hussain,
Kanpur, 21 June.

 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

11 p.m. please

SIR, The Kolkata Metro railway authority has recently taken a decision to reschedule its last train from 11 p.m. to 10.40 p.m. The reason given is lack of enough passengers on the 11 p.m. trains causing financial loss to Metro Rail.

This theory cannot be accepted. In a welfare state the government has to spend money to run various services for its citizens. If the government is to be free of profit or loss should not and cannot come into consideration.

So inadequate number of passengers on the late evening trains cannot be acceptable logic. If the government is to be free of profit or loss the trains remain over crowded.

The excess revenue earned at the peak hours can compensate

that because these trains do not earn enough revenue, the services will be discontinued?

In the good old days there were no late evening trains. As the story goes, these trains used to incur considerable loss. Yet the services continued, as there were hardly any standard means of transport in that area.

Now, with the introduction of running metro at 11 pm, because at that hour of the night, safe and secure means of transport is

scarce in the city. Government is not a business house that it would weigh profit and loss for services rendered to its citizens. Hence we appeal to the metro railway authority to continue its last train service at 11 p.m.,

Yours, etc.,
Dr Prottyush Chatterjee,
Kolkata, 21 June.

PARCHED PRIDE

SIR, For the past two weeks, around 2.8 million Delhi residents have been suffering from a severe water crisis. Water is an essential part of human life, and survival without it is impossible.

In a city like Delhi, the capital of India, which houses numerous ministerial residences, including those of the Prime Minister and the President, the public is craving every drop of water.

Such a situation is enough to tarnish the country's reputation globally, despite our desire to see

NO TO FLOWERS

SIR, Should we start the practice of giving vegetables instead of flower bouquets on birthdays or other functions? Recipients often leave the given bouquets behind. Vegetables, on the other hand, can be consumed.

Instead of a rose, you can also give an inexpensive seasonal fruit such as guava, raw mango, lemon, amla, sapota, etc. The size of the basket can be trimmed according to one's budget. Instead of wrapping the basket with plastic, we can use cotton cloth, which can also be used later.

This change will also mark our gratitude to farmers and and will help improve their economic status. Adopting our indigenous culture is always better than aping Western customs. Such small changes will definitely bring about a revolution in our society.

Yours, etc., V S Jayaraman,
Chennai, 20 June.

India in a leading position. While the rule of every party will eventually end, we patriots must live with pride and be able to say, "I belong to India". It is the government's responsibility to promptly address such crises, ensuring that its citizens do not face difficulties, while upholding the pride of India worldwide.

Yours, etc., Jakir Hussain
Kanpur, 21 June 2011

For world-class firms, is India going Korea way?

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN SANKLESARIA AIYAR



Without any announcement or perhaps even a plan, the govt seems to be creating an Indian version of the Japanese zaibatsu and Korean chaebol — giant conglomerates supported by the state to create national champions that can take on western corporate giants.

The zaibatsu were corporate families that in 1900-1940 converted a once backward country into a global power that could fight the UK and US in World War II. The zaibatsu were supported by state subsidies and monopolies. They gave kickbacks, leading to charges of crony capitalism. Dismantled by the US occupying forces after WWII, they re-emerged in new avatars, and spearheaded Japan's industrial rise from 1950 to 1990.

Korea industrialised rapidly from 1960 onwards. As Japan, govt backed conglomerates called 'chaebol' such as Hyundai, Daewoo, Samsung and Lucky Goldstar. Daewoo went bust but the others became world class. They too were called crony capitalists. The chaebol, like the zaibatsu, were successful examples of what is now called 'industrial policy' — govt support through subsidies and other favours to help create national champions.

India appears to be moving in a similar direction. It now has a corporate Big Three — Tata, Ambani, and Adani — well ahead of the rest. The next tier is headed by Kumar Birla, accompanied by Sajjan Jindal (JSW), Sunil Mittal (Bharti Airtel), and Anil Agarwal (Vedanta). Rahul Gandhi accuses the govt of giving them favours for money. He seems to think one can become a top industrialist by buying favours. No, India is an extremely competitive place where the biggest groups of yesterday have been laid low despite their historic links with top politicians. Where are Hindustan Motors (CK Birla group), Premier Automobiles (Wachand), JK Synthetics (Singhania sub-group), the Thapars or DCM today? Alas, their historical supremacy was not matched by their ability to compete.

All industrialists make political contributions, lobby for favours, and get rewards. But without enterprise and high efficiency, they wither in the face of competition engendered by globalisation and new upstarts. In the licence-permit raj till 1989, anybody who got an industrial licence could mint money in monopolistic conditions. Today licences have been abolished and competition has killed many big names of yore.

Rahul Gandhi accuses Anil Ambani of being a beneficiary of crony capitalism, a charge the latter strongly denies, pointing out that the group bagged big projects when UPA was in office. Yet Anil Ambani, who was once on the global rich list, went virtually bust while his brother Mukesh soared sky high. One was competitive and the other was not. Favours did not matter.

SUNNY OUTLOOK: A field of solar panels at an Adani renewable while Tata is eyeing the global EV market

Like Japan's zaibatsu or Korea's chaebol, India's Big Three are conglomerates operating in several fields. In the West, the track record of conglomerates is poor. But in developing countries, good management is a scarce resource. Groups that have it can expand successfully into a huge variety of new sectors. Tata is in IT, steel, autos, power, chemicals and electronics. Adani has diversified from ports to power, cement, airports, solar parks and equipment. Rahul Gandhi says he favours. But that alone cannot explain his meteoric rise, just as favours alone did not explain the success of Mitsubishi or Hyundai.

To promote manufacturing, BJP govt launched a production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme. Its big success has been in attracting Apple for cellphones, with Google Pixel likely to follow. But this may not thrill the RSS: it wants national champions, not MNCs. The problem till recently was that Indian companies were good enough for middle-class technology, but lacked the skills and capital to become world class.

That is finally changing. Govt is building on this by helping the top conglomerates to become world-class national champions. In green hydrogen, a cutting-edge area, the govt is backing Reliance Industries and Adani with PLIs to become world leaders. It offers subsidies of up to 70% for chip fabrication (fabs). Tata will launch its first fab in Dholera, Gujarat. Adani plans to be in the extreme value chain from solar equipment to solar parks, becoming a world renewables leader. Tata plans to become a world leader in electric vehicles, and Ambani in telecom. Bharti Airtel is already a major telecom operator in Africa.

Defence has been opened to the private sector. Tata is at the forefront of defence aeronautics. A Reliance subsidiary has showcased software for drones and air defence design. Adani is building a missile plant in Telangana and plans to make drones too.

Adani is India's top port operator. He is instrumental in helping India compete with Chinese port expansion in Asia, by building ports and terminals abroad in Haifa and Colombo.

Space has been opened to private companies including foreign ones. But rather than letting Tesla's Starlink dominate satellite telephony, both Reliance Jio (Ambani) and Bharti Airtel plan to give it competition and will get all the support they need.

China, Korea and Japan have always been admired for creating national champions. Atmanirbhar (self-reliance) is evolving into chaebolisation. Whether it will succeed is an open question. But the attempt seems to be on. ■

How will cities find a solution if they don't even count heat wave deaths?

Heat waves are becoming deadlier, with India recording over 100 deaths and 40,000 suspected heat stroke cases since March. But these numbers do not tell the whole story, says **Dileep Mavalankar**, the man who played a key role in formulating India's first Heat Action Plan (HAP) for Ahmedabad in 2013. The former director of Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar talks to Ketaki Desai about why govts need to wake up

■ Tell us about Ahmedabad's HAP. How did it come about?

The first step was to analyse temperature and co-relate it with the all-cause mortality data (total number of deaths happening in Ahmedabad every day). In the 2010 heat wave, 800 additional deaths were registered in one week. Ahmedabad usually has 100 all-cause deaths in May. But that year it was 47 degrees one day, and 310 people died. We looked at 15 years of daily mortality during summer at different temperatures to decide on three threshold points at which mortality and temperature were increasing — 41 degrees (yellow alert), 43 degrees (orange alert), and 45 degrees (red alert). There were four major HAP components: early warning and inter-agency coordination; public awareness and community mobilisation; medical and para-medical systems; reducing exposure and long-term actions. After each season, we did a review to see what worked and what didn't. After two years of implementation, we found that mortality at peak heat time reduced by 30-40% after the HAP.

■ More than a decade on, why do you say more Indian cities have HAPs? With historic high temperatures, should the capital do so?

If Delhi looked at what's happening to its all-cause mortality, it would wake up to take some serious action. And they are trying to hide data. We've requested for data from Delhi and other cities several times. Cities

like Nagpur, Bhubaneswar, and Surat are doing it. But there is no national mandate, either from the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) or urban development or the health ministries. In the last few years, the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) created an online health reporting system to capture data from hospitals. But we need to do this from cities since not all deaths happen in hospitals, and not all hospitals are reporting. When we looked at five hospitals in Ahmedabad, we saw only around 76 people had died of heat stroke whereas our data showed 800 excess deaths as compared to average mortality of that period.

■ What do you make of this year's heat stroke and fatality numbers?

They have given the number of 40,000 heat stroke cases. If there were 110 deaths, that's a mortality rate of about 0.3%. But if you look at heat stroke mortality ordinarily it's 20-30%. So, either these 40,000 are not really heat stroke cases or the mortality is under-reported. That's why all-cause mortality is the best indicator. If there is no other explanation besides heat (no epidemic or major disaster), then those are likely to be heat-related excess deaths. This also depends on doctors recording the cause of death, which does not always happen. In 1960s London, there was a system developed during the plague to do mortality analysis and print it. If

London could do it 300 years ago, how come Delhi isn't doing it? Public health agencies, national and international, are not insisting, nor is the home ministry which registers the deaths. If a person dies in a smart city and we don't know why, what kind of smart city is it? If you don't accept the problem, how will you find the solution?

■ What should the govt be doing to better prepare ordinary citizens for extreme weather conditions?

In March, the IMD website had said a heat wave was coming. After that, I have only seen a few ads from the govt this whole season. If the govt is not advertising, how will people know what to do? We've been breaking heat records ever since 2022. Unless we take action now, it will only get worse. This is a wake-up call.

■ What can other Indian cities learn from the Ahmedabad model?

A blueprint is ready. What we need is to act immediately to raise awareness among citizens. We had thought heat islands in the city centre only have a 5-6 degree difference, but a recent World Bank study in South Africa shows a 16 degree difference between richer and poorer communities. We must do such studies. Besides, each city, state, and country should have a chief heat officer to coordinate all govt and stakeholder action.

■ In India, heat waves have only highlighted inequalities between the rich and the less privileged. How can such disparities be reduced?

People who are richer, who can afford ACs and have the luxury of not going to work outside in this heat will be okay. But the more ACs we put, temperatures will rise further. Poor people will be worse off. One suggestion is to have an overall plan and, within it, focus on vulnerable sections. If someone lives in a slum in Delhi and works outdoors, the HAP is not going to change his job or give him money. Ahmedabad has tried something called parametric insurance. If the temperature goes above a certain point for more than 7 days in a season, each person will be paid Rs 2,000 as compensation because they cannot work. Water is the other most important thing the poor are not getting in places like Delhi. Modi as CM had developed Gujarat's first climate change department, but not much is happening at the national level.

FOR THE RECORD



NET is far from perfect but its cancellation matters more than you think

BY INVITATION

RITUPARNA PATGIRI



As soon as news spread that the 2024 UGC-NET exam had been cancelled by the ministry of education, affected students, teachers and others started a tweetstorm about how unfair this decision was. The exam was held on June 18 in two shifts, with one ending at 6 pm. The very next day at 10 pm, cancellation was announced. In fact, after taking the exams, many complained about the format—multiple choice questions (MCQ) that don't really test teaching and research aptitudes—and framing of questions along with poor infrastructural facilities such as lack of clean toilets and disabled access at centres. There were also complaints about the high registration fee ranging from Rs 550-1,150 depending on one's location. Little wonder that after bearing with all this, and sitting for exams in the intense heat, there was so much anger among students.

A lot has already said about the disadvantages of a centralised exam as well as using a MCQ-based test, so I am not dwelling much on those. But in the backdrop of the cancellation, let's unpack what it means for the future of higher education, particularly humanities and social sciences in India.

PHD admissions delayed: In March 2024, the National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts the exam, stated that the NET score would be combined with the marks obtained in the entrance exam for admission to PhD programs. This means that these admissions will be now delayed for institutions that planned to use NET scores. These include IITs, IIMs, and other top universities of Hyderabad.

Foreign-degree premium: Exam cancellation sends a message that the Indian higher education system is untrustworthy. Students will take it as a sign to pursue PhD degrees outside India, especially in Europe and the US. But this can be done only by a privileged group of people. It is not easy to get admission into a PhD program abroad, especially for those with



DEGREE OF BIAS: Many will go abroad for PhD but what of those who can't afford to

limited access to both money and information.

What this does is create a distinction between those who have a PhD from abroad and the ones who pursue a PhD within the country. People with PhD degrees from abroad can be favoured when

it comes to hiring. This distinction already exists, as one can see from the profiles of recent recruits in several private universities. There is a clear preference for those with foreign degrees among private universities, especially 'white degrees'. This particularly affects students from marginalised sections. Clearing the NET exam and pursuing a PhD in India at a public university is the only choice that many have.

Marriage pressure increases: There are other associated fallout. The Junior Research Fellowship (JRF)—which students can avail after clearing UGC-NET to fund their PhDs—has an age limit of 30. So this loss of time can affect students' chances of obtaining it if they are closer to the age limit. For women candidates, the cancellation has additional ramifications. As a woman enters her twenties in India, there is pressure to get married. Clearing NET and getting into a PhD program is for many a way to delay marriage. Obtaining a JRF ensures financial security and further enables women to negotiate with their families. This is especially true for women from low income families. Since NET

is the minimum eligibility criterion for getting a teaching position, it also pushes people out of the job market. Cancellation of the exam means further delay in rescheduling, result declaration and disbursement of certificates.

Setback for humanities and social sciences: This compromising situation is one more attack on humanities and social sciences—a global trend at the moment. Humanities and social sciences have been hit with fund cuts, closure of departments, job precarity and politicisation of educational spaces. Cancellation of the exam and the heightened uncertainty around it further propagates the view that it is futile to pursue higher degrees in these disciplines.

Like many others, I don't think the NET exam is a good test of one's teaching and research aptitudes. But in a country where selections can be marred by social biases, it at least creates a pretence of objectivity. For the exam itself to be cancelled is not a good sign for the Indian higher educational system. It is a direct blow to student aspirations. ■

Patgiri is a sociologist and teaches at IIT Guwahati. Views are personal

Right Melodi: Italian PM marries strategy and selfie diplomacy

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHAA DE



Giorgia Meloni, the 47-year-old first female prime minister of Italy (so much catching up to do with India), was indisputably the prima donna of the rescheduled G7 summit. Dressed in a pink trouser suit, the tough-talking, hard-nosed politician effortlessly held her own with seven men while gamely smiling through photo ops. But what grabbed maximum eyeballs was Meloni's upbeat selfie on Instagram with the special invitee to the 50th summit — our very own Narendra Modi. "Hello from the Melodi team," greeted a priming Giorgia. And a meme fest broke out. Ooh, their chemistry swooned admirers. Ash, their camaraderie? Ciao, bella!

The obvious bonhomie between the Jodi No 1 is not new. Meloni and Modi had struck a great rapport from the time they first interacted in Delhi, then Dubai. The latest selfie sealed the pact between two strong-willed global leaders. Meloni, who recently got a big boost after her far-right party won European elections in Italy with a whopping 28% of votes, chose to share the spotlight with the 10th prime minister, third-time prime minister of a burgeoning democracy. Never mind the lower numbers. Modi is still the bossman. And Italy has serious business to further with India — telecom, critical minerals, AI, defence, and energy. The Indo-Italian strategic partnership cannot be ignored. And the power of diplomacy via the Melodi selfie seems irresistibly harnessed to add teeth to the mutually beneficial alliance.

Meloni, who joined active politics at 15, may have been called '4th Most Powerful Woman in the World' by Forbes, and featured on Time magazine's most influential list but her ultra-conservative views have also got her labelled as 'xenophobic' and 'heartless'. Meloni has frequently opposed same sex marriage, euthanasia and favoured a naval blockade to halt immigration. At G7, she made the reference to 'safe and legal' abortion watered down.

Critics have often pointed out the many contradictions between her stated beliefs and personal life. Take her famous quote: "I am Giorgia. I'm a woman. I'm a mother. I'm Italian. I'm Christian." As a mother to a young child whose father (flamboyant journalist Andrea

Giambro) is described as a partner (now an ex), critics questioned her double standards. Her political party, Brothers of Italy (why not sisters?), won back favour during Covid times thanks to efficient management despite the uncomfortable neo-fascist undertones of her party's slogan, 'God, Fatherland, Family'. Leading American newspapers like The New York Times have run headlines saying that the 'For Right' wants to take over. And Meloni is leading the way.

At the moment, however, Meloni is being hailed as kingmaker of the EU and a giant among the G7's political dwarfs. There were also side references to 'Meloni and the six large ducks' — one by one, the other leaders (from Macron to Trudeau) were shown their place in the pecking order. Since her election as Italy's PM in late 2022, Meloni has surprised everyone with her pragmatism. She is also given credit for being a skillful negotiator and a diplomatic strategist par excellence.

Europe is clearly experiencing a 'Meloni Moment' as Fareed Zakaria gushingly declared, while comparing Meloni to Angela Merkel. Hardly a fair comparison. Merkel was 'yes' of the 'yes' guys', just smarter. Meloni's party language and style ensure she will never be mistaken for one of the guys. This makes her a real change in the European political arena where a not-so-cozy Old Boys' Club has been in operation for the longest time. She, along with France's Marine Le Pen, are leading a rightward swing in the EU.

Meloni has made it clear — she is no decorative prop in Armani suits, she is boss lady

Her counterparts are scratching their heads, wondering how to deal with Giorgia. For starters, Rishi Sunak needs to up his miah-miah game! He appeared so gauche when attempting a badly timed 'Time to remain united' as the gang of seven this year were beset by their own domestic travails, struggling with shaky economies and dented personal images. As for Meloni, she made it as much 'India's Moment' as hers. And yes, her namaste, which also went viral, was not an accident. India is clearly on top of Ms. Meloni's agenda. And all things Italian are on India's priority list as well now that Italy is no longer seen as Sonia Gandhi's personal domain.

Time to remain united? Here's a hot quote: "If I were British, I would be a 'Couty' Cut to 2024. And if you were Indian, you would be...?" ■

INBOX

Naidu and Nitish Kumar need BJP too

This refers to 'It's time to...'. (ATM, June 16). Although BJP needs Naidu and Nitish as crutches, it is still the single largest party in Lok Sabha. To expect that uncertainties of a coalition government will rock this govt, is to delude oneself. Also, it is advantageous for Naidu and Naidu to continue their support, while getting reciprocal benefits for their states. Having said this, the invincible aura of Modi has been dented. No more 'my way or the highway' now.

—Vijai Pant, Hampur

Bipartisanship debate

Asopos of 'Open can learn...'. (ATM, June 16). While Swapna Dasgupta is all praise for Patnaik's bipartisan values, he can't expect the same from opposition parties whose primary role is to raise issues of national importance. Their protest against Adani's alleged irregularities, or demand for an enquiry into stock market surge is not partisan behaviour. Bipartisanship should not come at the cost of effective governance and democracy.

—Rakhi Banerjee, Kolkata

Fix entrance exams

Suggestions made in 'NET controversy...'. (ATM, June 16) are important. Human resource development will be achieved in a real sense only if we study the way UPSC, GATE exams are conducted. Additionally, the mass level exam pattern of US and China could be analysed and implemented.

—Vishal Bansal, Aurangabad

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Heli-buckets and tankers in hills, but the fault is not in our clouds

BY INVITATION

MOHIT SATYANAND



At 7 am last Saturday the helicopter was thrumming in the hazy sky, towing its red 'belly bucket' to the Binsar forest. The sortie had begun two days ago, the chopper scooping up water from Bhimtal lake, 45 km to the south, and dumping it on the raging fire in the Binsar sanctuary.

Water is scarce on the Binsar ridge, but even if that were not so, once a forest fire goes on, the vast tracts of terrain cannot be approached by land. Four forest guards died after the winds picked up pace and engulfed their vehicle. A fifth forest watcher who had 70% burns was airlifted to AIIMS Delhi but passed away in hospital.

A day later, the skies are silent, so presumably the Binsar fire has been put out, but the Kumaon sky is heavy with smoke, the slopes hot and dry, and the hillides busy with the transport of water. At a roadside hand pump, a knot of villagers looks up at the helicopter and speculates about the amount of water it is carrying.

"Ten thousand litres," one uncle says quite confidently.

"Ten thousand litres," an army man on home leave echoes that afternoon, when I was having a flat tyre fixed.

"That's a lot of water to carry," I venture.

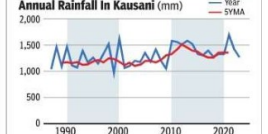
"It's a huge helicopter, the Mi-17," he replies. It is, but even so, the Mi-17 can't carry more than 4,000 kg of load, Wikipedia informs me. Allowing for the weight of the pilot and crew, the maximum amount of water it could carry would be about 3,000 kg, which is about 3,000 litres. Burning aviation fuel at the rate of four litres a kilometre, chugging a 100 km for every round trip from Bhimtal to Binsar and back, the helicopter is about the most expensive way to ferry water.

Not that cost should be a major consideration when fighting a raging forest fire. But in the daily life of a remote, hilly, water-scarce area, the helicopter is down to the stream at the bottom of our valley last week. I reckoned that one in every two vehicles I crossed was ferrying water. One was a dedicated tanker being piloted by the local govt; the others were pick-up trucks with plastic tanks spilling water as they grooved on to the steep, winding road. Most settlements now boast a hand pump, but where homes are more isolated, women and children trudge to the nearest spring, or water source, battered plastic cans in hand.

The poor pay for their water with time and effort; the rich, in their second homes, and in the bourgeois-



Annual Rainfall in Kausani (mm)



ing concrete cluster of hotels on the ridge, with the price of diesel burnt to bring the water up the hill. There is an irony of physics here: rainwater runs down the hill in the monsoons, some of it getting stored in underground aquifers, but most of it surges down to the plains in the muddy eddies of seasonal streams. But we fail to store it when it falls, even though rainwater harvesting is not exactly rocket science. And when the rains are slow to arrive, as they have been this year, we scurry down the hill, to find the remnants of last year's rainfall in the stagnant pools of the Binsar reservoir. It is never rained where we lived, as if water originated in the river below, rather than in the skies above.

As a footnote, I know some people might respond by saying I am not taking drought into account, the possibility that we receive less rain than we did in better times. Well, I checked that, thanks to the daily rainfall data that hobby meteorologist David Hopkins has recorded since 1987, at Kausani, on a ridge to the north of us, but very much in the same meteorological zone. The graph above shows annual rainfall since then, along with a five-year moving average, SYMA. Annual rainfall was flat, averaging about 1,500 mm a year for about two decades till 2005, then perked up to almost 1,500 mm, and is now running at 1,500 mm a year.

If we are running short of water on our hillside, the fault is not in our clouds, but in ourselves, that we insist on marble bathrooms and velvet bedspreads, but not in water storage. ■

Satyanand is an entrepreneur and investor

REFLECTIONS

Tourism's damaging effect

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

THIS past month has been so miserable that apart from staying indoors, reading, surfing the Net or bingeing on movies, there is little that one can do. Driving up to the hills is now not an option since they are overrun by tourists who seem undeterred by the weather. After a short trip to Dehradun recently, I swore I would not stir out this summer. The temperatures there were only marginally lower than boiling Delhi's and power outages made lives miserable. There have been going to Dehradun since the 1960s, and distinctly remember how the temperatures would dip after rain in Mussoorie to make one believe that one was in a hill station. The beautiful drive to the sulphur springs at Sahasrabad were a treat we were allowed often. In those days, there was only a charming Buddhist monastery and library, and gentle monks would wave at us as we passed by.

Come to 2024, Dehradun is now a Smart City: this means that the old cityscape has been altered to suit the lifestyle of the smart people who occupy it now. Gone are the gracious bungalows with *litchi* and mango trees and large, airy verandahs and the famous bookshops and bakeries of yore. These are either untenable or so difficult to walk into that they are outlets all over the town that probably sell fake stuff.

Let's not make this a dirge for an old town that has vanished there are so many that have suffered similar fate, but question the wisdom of promoting commercial tourism. Uttarakhand is now the go-to destination for pilgrims, be it the Char Dham Yatra or visiting Kaichai Ashram (oops, sorry, now Kaichai Dham). Jageshwar and countless other pilgrim spots with ancient temples that have a magical pull.

Soon, we will have the *kamavariyas* trotting to Gangotri to bring down *Gangajal* and all routes will be clogged by their long lines, with loud, raucous *bhakts* perched on accompanying tempos and mini-trucks blaring deafening *bhajans*. The National Highway is made a one-way route and the traffic on the other side is enough to turn one's hair grey.

Several environmentalists have raised concerns about how this widening of roads, cutting down trees and allowing free access to fragile ecosystems is harming our natural resources and environment. But who cares to listen? The locals, even as they complain about this, are hap-

Give serious thought to regulating the volume of tourists. If this means charging a substantial fee, so be it. Also, no trees should be sacrificed to ease the path of a tourist

py to earn the extra money they get from opening small *dhabas* and Maggi spots that offer 'chaao mein' and momos, cold drinks and mineral water, and offering 'homestays' with no proper sewage disposal units. In short, except for carping critics (who cares for them anyway?), *achhe din* have arrived, they believe.

Like many others of my age who are unable to trek and undertake adventurous trips, I love the blogs that young people post. The pristine beauty of a remote village in the Himalayas or Ladakh, an atmospheric temple that hardly anyone can visit because it is so remote and difficult to reach — there are some superb views you can see as you sit in an armchair and flit from one travel blog to another. What I fear, though, is that soon, some eager

tour promoter will persuade crowds to 'explore' these hidden beauty spots. I can just see the litter they will leave behind them as they move on after taking the mandatory selfie, to destroy the next undiscovered treasure. So, what can we do to protect the few beauty spots that are left?

For one, serious thought needs to be given to regulating the volume of tourists. If this means charging a substantial fee, so be it. This is how Bhutan has deterred irresponsible tourists from polluting its beautiful land. Do not allow roads to be widened, underpasses and bridges to be built in these areas. A pilgrimage means walking to make it. Air-dropping rich *bhakts* in helicopters is a strict *no-no*. No trees should be sacrificed to ease the path of a tourist. In Jageshwar there is a horrifying plan to cut down thousands of its famous deodar trees, quite forgetting that it is venerated because the *yogi* *irigam* there is named after its deodars. Many of these stately trees are hundreds of years old and are an irreplaceable treasure.

Come now to Kaichai, where Baba Neem Karoli built a charming *ashram* on the banks of an *uttar-nahini* stream. For decades, the local people went there to sit at his feet and be blessed by the loving tranquility he exuded. After Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Meryl Streep and other celebrities discovered it, our own Virat-Anushka and countless stars have been spotted there. So what was once an *ashram* is now called a *dham*, and accessing it is becoming impossible. At the annual *bhandara* held in June, there are lines of people from Bhowali that stretch for miles as they await *darshan*. This little village is now a thriving tourist industry of commerce that has sprung up with 'hotels', *dhabas* and craft shops. Naturally, the locals are delighted, but has anyone thought of what this tourist overload is doing to the temple itself? I'm convinced that *Babaji*'s soul has fled the place. Those of us who knew him as a gentle, loving man who offered no *gyan* but blessed those whom he loved with his eyes, will never find that peace now.

Check manipulation of online reviews

CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRMAJI

THE increasing dependence of consumers on online reviews of products and services makes it imperative that these reviews be honest and genuine. However, the very fact that they influence consumer choice tempts manufacturers and service providers to manipulate the reviews to their advantage. Executed through paid reviews, often managed by specialised online reputation management companies, such fake and fraudulent high-star ratings and reviews distort consumer choice and harm consumer interest.

Another deceptive practice is to block or reject genuine consumer reviews that are negative or critical of the product or service. This suppression of honest opinions that go against a product or a service, once again undermines the very *raison d'être* of online reviews and misleads consumers on the quality, be it a product or a service.

Last month, I got two interesting feedbacks about online reviews — one of these pertained to the purchase of an apparel on the basis of the five-star ratings that it had received on the website. However, on delivery, the consumer found the quality to be poor. She soon got the answer to the 'five-star' ratings that the garment had garnered — inside the package was an offer of payment of ₹200 for a five-star rating! She brought this to the notice of the online marketplace, but there was no response!

In another case, the consumer found the quality of the shirt to be very different from the description on the website — it was obviously a case of misrepresentation, and so the consumer gave the garment a poor rating and wrote a review pointing out the falsities. The website did not publish it!

Not publishing critical reviews or poor ratings is as bad as paid positive reviews, and I must mention here that the Federal Trade Commission in the United States took a very serious view of an online fashion retailer, Fashion Nova, blocking hundreds of thousands of negative consumer reviews about its products for several years and imposed, in 2022, a penalty of \$4.2 million for the harm incurred by the consumers. Last year, it used this money to pay refunds to consumers who bought goods on the basis of the one-sided reviews and were unhappy with the product.

With the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs and the consumer protection regulator — the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) — taking a very serious view of such devious manipulations and

manufactured reviews, one hopes to see similar regulatory action here in India too. In 2022, the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs introduced, on a voluntary basis, the Indian Standard (IS) 19000:2022 on online consumer reviews, aimed at ensuring the integrity and accountability in the publication of reviews and eliminating fake, fraudulent and biased opinions.

The standard prohibits publication of reviews that have been purchased or written by individuals employed for that purpose by the supplier or seller or by a third party, and requires stringent processes such as filtering and control tools and algorithms to be put in place by all online sites that publish consumer reviews. Unfortunately, the voluntary standard did not have the desired result, and so the ministry has now decided to make the standard mandatory through a quality control order and initiated the process.

Not publishing critical reviews or poor ratings is as bad as paid positive reviews

Once the quality control order comes into force, the BIS of Indian Standards (BIS) will be the enforcing agency but the CCPA can also take action against violations, including refusal to publish negative news.

Interestingly, in a nationwide study by Local Circles, a community social media platform, involving 54,000 users of e-commerce sites and apps, 22 per cent of the respondents said their reviews were not published because these were negative. About 60 per cent of the respondents found reviews to be positively biased, while 36 per cent felt that way about ratings.

Unlike advertisements issued by businesses, online reviews are opinions of other consumers who have used the services or products, and are, therefore, of immense help to consumers in making an informed choice — it is, therefore, absolutely essential that the sanctity of such reviews is strictly maintained. In fact, it is in the interest of businesses to ensure that reviews are honest and true so that consumers can depend on them and they continue to patronise online retail stores and review platforms. Towards this end, all such online sites should explain the processes employed by them to ensure the reliability of the reviews, including statistical data on the number of reviews received, published, rejected and the reasons for it.

Meanwhile, I would urge more and more consumers to give their feedback on services and goods that they hire or purchase so as to help fellow consumers. If negative comments are not published, they must lodge a complaint with the BIS or the Consumer Affairs Ministry through the national consumer helpline.

In sync with government time

COLASHOK AHLAWAT

THE flag was fluttering in the wind and the sun was going down fast. The year was 1966. There was the usual sepoy section on guard at the Corps Commander's bungalow in Tezpur, Assam. It was about time to lower the flag of the flagstaff house.

The guard commander looked at his ammunition boots, satisfied himself that the shoes were bright and the leather shoe laces weren't wrinkled. Then he counted the hob nails of his boots: all 13 were in order. He shouted the command and the squad started marching towards the flagstaff of the Corps Commander's house.

The General was going around the flower beds and trimming some leaves with a pair of secateurs. He slipped the tool into his pocket and moved closer to watch the lowering of the flag at retreat. The *maah* came out with a watering pot and started tipping the water onto the saplings and perennials. The General was a lover of flowers and liked his garden well kept.

I was sitting with Subedar Sube Singh (of the Jat Regiment) as he narrated the incident. He was 93 but remembered that evening well. He was a Havildar in the defence company and they were on guard duty at the bungalow

that summer several decades back.

"I was taking down the flag at 6 pm when I felt that the General had come quite close to me and stood watching me. I was tying the rope on the flagpole having taken off the flag. My eyes fell on the General's wrist watch. It showed the time as five minutes to 6. My watch showed exact 6 pm."

"*Subh galti ho gahi magh se jhanda utarne ke time mein* (Sir, I am afraid I made a mistake. I lowered the flag five minutes early)," Subedar Sube Singh recalled having told the General.

The General, he said, laughed. "He was a very good man."

"*Ghabrao mat, tumney sarकारी ghadi pehni hai* (Don't be nervous, you are wearing a government watch)," he told Sube Singh, "and I am

Corps Commander's house, Tezpur, 1966 — a watch that was not entirely reliable and a General who was always affable

wearing a personal watch. And a government watch can never be wrong. You did the right thing going by government time."

Then the General Sube Singh said "shaobash" and it was such a relief, Sube Singh smiled.

"In those days, we were issued a wrist watch from the quarter guard to do duties. We could not afford to buy watches. *Nisar ke feetey waali ghadi hoti the* (Those hand-wound watches used to have a canvas strap)," Sube Singh recalled.

India used to import watches from Switzerland and HMT had just started manufacturing hand-wound watches in collaboration with the Citizen Watch Company of Japan. The demand for watches was very high and these were fearfully expensive.

The Army used the Omega military watch but since it wasn't shock-proof, it often developed variable moment and time errors. It was also the job of weapon armourers to check the watches for accurate movement.

After the incident, General Sube Singh gave orders that every week, all watches will be synchronised.

"Subedar Sube, but you didn't tell me who this General was?" I asked Sube Singh.

His name was Sam Manekshaw, he said. Who else I thought. The stuff of legends.



RIMA DHILLON

FOR most of species of the avian world in our region, the month of March marks the beginning of the breeding season, which culminates by July. However, the impact of the unprecedented heatwave on this year's nesting season is uncertain. There have been reports of birds falling out of the sky due to dehydration. The full effect of this heatwave will only become clear over time.

In the normal course of things, spring is the season for new beginnings. For birds, it signals the perfect time to bring forth a new generation. The warm weather creates ideal conditions for raising a brood. As winter gives way to warmer temperatures, the environment changes. Insects hatch in multitudes, providing abundant food for hatchlings. In March, the transformation is evident. New leaves appear, flowers bloom, and there is a distinct change in the sounds



Brown-headed barbet excavating tree hole.



A family of ground-nesting francolins.



Nest of a common tailorbird.

of nature. Bees buzz more loudly, and bird-song becomes more musical. Birds appear in pairs, and the air resonates with males serenading females, hoping to find a mate.

Love is in the air! From pigeons and doves cooing to the red-wattled lapwings' delicate dance as it sallies and swoops around the female, the peacock's grand display, even crows and rufous treepies turn their raucous calls into songs of love. Many species, like bee-eaters, hornbills and kingfishers, woo their mates with food. If the female accepts, the male knows he has succeeded.

After courtship, it's time to build a home safe enough to raise a family. Birds have varied nest designs: the red-wattled lapwings and francolins (*teetar*) use a few twigs and

stones on the ground, while baya weavers create complex funnel-shaped nests. Bulbuls weave neat grass cups, and tailorbirds stitch leaves together. Many waders and water birds, like black-winged stilts, little grebes and jacanas, make floating nests on ponds. Each species has its unique methods. A baya weaver male builds multiple nests before winning the approval of its mate.

Barbets and woodpeckers excavate tree holes for nests, which other birds like mynas, paroquets, owlets and hornbills later use to raise their own families. The task of incubating the eggs is performed by females, males, or both, depending on the species.

Among the ground nesters like francolins and peafowl, the females incubate eggs

Their dull colouration is designed to help them in blending into their surroundings to avoid predators. Lapwings are an exception; both sexes are brightly coloured. Predators are anyway wary of them due to their aggressive nature. Chicks of ground and water-nesting species like ducks and geese are precocial — they are able to walk and feed soon after hatching to avoid the dangers lurking around.

Hornbills have a unique nesting practice. The male seals the incubating female in a nest hole until the chicks are ready to fly. He provides food for his mate and chicks, ensuring their survival.

Nature ensures a successful breeding season by aligning insect hatches with bird

hatchlings, providing ample food. Birds are smart and may postpone or avoid breeding if conditions are unfavourable.

Humans often paradoxically help and harm birds. We provide food and water while destroying their natural habitats. Unthinking actions like pruning trees during the nesting season can leave birds without vital resources. Chopping down old trees removes essential nesting sites and food sources like termites.

Good Samaritans sometimes unintentionally harm birds. Lappings often nest on rooftops, carrying chicks on their backs down to the ground for food. Residents, fearing for the chicks' safety, might bring them inside, where they usually perish. Similarly, well-meaning people 'rescue' ducklings thinking they are lost, when in fact the parent duck is leading them to the nearest waterbody. Thus, separating them from their parents may lead to their demise. On finding a fledgling, it is best to return it to its nest or nearby, allowing parents to care for it. If rescue is necessary, create a natural environment and feed it appropriate food. A few drops of sugar water is good first-aid for a baby bird.

The best approach is to let nature take its course. Mama bird knows best.

—The writer is president of the Chandigarh Bird Club

PROFILES

An ancient centre of learning

Nalanda University

Years-long efforts to re-establish the 'Mahavihara', known as the first international residential school in the world and home for learned monks and teachers, from Nagarjuna to Aryabhata, came to fruition last week as Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a specially-designed new campus in Bihar

Sreeparna Chakrabarty

"Learning is being here," calls out the rejuvenated Nalanda University, situated besides the picturesque Rajgir hills, about 90 km east of Patna in Bihar. An apt description for a place which is known as the first international residential school in the world, established roughly 500 years before the famed Oxford University. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a new campus of the varsity on June 19.

Although its history goes back to the times of the Buddha, the 'Nalanda Mahavihara', as it was known then, was founded in the 5th century CE by Emperor Kumaragupta, and it flourished for the next 700 years, promoting a syncretic learning experience.

The first residential university of the world was sustained by the conscientiousness of the learned monks and teachers, which included masters such as Nagarjuna, Aryabhata and Dharmakirti. At its peak, it is believed to have possessed 2,000 teachers and 10,000 students.

Chinese travellers Hsien-Tsang, who wrote detailed accounts about the university and was a student there himself for five years, says in his memoirs that there was a rigorous oral entrance test for students who wished to enrol and only about 20% qualified. The subjects that were taught at Nalanda included Buddhist scriptures (of both Mahayana and Hinayana schools), philosophy, theology, metaphysics, logic, grammar, astronomy and medicine.

The varsity attracted scholars to its campus from places as distant as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and South East Asia. Those scholars have left records about the ambience, architecture, and learning at Nalanda, as well as about the profound knowledge of Nalanda teachers. The most detailed accounts have come from Chinese scholars.

The ruins of the seat of learning were first rediscovered in 1812 by Scottish surveyor James Buchanan-Hamilton. Later, in 1861, it was officially identified as the ancient



PHOTO CREDIT: PTI

university by Sir Alexander Cunningham. It was in March 2006, while addressing a joint session of Bihar State Legislative Assembly, that the late former President, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, proposed the revival of the ancient university.

The ruins of the university had till then been a mere fascinating subject for historians and archaeologists. Concurring ideas came simultaneously seeking the re-establishment of Nalanda: from the Singapore government; the leaders of 16 member states of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in January 2007 in the Philippines; and from the fourth East Asia Summit, in October 2009 in Thailand, according to the University website. Parliament of India passed the Nalanda University Act, 2010, and in September 2014, the first batch of students were enrolled.

Master plan

In total, 17 countries other than India — Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam — have helped set up the University. Ambassadors of these countries

attended the inauguration of the campus by Mr. Modi.

In 2013, the master plan for the campus, proposed by renowned architect B.V. Doshi's Vastu Shilpa Consultants, was chosen after an international competition. Built at an initial cost of ₹1,800 crore (\$210 million) and spread over 485 acres, it is a large carbon footprint-free Net-zero campus. The design and architectural elements of the new campus are inspired by the original monasteries and buildings at the Nalanda Mahavihara. It includes over 100 acres of water bodies (Kamal Sagar ponds), an on-grid solar plant, a domestic and drinking water treatment plant, and a water recycling plant as well as over 100 acres of green cover.

The University also has a 250-capacity Yoga Center, a state-of-the-art auditorium, library, an archival centre and a fully equipped sports complex. The university's Visitor is the President of India. The chancellor and chairperson of the governing board is Prof. Arvind Panagariya. The Vice-Chancellor is Prof. Abhay Kumar Singh. The varsity offers Post Graduate and Doctoral programmes in Buddhist studies, philosophy and comparative religions; languages and literature;

ecology and environmental studies; sustainable development and environment; and, international relations and peace studies. At present, students from over 20 countries are enrolled in various courses.

The university admitted its first batch of 15 students in 2014 to the School of Historical Studies and the School of Ecology and Environmental Studies. Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen, who had been associated with the project since 2007, was the first Chancellor and the then President, Pranab Mukherjee, the first Visitor.

Beginning of the decline

The university has also seen its fair share of controversies since its inception, notably the appointment of Gopa Sabharwal, a former Reader in sociology at a Delhi University college, to the post of Vice-Chancellor. Prof. Sen later resigned himself from continuing as the Chancellor for a second term. He was succeeded by former Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo, who also left citing concerns about autonomy and political interference in academic matters. The other wrangle is the narrative

surrounding the decline of the university. While the dominant account is that it was destroyed by Turkish invader Bakhtiyar Khilji around 1200 AD, some experts claim that the varsity saw a natural decay coinciding with the decline of Buddhism in the region. "The reality is that there is no historical source that talks about Bakhtiyar Khilji destroying Nalanda," says Namit Arora, author of the book *Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization*.

"Forty years after Khilji's campaign, a Persian account by Minhaj al-Siraj speaks of Khilji's destruction of a monastery and the killing of its monks. But this was not Nalanda. Scholars have firmly identified this monastery as Odantapuri, 12 km from Nalanda. It was described as located inside a fortified city (now at Bihar Sharif), a political and economic centre, and hence deemed a military target. There is no record of Khilji ever going to Nalanda, which had little political or economic allure, nor was it a thriving centre of religion at the time," he told *The Hindu*.

"For over a century, Nalanda had suffered and dwindled owing to funding cuts, followed by active persecution by the Brahminical kings of the Sena dynasty. Many of its monks had fled south long before Khilji. Rather than a dramatic final end, Nalanda continued its long phase of decay and depopulation for decades after Khilji's death (1206). Nalanda was in fact still limping along in 1234-36, supported by king Buddhasena of Bodhi Gaya, when Dharmasvamin, a monk from Tibet studied there and wrote about it," he added.

Demands have also been raised in both the Bihar Assembly and the Rajya Sabha to change the name of Bakhtiyarpur Railway station, which is just 60 km away from the varsity.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has, though, dismissed these demands, saying Bakhtiyarpur was his birthplace. "When an Act on Nalanda University was tabled in Parliament, an MP had said the destroyer of the famed varsity had stationed his camp in Bakhtiyarpur. Now, a man in the same place is rebuilding Nalanda University," Mr. Kumar said in 2021.

THE GIST

▼ In March 2006, while addressing a joint session of Bihar State Legislative Assembly, the late former President, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, proposed the revival of the ancient Nalanda University

▼ Parliament of India passed the Nalanda University Act, 2010, and in September 2014, the first batch of students were enrolled

▼ Built at an initial cost of ₹1,800 crore and spread over 485 acres, it is a large carbon footprint-free Net-zero campus, whose design elements are inspired by the original monasteries and buildings at the ancient Mahavihara

The 'power star' of politics

Pawan Kalyan

The actor-turned-politician's bet to bring the BJP and the TDP into an alliance, along with his JSP, has paid off as the NDA swept the State in recent elections

Sumit Bhattacharjee

In the 2024 elections in Andhra Pradesh, actor-turned politician Konidala Pawan Kalyan, the founding president of the Jana Sena Party, proved that he is no 'run-of-the-mill' politician.

He exhibited his tenacity to hang on to the game of politics and hit back at his critics by scoring a 100% strike rate. His party candidates won all the 21 Assembly seats that they had contested and also secured two Lok Sabha seats, with huge majority.

Mr. Kalyan announced with a bang that he is here to stay. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was so impressed by his show of strength that in one of the meetings he referred to Pawan as 'Yeh Pawan nahi, yeh Andhee hai' ('He is not wind', as Pawan in Hindi means wind, 'He is storm').

One among the top machine idols in Telugu cinema, Mr. Kalyan's political career has been a chequered one ever since he launched his JSP on March 14, 2014. He faced setbacks, but he never quit, as his elder brother, K. Chiranjeevi, a mega star in Telugu cinema, had done. Chiranjeevi had launched his Praja Rayam Party in 2008, but quit the game after his first outing and merged his party with the Congress.



Though Mr. Kalyan had launched his party in 2014, he did not contest that year's General and Assembly elections. He lent support to the National Democratic Alliance of the TDP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The NDA came to power in the residual State of Andhra, immediately after the bifurcation of the State.

But in 2019, he quit the NDA and went to the polls in an alliance with Left parties. The JSP could win just one seat with Mr. Kalyan himself losing in the two seats he contested. But the actor-turned politician did not lose hope. This time, he joined the NDA and laid the ground work for the alliance's victory in the State.

In an earlier interview to *The Hindu*, Mr. Kalyan had stated he was drawn towards politics from his college days and was deeply inspired by the tall leaders from the Left wing such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Charu Majumdar.

national president of the TDP and the current Chief Minister, at the Rajahmundry Central Jail in September, 2023. Mr. Naidu was then in remand over corruption allegations. Outside the jail, while addressing a press conference, Mr. Kalyan announced the tie-up with the TDP.

"I have been thinking all this while whether the TDP and Janasena must come together ahead of elections. I am in the NDA. It is my prayer that to fight against the atrocities of the YSRCP, the Janasena and the TDP must come together in the upcoming elections," he said.

He was clear that only an alliance could bring the rule of the YSRCP to an end. It is believed that Mr. Kalyan played the bridge between the TDP and the BJP to forge the three-party alliance. He also admitted that the JSP alone could not form the government. Nor did the party have the financial strength or backing to contest all 175 seats.

He settled for 21 seats and his focus was to win all of them. This gamble paid off. In the assembly elections, the NDA alliance won 164 seats, including the JSP's 21, while the YSRCP's tally sank to 11 from 141 five years ago.

A political novice 10 years ago, Pawan Kalyan is today the Deputy Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh.

Force of stability

Pema Khandu

The Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister, known for his headline views on China and reform measures at home, has won a third term with a thumping majority

Rahul Karmakar

An accident propelled him from a district Congress president in 2010 to a Minister in the Arunachal Pradesh government within a year. He was 31 when his father, former Chief Minister Dorjee Khandu, died in a helicopter crash on April 30, 2011, leaving a void in Tawang district's Mukto Assembly constituency. More than a decade later and a few days into his third term, the 44-year-old Pema Khandu has become the longest-serving Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh after Gelong Apang, who formed the first BJP government in the frontier State in 2003.

Diverse ethnic interests and dependence on funds from the Centre leave little scope to be politically adventurous in Arunachal Pradesh. Mr. Khandu, who saw three Chief Ministers and a 24-day President's Rule in a span of five years and 74 days between the death of his father and his first term as Chief Minister, learnt to be cautious.

A few bold decisions of his government such as recommending permanent residence certificates to six communities not on the list of Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribes in February 2019, had led to large-scale violence. However, it did not take long for Mr.



ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Khandu to tide over such crises, including alleged bids by some of his party colleagues to dislodge him.

Mr. Khandu has made it a point to downplay the periodic renaming of places in Arunachal Pradesh by China. He has also been disinclined to follow New Delhi's position on the Line of Actual Control. "Arunachal does not share a border with China. The direct border is with Tibet. China occupied Tibet. Nobody can erase history," he said in November 2020. He also said the State was unable to major projects funded by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank due to China's "unethical" claim. This made him pressure the Centre for scrapping the population criterion in funding for Arunachal Pradesh.

There has virtually been no competition for the Khandu family in Tawang, especially in the Mukto Assembly seat, since 1990. This is evident from Mr.

Khandu and his father having won a few elections unopposed.

Dramatic rise

Mr. Khandu's rise to the top job in the State has had layers of drama. In 2011, he became the Minister of Tourism, Urban Development, and Water Resources. He kept a low profile as the Congress government faltered with Nabam Tuki replacing Jarom Gamlin as Chief Minister, only to be dismissed by the Centre in January 2016. Then a "rebel" Congress government, headed by Kalho Pul, was established in February 2016, but the Supreme Court had Mr. Tuki reinstated. Mr. Tuki sprang a surprise by resigning four days later and paved the way for Mr. Khandu to head the Congress government.

Three months later, he defected with a group of Congress MLAs to the regional People's Party of Arunachal and in December 2016, his group joined

the BJP. It was the second time in 13 years that the BJP ruled Arunachal Pradesh without winning the Assembly elections.

Its penetration in the State during Mr. Khandu's first term helped the BJP win 41 seats out of 60 in 2019 and five more in 2024. Building on the "political stability", Mr. Khandu pledged to pursue a transformative reform agenda through 24 citizen-centric initiatives. He also promised to enhance women's safety and promote gender equality in a State troubled by polygamy.

Mr. Khandu's push for connectivity and tourism was evident from the Do-nyo-Polo Airport near the State's capital Itanagar, which became a reality in November 2022 after years of uncertainty. In March 2021, he drove 140 km through jungles and slush in an off-roader to kill three birds with one stone — become the first CM to visit Vijaynagar, the State's most unconnected part on the Myanmar border, emphasise the need to carve a road to the place, and deliver the 4x4 vehicle for the Circle Office in Vijaynagar. Now, as Chief Minister for the third time, Mr. Khandu promises to build on the initiatives he launched and implement the BJP's vision to make Arunachal Pradesh more developed.

JERUSALEM

IDF says Israeli civilian was shot dead in occupied West Bank

The Israeli military said an Israeli civilian died after being shot near the occupied West Bank city of Qalqilya and that troops launched an operation in the area. The military and the Israeli police were investigating the circumstances of the death. In recent days, there have been several violent incidents in Qalqilya and its vicinity. AFP

SEOUL

U.S. aircraft carrier arrives in South Korea for joint military exercises

A U.S. aircraft carrier arrived in South Korea on Saturday for joint military drills aimed to better counter North Korean threats. The announcement came a day after South Korea summoned the Russian Ambassador to Seoul to protest a defence deal signed by President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-un. AFP

XICHANG

China, France launch satellite to better understand the universe

A Franco-Chinese satellite blasted off on Saturday on a hunt for the mightiest explosions in the universe. The Space Variable Objects Monitor (SVOM) is carrying four instruments — two French, two Chinese — that will seek out gamma-ray bursts, the light from which has travelled billions of light years to reach Earth. AFP

TAIPEI

Taiwan detects 41 Chinese aircraft, seven naval vessels around island

Taiwan's Defence Ministry said on Saturday it had detected 41 Chinese military aircraft around the island in a 24-hour window, a day after Beijing said "diehard" advocates of Taiwan's independence could face the death penalty. Seven naval vessels were also spotted during the time period. AFP

Pakistan Minister condemns Swat lynchingPress Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal on Saturday condemned the lynching of a man in the town of Swat for allegedly committing desecration of the Koran, lamenting how religion is being weaponised to justify "street justice" and "vigilantism".

The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader, while speaking during the Budget debate in the National Assembly, said that parliament had to take stern notice of "mob justice".

On Thursday night, an enraged mob in Swat gunned down a tourist, dragged him through the town and later hanged him in full public view for allegedly committing desecration of the Koran.

The 40-year-old from Sialkot was visiting the resort town of Swat.

Israeli attacks on Gaza City camps leave at least 42 dead

'The occupation and its Nazi leaders will pay the price for their violations against our people,' says Hamas; IDF claims that its fighter jets struck two military infrastructure sites in northern Gaza

Reuters
CAIRO

At least 42 people were killed in Israeli attacks on districts of Gaza City in the north of the Palestinian enclave on Saturday, the director of the Hamas-run government media office said.

One Israeli strike on houses in al-Shati, one of the Gaza Strip's eight historic refugee camps, killed 24 people, Ismail Al-Thawabta told Reuters. Another 18 Palestinians were killed in a strike on houses in the Al-Tufah neighborhood.

The Israeli military released a brief statement saying: "A short while ago, IDF fighter jets struck two Hamas military infrastructure sites in the area of Gaza City."



No let-up: People make their way through the rubble of buildings destroyed at the al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City on Saturday. AFP

It said more details would be released soon.

Hamas did not comment on the Israeli claim to have hit its military infrastructure. It said in a statement the attacks targeted the civilian population and vowed "the occupation and its Nazi leaders will pay the price for their violations against our people."

Footage obtained by Reuters showed dozens of Palestinians rushing out to search for victims amid the destroyed houses. The footage showed wrecked homes, blasted walls, and debris and dust filling the street in Shati refugee camp.

Israel's ground and air campaign in Gaza was triggered when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing around 1,200 people and seizing more than 250 hostages, according to Israeli tallies.

Suhassini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to skip the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to be held in Kazakhstan next month, and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is expected to officiate in his place. According to sources aware of the decision, Mr. Modi has decided not to travel to Astana for the summit.

The offensive has left Gaza in ruins, killed more than 37,400 people, of whom 101 were killed in the past 24 hours.

More than eight months into the war, Israel's advance is now focused on the two last areas its forces had yet to seize: Rafah on Gaza's southern edge and the area surrounding Deir al-Balah in the centre.

The Israeli military said forces continued "precise, intelligence-based" targeted operations in Rafah, killing many Palestinian gunmen and dismantling military infrastructure.

Mr. Modi's decision to miss the SCO Heads of State Council in Astana could also have a bearing on India's participation in the SCO Heads of Government conference, due to be held in Islamabad in 'Autumn 2024', which Pakistan would host.

When asked on Friday, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal declined to confirm India's participation in the SCO, saying that details of the visit were not yet "finalised".

The sources cited the coming Parliament session, which will run from June 24 to July 3, as the reason for Mr. Modi's decision. In addition to the Speaker's election and the President's address to both



Narendra Modi

Houses, the Prime Minister is expected to reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha between July 2 and 4.

The SCO, originally a Eurasian security and economic grouping promoted by Russia and China, includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan as full members. Iran and Belarus will be inducted this year.

Mr. Modi's absence at the SCO is likely to raise questions over India's commitment to the grouping that it joined seven years ago as a full member. Mr. Modi had visited Kazakhstan to attend the SCO Summit in 2017, but the setting has become more troublesome for New Delhi over the past few years. India's tensions with Pakistan, which also was inducted in 2017, have often been the chief irritant at the conference.

During the COVID pandemic in 2020-21, the SCO summits were held virtually. Since the military standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the deadly Galwan clashes of

2020, and the breakdown in ties, Mr. Modi has not met Chinese President Xi Jinping for a bilateral meeting anywhere, although he has engaged briefly with him on the sidelines of the G-20 in Indonesia in 2022 and the BRICS summit in South Africa in 2023.

Moscow ties

Since 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also made the discourse with Moscow more difficult. Although Mr. Modi met with President Putin at the SCO summit in Uzbekistan that year, the conversation was overshadowed by the conflict, and Mr. Modi's statement that "this era is not of war".

India and Russia have not held the annual Putin-Modi summit since then, and a possible meeting when India hosted the SCO for the first time in 2023 was avoided after the government decided to hold the summit virtually, due to "scheduling difficulties".

Earlier this month, Mr. Putin's foreign policy aide and senior diplomat Yuri Ushakov had told TASS news agency that the Russian President was looking forward to meeting Mr. Modi at the conference, which was especially important "in the light of the elections in India, which have just finished".

If Mr. Modi misses the SCO summit in July, it will be seen in sharp contrast to his attendance at the G-7 Summit in Italy last week, where India is not a member, but was invited to the "Outreach" along with nine other countries.

U.K. hard-right leader Nigel Farage says West provoked Ukraine warAgence France-Presse
LONDON

Nigel Farage, leader of Britain's anti-immigration Reform U.K. party, faced strong criticism on Saturday after saying that the West provoked Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In an interview with the BBC on Friday, Mr. Farage said "we have provoked this war", while adding

that "of course" it was Russian President Vladimir Putin's "fault".

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told reporters that Mr. Farage's claim was "completely wrong and only plays into Putin's hands".

Labour leader Keir Starmer, who looks set to take Mr. Sunak's job after an election next month, said Mr. Farage's comments were "disgraceful".

Russia targets Kyiv's power grid in overnight attackAgence France-Presse
KYIV

Ukraine on Saturday said Russia had launched a "massive" overnight attack on energy infrastructure in the west and south, adding that at least seven persons died in strikes elsewhere.

Russia launched 16 cruise missiles from land, sea and air as well as 13 attack drones, aiming at energy infrastructure in several regions.

Kremlin launched 16 cruise missiles from land, sea and air along with a fleet of 13 attack drones

Air defences downed all but four of them, it added.

The Energy Ministry said this was "the eighth massive, combined attack on energy infrastructure facilities" in the past three months, targeting the

southern Zaporizhzhia region and Lviv in the west. "Equipment at (operator) Ukrenergo facilities in the Zaporizhzhia and Lviv regions was damaged," the Ministry said.

More than two years into the Russian invasion, targeted missile and drone attacks have crippled Ukraine's electricity generation capacity and forced Kyiv to impose blackouts and import supplies from the European Union.

Sport

Portugal breezes into round of 16; France and Netherlands settle for a drawAgence France-Presse
LEIPZIG

Portugal swept into the last 16 of Euro 2024 on Saturday after comfortably seeing off Turkey 3-0 and guaranteeing first place in Group F.

Bernardo Silva's free finish in the 21st minute, a comical Samet Akaydin own goal shortly afterwards and Bruno Fernandes's second-half tap-in — set up nicely by Cristiano Ronaldo — gave Portugal a straightforward win in



Opening salvo: Bernardo sets Portugal on its way to an easy win over Turkey with this strike. AFP

front of swathes of passionate Turkish fans in Dortmund.

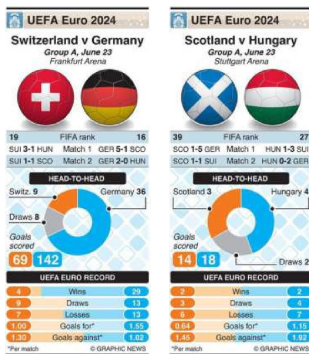
On Friday, France and the Netherlands edged towards the last 16 after a 0-0 draw in Leipzig that failed

to catch fire in the absence of Kylian Mbappe.

The French captain sat out the whole match from the bench after breaking his nose in France's opening 1-0 win over Austria

just four days ago.

Xavi Simons had a goal controversially ruled out for the Dutch, while Antoine Griezmann wasted two glorious chances for France. A share of the



The explosive pace of Jeremie Frimpong took him clear on goal but could not produce a clean finish. Aurelien Tchouameni replaced Mbappe in France's only change as coach Didier Deschamps sought the security of an extra midfielder.

Without its captain and talisman, the 2022 World Cup finalist turned to Griezmann for inspiration. But the Atletico Madrid forward had a moment to forget with the biggest chance to open the scoring before half-time.

An intricate move played in Adrian Rabiot but when he decided to pass rather than shoot, Griezmann failed to connect on his weaker right foot.

The normally reliable Griezmann was guilty of another big miss when his

weak effort was turned behind by Verbruggen with the goal gaping.

Talking point

But the major talking point of the first goalless draw of the tournament saw the Dutch denied a winner.

Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Simons fired in on the rebound after Maignan saved from Memphis Depay 18 minutes from time.

The goal was ruled out for offside as Denzel Dumfries was adjudged to be interfering with Maignan's ability to stop the shot.

The results: Group D:
Netherlands 0 drew with France 0.

Group F: Georgia 1 (Mikautadze 45+4-pen) drew with Czechia 1 (Schick 59); Turkey 0 lost to Portugal 3 (Bernardo Silva 21, Akaydin 28-og, Fernandes 56).