

बिज़नेस स्टैंडर्ड

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बजट से जुड़े संकेत

लो क सभा के नए सत्र के पहले संसद में राष्ट्रपति का अभिभाषण केवल एक संवैधानिक प्रक्रिया पर नहीं होता है क्योंकि इसमें आपत्ती पर आगले पांच वर्ष के लिए सरकार की नीतियों और योजनाओं को रेखांकित किया जाता है। राष्ट्रपति प्रदीप मोरु ने 18वीं लोक सभा को शुरूआत के बाद संसद के पहले संयुक्त सत्र को संबोधित करते हुए जो कुछ कहा वह वाईलिंगस से महत्वपूर्ण था। यह संबोधन तब आया जब नरेंद्र मोदी का बतौर प्रधानमंत्री तीसरा कार्यकाल शुरू हुआ लेकिन यह वह कार्यकाल है जहां राष्ट्रीय जनतांत्रिक गठबंधन के साझेदारों की भूमिका बहुत अस्पष्ट है क्योंकि पिछले दो अवसरों की तरह इस बार भारतीय जनता पार्टी (भाजपा) को अपने दम पर बहुमत नहीं हासिल हो सका। व्यापक सामाजिक-राजनीतिक बहस के मुताबिक देखें तो यह ऐसे समय हुआ है जब रोजगार, खासकर युवा बेरोजगारी एक अग्रम युग है और परेलु तथा विदेशी कारोबारियों का निवेश कमजोर पड़ा है। ऐसे में इस भाषण से उम्मीद की जा रही थी कि इसमें नीतिगत दिशा को लेकर अस्पष्ट बातें कही जाएंगी। इस भाषण में सरकार की पिछली उपलब्धियों के बारे में वक्तार से बात की गई। इसमें मोदी जी पर इस बात पर जोर दिया कि कैसे भारत 10 वर्ष पहले की दुनिया की 11वीं बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था से उठकर अब पांचवीं सबसे बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था वाला देश बन गया है और इस समय हमारा देश दुनिया की सबसे तेज विकसित होती अर्थव्यवस्था वाला देश है। इन परिस्थितियों का श्रेय 'रिफॉर्म', 'रिफॉर्म ऐंड ट्रांसफॉर्म' को दिया गया। आर्थिक वृद्धि के मोर्चे पर कांतिबंद के बाद 2021 से 2024 के बीच वृद्धि का दशरा सालाना 8 फीसदी रहने की बात को रेखांकित किया गया।

कुल मिलाकर अभिभाषण में राजनीतिक दृष्टि से सभी जरूरी विषयों को छुआ गया। सरकार के गरीबी निवारण पर ध्यान केंद्रित करने, पर्यवरण के अनुकूल अर्थव्यवस्था, किसानों और मालिकों के सहायिकरण आदि विषयों की रेखांकित प्रतिक्रियाएं उन विषयों की भी उल्लेख किया गया जिन्हें अतीत में काफी विफल हुआ है। उदाहरण के लिए भाषण में इस बात का उल्लेख किया गया कि सरकार ने विवादोत्पन्न व्यापारिकता संशोधन अधिनियम के तहत नागरिकता प्रदान करना शुरू किया, कैसे इलेक्ट्रॉनिक वोटिंग मशीनों ने पिछले चुनाव में एक बार फिर खरा उतर कर दिखाया और कैसे अनुच्छेद 370 को समाप्त करने से जम्मू -कश्मीर राज्य के विशेष दर्जे में परिवर्तन आया। यह दिलचस्प बात है कि भाषण में परीक्षा संबंधी संस्थाओं में व्यापक बदलाव के चादे से भी पीछे नहीं डाल गया। यह हाल ही में राष्ट्रीय पाठ्यता सह प्रवेश परीक्षा (नीट) के लिए लीक से जुड़ी हुई बात है। ध्यान रहे कि यह परीक्षा केंद्र सरकार की एक संस्था के नेतृत्व में कराई जाती है।

राष्ट्रपति के अभिभाषण में इस बात के तगड़े संकेत थे कि सरकार आगामी आम बजट के लिए अपनी क्षमताएं बचाकर रख रही है। मुरु के अभिभाषण में साफ बताया गया कि कैसे आगामी बजट सरकारी दुरगामी और भविष्यवांशी नीतियों और दृष्टिकोण का एक प्रभावी दस्तावेज होगा। मुरु ने याद किया कि 'बड़े आर्थिक और सामाजिक निर्णयों के साथ बजट में कई ऐतिहासिक कदम' भी देखे जा सकते हैं। अन्धधन में कहा गया है कि शहरी में रहने वाले 2.6 करोड़ से अधिक गरीब लोग अर्थव्यंक गमी से जुझ रहे हैं। वर्ष 2050 तक यह संख्या बढ़कर लगभग 21.5 करोड़ तक पहुंच जाएगी। संयुक्त राष्ट्र की संस्था यूनिसेफ का कहना है कि लगभग 56 करोड़ बच्चे वार-वार लू का सामना कर रहे हैं और आशंका जताई गई रही है कि यह संख्या 2050 तक बढ़कर 2 अरब तक पहुंच सकती है। ऐसी बचस स्थितियों इस बात का संकेत है कि वर्तमान समय में अर्थव्यंक तापमान का सामना करने वाले लोगों को निकट भविष्य में और भीषण गमी झेलने के लिए तैयार रहना होगा। ठंडे प्रदेशों में रहने वाले लोग

नीतिगत खामियों से बच कर रहे बजट

आम बजट में देश के कारोबारी जगत की इच्छाओं को पूरा करने से अधिक जरूरी है कि नीतिगत खामियों से बचा जाए। बता रहे हैं एके भट्टाचार्य

खबरो के मुताबिक वित्त मंत्रालय के अधिकारियों के साथ बजट पूर्व बैठक में उद्योग जगत की ओर से यह मांग की गई है कि उन कंपनियों को प्रत्यक्ष कर दरों में राहत प्रदान की जाए जिनकी कर योग्य आय 20 लाख रुपये तक है। इसके अलावा पेट्रोल और डीजल कीमतों में उत्पाद शुल्क कम करने, महात्मा गांधी राष्ट्रीय ग्रामीण रोजगार गारंटी योजना (मनरेगा) के तहत न्यूनतम मजदूरी में इजाजत करने तथा किसानों को प्रधानमंत्री किसान सम्मान निधि अध्याय पीएम किसान के तहत दी जाने वाली सीधा बढ़ाने की बातें भी शामिल हैं। एक अधीक्षक संगठन ने तो वस्तु एवं सेवा कर (जीएसटी) को तीन दरों वाली प्रणाली में बदलने तथा पुंजीगत लाभ कर के जटिल ढांचे को सरल करने की भी मांग की। अब सवाल उठता है कि सरकार की इन अनुसंधानों को र्थकार करने और पुंजीगर्ह में पेश होने वाले बजट में इनकी घोषणा करने की क्या संभावना है? उन अनुसंधानों से परे उन अस्पष्ट मूर्तों का आकलन करना भी जरूरी है जो मोदी सरकार के तीसरे कार्यकाल के पहले बजट में नजर आ सकते हैं। विजय जीएसटी दरों को तीन दरों में समाहित करने की मांग उपयुक्त है। ऐसा

करके राज्यस्तर निरपेक्ष दर को बढ़ाया जा सकता है और कर संग्रह में सुधार किया जा सकता है। परंतु आम बजट में ऐसी घोषणाओं की अपेक्षाओं की जा सकती है। केंद्र और राज्यों के प्रतिनिधित्व वाला एक समिति इस सारले का परीक्षण कर रही है और जीएसटी को अनुसंधानों के आधार पर समीक्षित परिपद इस पर निर्णय ले सकती है। क्या वित्त मंत्री निर्मला सीतारमण बजट में जीएसटी दरें कम करने के सवाल पर केंद्र का स्पष्ट स्पष्ट करेंगे? लगता तो नहीं।

वित्तीय और रर वित्तीय परिसंपत्तियों के लिए एक समान सरल पुंजीगत लाभ कर ढांचे को मांग भी उठता ही है। यह अनुसंधान विशेष रूप का विषय होनी जिसमें उद्योग संगठन को विशेष ध्यान देना पड़ेगा। परंतु निर्यात के लिए धारण अवधि को 12 महीने के समान सरल करने जाना चाहिए तथा दरों को 10 फीसदी करना चाहिए। इसी प्रकार अल्पव्यंक के पुंजीगत लाभ कर की दर को घटा कर दो प्रतिशत परिसंपत्तियों के लिए इसे 15 फीसदी करना चाहिए। पुंजीगत लाभ के ढांचे की सरल और पारदर्शी बनाने का सुझाव उचित है। इसमें सुधार का मूल विचार कुछ वर्ष पुराना है। अब सरकार को इस पर अंतिम निर्णय लेना चाहिए।

परंतु क्या सरकार नए ढांचे को बजट के माध्यम से पेश करेगी? बतों कई वर्षों के दौरान आम बजट के भाषणों में ऐसी घोषणाएं नहीं की गई हैं जो शेयर बाजार पर असर डाल सकती हों। सरकार की चोहों कि शेयर बाजार के किसी भी हिस्से को नकारात्मक ढंग से प्रभावित कर सकने वाली किसी भी अलोकप्रिय खबर को बजट के सकारात्मक प्रभावों या उसके कर राहत संबंधी प्रस्तावों के प्रभावों को नष्ट करने दिया जाए। ऐसे में बजट में शराब उन्नीं बातों को शामिल किया जाए जो शेयर बाजार पर सकारात्मक असर डालें। पुंजीगत लाभ कर व्यवस्था के पुनर्गठन जैसी बातें, जो कुछ लोगों को जरूर तो कुछ अन्य को नाराज कर सकती हैं, उनसे शराब बचा जाए। वर्ष 2024-25 के बजट में अलग-अलग तरह की संशोधनों पर पुंजीगत लाभ कर की जरूरतों को सरल किया जा सकता है, लेकिन वार्षिक कई वर्ष वर्ष बाद में करने के लिए एक अधिकाराग्रण समिति पर छोड़ जा सकते हैं।

मनरेगा के तहत मजदूरी बढ़ाने और पीएम किसान योजना के तहत किसानों की उठने वाली राशि बढ़ाने की बात मोदी सरकार के लिए मौजूदा राजनीतिक माहौल में अनुकूल साबित हो सकती है।

चुनाव के बाद हुए हालिया सर्वेक्षण बताते हैं कि ग्रामीण भारत में सलाहप्री दल को लेकर रुचि कम हुई है। ऐसे में 2024-25 का बजट मनरेगा और पीएम किसान की राशि के वित्त बृकाव वाला हो सकता है। मनरेगा के मेहनताने में हाल के वर्षों में बढ़ी महंगाई नजर आनी चाहिए। इसी तरह पीएम किसान योजना के तहत 2019 में 6,000 रुपये की जो वार्षिक राशि तब की गई थी उसमें भी मुद्रास्फीति के हिसाब से उचित इजाजत किया जाना चाहिए। यह सरकार की राजकोषीय मजबूती की कोषिश के लिए चिंता का विषय नहीं होना चाहिए क्योंकि बेहतर कर राजस्व और रिजर्व बैंक से हासिल होने वाले अधिशेष से इसकी आसानी से भरापाई हो जानी चाहिए।

बड़ी बहस इस बात पर होगी कि मध्य वर्ग को आर कर राहत देने की बात केंद्र सरकार र्थकार करेगी या नहीं। वर्ष 2021-22 में लगभग 6.8 करोड़ भारतीयों ने आवक रिटर्न दाखिल किया। इनमें से 5.8 करोड़ लोगों की सरल वार्षिक आय 2.5 लाख से 20 लाख रुपये के बीच थी। तब से अब तक इस आय वर्ग के लोगों की संख्या में उन्नाफा हुआ होगा। अगर कदातल को इस वर्गों को कर राहत दी जाती है तो इससे बड़ी तादाद में लोग लाभान्वित होंगे। परंतु अगर बजट में ऐसी राहत की घोषणा की गई तो इससे राजस्व में भी कमी आएगी। उद्योग जगत को खोलें है कि कर राहत और मनरेगा तथा पीएम किसान के तहत बढ़ाई हुई राशि से खराब मांग बढ़ेगी।

मोदी सरकार ने अलग तर्क मांग बढ़ाने के लिए ऐसी कर राहत पर कम की बतों किया है। उनमें अर्थव्यवस्था को बतों प्रदान करने के लिए निवेश बढ़ाने की प्रार्थनिकता दी। चुनाव के पहले कर राहत देने से कुछ राजनीतिक लाभ नहीं मिल सकता था। परंतु अब चुनाव हो चुके हैं और मोदी सरकार को प्रत्यक्ष कर पुनर्गठन के चादे को पूरा करना हो गया। कुछ वर्ष पहले शुरू हुए इन सुधारों को पूरा करना समझदारो भरा होगा। मध्य वर्ग के लिए कर

दरों में कटौती के आधार पर बजट का आकलन करना सही नहीं होगा। अंतरराष्ट्रीय बाजार में कच्चे तेल की कीमत में अस्थिरता को देखते हुए पेट्रोल और डीजल पर कर को कम करना जोखिम भर हो सकता है।

बजट का ऐसी मांगी के पूरा होने के आधार पर आकलन करने के बजाय उसका आकलन इस आधार पर होना चाहिए कि यह कम से कम चार नीतिगत कमियों से बच पाता है या नहीं। पहली, इसे राजकोषीय मजबूती की उमर राब से परे नहीं हटना चाहिए जो कांविड के बाद के वर्षों में बजट में रेखांकित की गई। हां, अगर इसके लिए लक्ष्य को एक वर्ष आगे बढ़ाया जाए तो बेहतर होगा। दूसरा, बजट को कुछ वर्ष पहले शुरू की गई आयात शुल्क बढ़ाने की प्रक्रिया को पलट देना चाहिए। अगर देश की र्थव्यी वृद्धि को तेज करेगी तो तो आयात शुल्क कम करने की प्रक्रिया एक बार फिर से शुरू करनी चाहिए। तीसरा, सरकार को अर्थकारणी नीतय करने में निवेश कम करना चाहिए। तबते कुछ वर्षों के बाद के पुंजीगत व्यय ने अर्थव्यवस्था को प्रति प्रदान की है। अभी तक निजी निवेश में सुधार के कोई संकेत नहीं नजर आत हैं। आखिर में उत्पादन संबंधी जालान्हात यानी पीपललाई योजना के क्षेत्र क्षेत्रों की तादाद बढ़ाने की राह पर अंशुष लगाना चाहिए। पीपललाई योजना की कई लागत ऐसे हैं जो केंद्र के साथ वित्तिगण क्षेत्र को भी चुकानी पड़ रही है। ऐसे में प्रतिस्पर्धा सुधार की वित्त बिना सिबिडी पर उमर की निरंतरता बढ़ रही है।

2024-25 के बजट में शराब उद्योग जगत की कर राहत, पेट्रोल-डीजल में शुल्क कटौती, पुंजीगत लाभ कर पुनर्गठन और मनरेगा तथा पीएम किसान योजना के तहत दी जाने वाली राशि बढ़ाने जैसी राशियों इच्छा पूरी नहीं हो सकीं परंतु यह दर्शाते उचित है कि अगर चार नीतिगत कमियों से पहले शुरू हुए इन सुधारों को पूरा करना समझदारो भरा होगा। मध्य वर्ग के लिए कर

शहरों में बढ़ती गर्मी और इसका समाधान

भारत भीषण गर्मी का सामना कर रहा है। विशेषकर, मई ने कारर बरपाया और तापमान इतना बढ़ गया कि पिछले कई वर्षों के रिकॉर्ड टूट गए और पिछले रिकॉर्ड की तुलना में तापमान 1.5 डिग्री सेल्सियस अधिक दर्ज किया गया। अल नोनी प्रभाव से उत्पन्न हो रहे जलवायु संकट के कारण परा लगातार बढ़ता ही जा रहा है और भीषण गर्मी से मानव से लेकर जीव-जंतु तक परेशान है। तापमान लगातार बढ़ने से भारत समेत पूरी दुनिया में हाहाकार मच गया है जिससे जलवायु अनुरूप एवं वैकल्पिक समाधानों की तत्काल जरूरत महसूस की जा रही है ताकि मानव, जीव-जंतु सहित पर्यवरण को और नुकसान से बचाया जा सके।

विश्व में शहरी आबादी बढ़ने के साथ अधिक लोगों को मौसम में अप्र प्रतिकूल बदलावों का सामना करना पड़ रहा है। मौसम का सख्त निजाज कमजोर एवं वंचित लोगों को अतिर प्रभावित कर रहा है। सी40 (शहरी का जलवायु नेतृत्व समूह) के एक सर्वेक्षण के अनुसार इस समय दुनिया के 350 से अधिक शहर अत्यधिक गर्मी की चप में आ गए हैं। इस अध्ययन के अनुसार 2050 तक ऐसे शहरों की संख्या बढ़कर 970 तक पहुंच सकती है। सिटी40 वैश्विक स्तर पर 96 शहरों का संगठन है, जो जलवायु परिवर्तन से जुड़े जोखिम एवं शहरी समाधान लागू करने के लिए संघर्ष कर रहे हैं। इसी अध्ययन में कहा गया है कि शहरी में रहने वाले 2.6 करोड़ से अधिक गरीब लोग अर्थव्यंक गमी से जुझ रहे हैं। वर्ष 2050 तक यह संख्या बढ़कर लगभग 21.5 करोड़ तक पहुंच जाएगी। संयुक्त राष्ट्र की संस्था यूनिसेफ का कहना है कि लगभग 56 करोड़ बच्चे वार-वार लू का सामना कर रहे हैं और आशंका जताई गई रही है कि यह संख्या 2050 तक बढ़कर 2 अरब तक पहुंच सकती है। ऐसी बचस स्थितियों इस बात का संकेत है कि वर्तमान समय में अर्थव्यंक तापमान का सामना करने वाले लोगों को निकट भविष्य में और भीषण गमी झेलने के लिए तैयार रहना होगा। ठंडे प्रदेशों में रहने वाले लोग

भी अधिक गर्मी का अनुभव करेंगे जिसके वे आदी नहीं रहे हैं। ऐसे आशंका के साथ योजनाकारों को प्रतिकूल परिस्थितियों से निपटने के लिए तैयारी दुरुस्त रहनी होगी।

शहरी नियोजन प्रक्रिया में भीषण गमी से निपटने के लिए एक समग्र नजरिया अपनाना जाना चाहिए जिसमें उद्योग संगठन को विशेष ध्यान देना पड़ेगा और आधुनिक जीवन की मूलभूत आवश्यकताओं में बेहतर जलामेद बैठाना आसान हो जाए। इस बदलाव के केंद्र में एक टिकाऊ शहरी बोधा होना चाहिए। शहरों को ऐसे भविष्य की नींव रखनी चाहिए जिसमें सड़क में सड़क से इनर लॉक व्यवस्था को नून आवश्यक सेवाओं का पुर्च हो, जो रोजमर्रा का जीवन आसान करने के साथ ही चरम जलवायु परिवर्तन के प्रभावों से बचाने में मददगार भी। यह न केवल समाधान है बल्कि रोकथाम एवं मदद का जरिया भी है जिससे उन लोगों के लिए एक सुरक्षा पक्ष तैयार हो जाएगा जो भीषण गर्मी से दौरान उपेक्षा का शिकार हो सकते हैं। सार्वजनिक परिवहन प्रणाली भी महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका निभाती है। एक विषयनीय एवं सक्षम प्रणाली निजी बल्लों पर निर्भरता कम करता है और उत्कर्जन एवं गमगीर उम्या द्वीप प्रभाव भी कम करता है।

मौजूदा संकट हमें चरम तापमान से निपटने में हलत प्रभावित पर विचार करने के लिए प्रेरित कर रहा है। हातर अवसरचंनान में प्रकृति के अनुकूल उपायों का प्रयोग होता है जिनका मकसद शहरी एवं जलवायु-संबंधी चुनौतियों से निपटना है। इन उपायों में वन्य जल प्रबंधन, जलवायु अनुकूलन, गर्मी का प्रचान निर्वाहित करना रखना, जीव-वैविधता बढ़ाना

समोशा रिपोर्ट में पारिस्थितिकी-नेत्र आधारित दृष्टिकोण जैसे शहरी निर्माण, शहरी वन एवं आर्द्रभूमि दोबारा बसात करने और शुरुआती सेतावन प्रणाली पर जोर दिया है।

वैश्विक स्तर पर हो रहे नवाचार हमें रहने लायक अधिक से अधिक शहर तैयार करने की महत्तरपूर्ण सीख देते हैं। सिंगापुर हातर छत और ऊर्ध्वचर उद्यान (वर्टिकल गार्डन) के जरिये गर्मी को समर्याय शुरू किया गया जिसमें धूप का असर कम करने के लिए चर्ची की छतों को संकेद रंग दिया गया है। इसी तरह, मेलबर्न में साल 2012 में 20 वर्षों की एक रणनीति अपनाई गई जिसमें शहरी वन क्षेत्र बढ़ाने पर जोर दिया गया और 2040 तक कैपेगीन कवर (बढ़ते पौधों से छायांकित क्षेत्र) बढ़ाकर 60 फीसदी करने का लक्ष्य रखा गया है।

शहरी क्षेत्रों में तापमान कम करने की प्रभावी रणनीति में हातर अवसरचंनान तैयार करना शामिल है।



अमित कपूर और विवेक देवराय



फोटो - पीटीआई

भारत और इजिप्ट के राफेल लड़ाकू विमानों ने गुजरात को मित्र के प्रसिद्ध पिरामिड के ऊपर तालमेल के साथ उड़ान भरी।

आपका पक्ष

अर्थव्यवस्था सर्वोपरि

लेख 'भारत में फिर राजनीतिक अर्थव्यवस्था शायी' सती निष्कर्षों के साथ बहुत चित्तकर्षक एवं हृदयाशायी चर्चा करता है। यह समझना आवश्यक है कि 18वीं लोक सभा जनताई से गठित हुई है और इसके गठबंधन सरकार के स्वरूप पर कोई प्रश्न, शंका और संशय निरर्थक है। मोदी सरकार पहले कार्यकाल से ही गठबंधन का अहम हिस्सा है। भाषणा नीति पिछली दो गठबंधन सरकारों की सरलता का ही परिणाम है कि भाषणा गठबंधन के विरुद्ध कोई विरोधी लहर नहीं थी। राजनीतिक दल पर तीसरी बार मोदी सरकार के गठबंधन स्वरूप को लेकर आलोचना जनमानस के लिए नया तक कोई अर्थ नहीं रखी। जब तक कि अर्थव्यवस्था आगे बढ़ने के साथ जनमानस की आकांक्षाओं को पूरा करने और उसके जनकल्याण पर ध्यान देती रहे। जनकल्याणकारी योजनाओं को दौ-बैक के लिए नहीं बल्कि सामाजिक संतुलन और स्थायित्व का कारक स्वीकार



मंदिर, धार्मिक पर्यटन, होटल, भोजनालय, छोटे-बड़े उद्योग व्यापार में देश के करोड़ों लोग प्रत्यक्ष एवं परोक्ष रूप से जुड़े हैं

करने की आवश्यकता है। यह सही है और आशंका जताई गई रही है कि सनातन की मंदिरों की अर्थव्यवस्था 3.02 लाख करोड़ रुपये की हो चुकी है और धार्मिक पर्यटन भी 1.34 लाख करोड़

पाठक अपनी राय हमें इस पते पर भेज सकते हैं : संपादक, बिजनेस स्टैंडर्ड, 4, बहादुर शाह जफर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली 110002. आप हमें ईमेल भी कर सकते हैं : lettershindi@bsmail.in। पत्राईमेल में अपना डाक पता और टेलीफोन नंबर अवश्य लिखें।

रुपये तक पहुंच गया है। मंदिरों, धार्मिक पर्यटन, होटल, भोजनालय, छोटे-बड़े उद्योग व्यापार में देश में करोड़ों लोग प्रत्यक्ष एवं परोक्ष रूप से जुड़े हैं और अयोध्या, वाराणसी, हरिद्वार, ऋषिकेश, मथुरा, तिरुप्ति बालाजी, शिरडी, मधुरा, उज्जैन, नासिक, कोलकाता, रामेश्वरम, कन्याकुमारी, जयपुर, कच्छ, इरावतीधाम, सोमनाथ और पर उतराछाड़ में सनातन और धार्मिक पर्यटन से ही अर्थव्यवस्था चला रही है। हजारों अनाथालय, बुद्धाश्रम, गौशालाएं, विद्यालय, भोजनालय, भ्रमशालाएं सनातन व्यवस्था में ही चल रहे हैं। यह सत्य है कि रोजगार सृजन निजी क्षेत्र में ही है तो आरक्षण और लेकर इतनी राजनीति क्यों? यह प्रश्न राजनीतिक पदल के सारने मुर फाड़े खड़े हैं।

विमोद जीतरी, दिल्ली

भारत को विकसित देश बनाने का लक्ष्य प्रणामनी नौद्री मोदी ने भारत को वर्ष 2047 तक विकसित बनाने का लक्ष्य रखा है। इस दिशा में केंद्र सरकार तेजी से काम कर रही है। देश की अर्थव्यवस्था के साथ ही बुनियादी ढांचे पर भी भारपुर जोर दिया जा रहा है। पिछले द्दिनों संसद में 18वीं लोक सभा का पहला सत्र शुरू हुआ है। इस बार संसद में केवल दो ही दिन बजत आ रहे हैं। पहला सत्रण (राष्ट्रीय जनतांत्रिक गठबंधन) और दूसरा सत्रण (भारतीय राष्ट्रीय विकासशीलता संस्थानी गठबंधन)। भले ही राजन और बिना कई दलों के गठबंधन से देश है लेकिन संसद में एक ही दल के रूप में नजर आते हैं। विकासिद देश अमेरिका में दो ही दल है फलतः डेमोक्रेटिक तथा दूसरा रिपब्लिकन। भारत में एक ऐसा एक चुनाव की परिपक्वता की गई है। शायद एक दिन देश में दो बड़े दल ही एक एक देश चुनाव भी देखने को मिल जाए।

मोहित कुमार, नई दिल्ली

How to Fix Skilling The Competition

Wages should adjust to blue-collar conditions

L&T has flagged the shortage of skilled workers, brought upon by inadequate skilling and accentuated by international migration. The issue is endemic across infrastructure, construction, manufacturing, logistics, retail and healthcare. India has low skilling rates for blue-collar workers by international comparison. Its workforce has an unusual preference for white-collar jobs. Conditions for manual work are also brutal in a heat-stressed nation. And there has been a shift towards contractual employment that aggravates the shortage of skilled workers. Preferred solutions by employers — automation or outsourcing — tend to perpetuate the skill gap by artificially depressing demand for workers. This cannot be the way forward for an economy that is looking at manufacturing and services to deliver on its demographic dividend.

The obvious starting point is equipping a higher proportion of the workforce with the skills most in demand. Both the government and industry need to step up their engagement with vocational education. This is especially true in emerging industries such as RE and logistics. Legislation is needed to bring parity in working conditions among blue- and white-collar workers. Where this is not possible — for instance, in construction — wages must adjust to the harshness of outdoor work. Industry also has to commit more towards tenure of employment for manual labour in order to draw in a new generation of workers.

All of these are required, but still may not suffice to replenish India's ageing manual work force. The wage disparity with office workers is considerably larger for skilled labour to be employment of choice. The onus is on industry to move from labour cost arbitrage to innovation-led growth. True, there is still a lot of wage arbitrage Indian manufacturing and services can rely upon. But they must climb the value chain to be able to perform on a global scale. As capital ceases to be the foremost growth constraint, the economy must work on its bigger skills bottleneck.



Advertising must focus on ways to make business and society grow, not just win clubbie awards

It's About Can, Not Cannes



Shivaji Dasgupta

Indian firms bagged 18 Lions at the 54th Cannes Advertising Festival 2024 — officially Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity — that ended last Friday. With no Grand Prix and only two golds, India's show is being dramatically — and rather unfairly — positioned as a colossal tragedy for Indian advertising. Perhaps this is a sobering moment for the client agency fraternity to refocus on the core purpose of a great talent pool: to accelerate socio-economic momentum of the country, as opposed to simply wooing prestigious but 'clubbie' awards.

According to a 2024 Dentsu India report, the advertising industry is poised to grow at 4.8% CAGR by 2025, this reaching ₹1.12 lakh cr. The Indian D2C brand market is likely to more than triple in four years to reach ₹83.2 bn (€12.12 lakh cr) by FY27, according to a June 2024 Lattice Sorin Investments report. In 2024, 25 major global retail brands are poised to enter India.

FMCG is predicted to grow at a 14.9% CAGR to ₹220 bn (€36.3 lakh cr) by 2025, up from ₹167 bn (€23.9 lakh cr) in 2023. Appliances and consumer electronics are expected to reach ₹21.38 bn (€3.17 lakh cr) by 2025. In 2023, the QSR (quick-service restaurant) industry witnessed a robust growth of 30.5% in revenue. The Indian cosmetics market was valued at ₹8.1 bn (€1.26 lakh cr) in 2023, and is expected to reach ₹14.4 bn (€2.14 lakh cr) by 2025, at a CAGR of 3.2%. Expecting a substantial surge of e-commerce to ₹225 bn (€37.2 lakh cr) by 2028, the digital economy is poised to reach ₹800 bn (€126.76 lakh cr).

Advertising at large, whether digital or legacy, is potent ammunition for this growth agenda. Especially since the new-age origin of demand is the unfamiliar 'Tier 2 downwards' online shoppers with a CAGR of 22% (88 mm) in rural India.



Global awards are usually not given for mainstream actions but designed to reward frolicky tokenism



What was the product again?

India, to complement the 15% growth in urban India, from 2018 to 2028. To ensure shareholder delight, the brightest creative minds must be deployed at the forefront of demand creation. This will clearly lead to sustainable growth for the creative industry.

At one end, there is hyper-consolidation with large global giants expanding their colonies. While on the other side, high-quality solo gigs are disrupting the market. In every case, revenue pre-munition and remuneration up-grades remain nagging challenges.

In fact, in our modern tech-thrilled society, purposeful yet monetisable communication opportunities are galore. India is positioned to emerge as a global AI powerhouse, with an estimated CAGR of 31.5% from 2023, forecasted to reach ₹5.1 bn (€760 cr) by 2027.

According to Statista, global digital ad spend is projected to reach ₹1.12 lakh cr (€16.76 lakh cr) by 2025, up from ₹800 cr (€119.6 lakh cr) in 2023. In this context, archive affections for global awards remain, at best, a distraction. At worst, a digression. For starters, they are usually not given for mainstream



In our modern tech-enthralled society, purposeful yet monetisable communication opportunities are galore.

reactions but designed to reward frolicky tokenism. The Pritzker Architecture Prize — 'Nobel Prize of architecture' — for instance, celebrates living structures, not scintillating sketches. Manjiv stars are awarded to restaurants who deliver outstanding food daily and are reviewed yearly not a one-time gastronomic creation. Oscars, Grammys, Emmys and Tonys are earned by scalable appreciation, not just conceptual craft.

Cannes and its peers hawk theoretical heroism for offshoots who are more often than not, incompatible in 'expressways'. Youngsters winning awards demand unjustified CTC premiums, and often snook career paths in 'parallel' advertising, inattentive to truthful challenges. Productive energies are simply consumed by an ornate-like code of silence, as 'vulnerable' ideas earn immunity from hard-work 'drudgery'.

Legacy clients expectedly succumb to the temperate ruses of the French Riviera, especially this time of the year. In fact, a tactical masterstroke by the Cannes organisers was to lure global clients, seducing legitimacy P&G was among the early advocates, and attendance now is often a boardroom SOP. The genuinely brilliant creative talent corps must urgently focus on the 'can', ways to further growth in business and society. Filmcraft 'can' excite growth in economies and the acumen to distinguish fake from real. Print 'can' persuade mass D2C action, not just armchair critical acclaim. OOH (out-of-home) 'can' drive behaviour change in many homes, beyond being a coffee-table showpiece.

The very moment advertising plays an inarguable role in driving real numbers, clients will be forced to pay fair dollars, and talent will enjoy the CTC that bankers command. Yachts will then become parking bay reality, and not an annual French fantasy. But for that to happen, the cream must demonstrate that they 'can', and not just Cannes.

Their tier is an autonomous brand constellation

Sports Can Push Our Young Out of Torpor

India is unfit. A Lancet Global Health study published this week reveals that half of our adult population doesn't meet WHO guidelines for sufficient physical activity. They get less than 150 mins of moderately intense activity, 75 mins of vigorous-intensity activity, or an equivalent combination, per week. Such a sedentary lifestyle puts adults at greater risk of heart attacks and strokes, Type 2 diabetes, dementia, and breast and colon cancers. But as far as incentives go, warnings haven't been much useful. They are either seen as applicable to 'other people', or as 'first world' concerns. It's time to take a different tack.

Physical activity regimes are usually conducted sporadically, if at all. Increasingly for our young, it's on par with 'Eat your greens', something that gets little traction outside adult surveillance. Instead, why not approach the problem through the more seductive means of competitive sports? India is showing its sporting prowess beyond cricket, throwing up role models for youngsters to emulate. Add the catalyst of 'fun' — instead of duty — and sports can provide the perfect push to get young people out of their sedentary habits — and their heads out of smartphones. On their parent, schools must inculcate the 'gymnasium' approach to treating bodies on par with minds. For this to take root, parents must realise that playing sports isn't a waste of time. Infrastructure — fields, parks, pools — must be accessible and affordable.

Benefits of physical activity are immense: improved mental health and building defence against diseases, especially as Indians are genetically more prone to non-communicable diseases. Our growing physical prowess should match our growing affluence. The generational change can start now.



When Don T Met ChatGPT, a Romcom

Reports say that famous troglodyte Don T has just discovered ChatGPT. With tomorrow's first round of US presidential debates on while we slurp our first cuppa, Don T's discovery and subsequent statement earlier this month that he used the AI chatbot to 'rewrite' (write?) his speech is good news for Team Don T. Making a Musk-like prediction that the industry made up of 'these wonderful speechwriters' will soon be gone, the Orange One explained patiently to the rest of us: 'One of the top people [in his campaign team], he said, "Oh, you're going to make a speech?" Yeah. He goes, click, click, click, and like 15 seconds later, he shows me my speech, written so beautifully... I said, "I'm going to use this sucker."'

Don T's speeches can only get more coherent, better-reasoned, with words like 'Vivekananda' spelt out by ChatGPT phonetically for ease of tripping off his tongue. Which can mean either of two things: Don T's legions will love this new AI-assisted naturally intelligent (but not sounding too intelligent) challenger to Uncle Joe; or they won't, missing their bossman's signature bromstone and bombast. Unless, of course, Don T's prompt is: 'Write a campaign speech in the style of Donald Trump.' That way, no one'll know the diff and the Don can still do away with his speechwriting team. May the ChatGPT win tomorrow's debate.

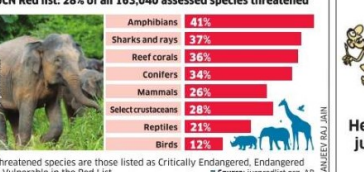
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In cricket, no format's too brief,
But the rain brings naught but grief.
A match that's so quick,
Stopped by one drippy trick,
Leaves fans in a state of disbelief...

THREATENED SPECIES

More than 45,300 species are now threatened with extinction — 1,000 more than last year — according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Red List. The threatened species in the updated list include elephants in the Southeast Asian island of Borneo, which has been classified as endangered. The Red List, a critical indicator of the health of the world's biodiversity, now includes 1,63,040 species, an increase of about 6,000 from last year.

IUCN Red List: 28% of all 1,63,040 assessed species threatened*



*Threatened species are those listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable in the Red List

Bel Curves

R Prasad



Hey, hey, I'm not a hunter, just an embedded artist!

For Our Mutual Benefit



Rachana Baid & V Shunmugam

Asset management behemoth BlackRock's departure from the Indian MF market in 2018 sent shock waves through the financial world. Operational inefficiencies and nascent market conditions were thought to be reasons for its exit. The decision was a head-scratcher for many considering India's flourishing economy and growing investor base. In April 2024, however, BlackRock announced its return through a JV with Jio Financial Services. So, what triggered this change of heart?

The answer lies not in a sudden shift in BlackRock's strategy but in the remarkable transformation of the Indian MF industry in the intervening years. In 2024, the industry's assets under management (AUM) stood at a modest ₹10 tn. Today it is ₹65.9 tn, reflecting a sixfold increase. This dramatic rise can be attributed to a confluence of factors:

1. **Digital revolution** has democratised investing, making it more accessible. The rise of user-friendly platforms, such as Paytm Money Grow and Zerodha, has slashed entry barriers by simplifying investment processes and offering intuitive interfaces. This digital revolution has expanded the investor base and fostered a culture of financial literacy through educational resources and independent information on performance and risks available on these platforms.

2. **Investment choices** Product offerings have undergone a significant expansion and next name rules. The product menu of MFs boasts diverse options catering to a broader spectrum of investors with varying risk appetites and financial goals. On the one hand, ETFs and index funds offer a cost-effective way to gain exposure to a broad market basket. On the other hand, thematic and sectoral funds focus on specific sectors or trends like ESG investing. Sebi's circular on the categorisation and rationalisation of schemes, issued in October 2017, ensured that MF products stayed true to their name.

3. **Strong regulatory** Regulatory reforms by Sebi have fostered growth and trust within the industry. The introduction of 'Riskometer' provided a standardised tool for investors to understand the risk profile of MF schemes and make informed decisions based on their risk tolerance. Additionally, revisions in the total expense ratios (TER) in 2020 have reduced the operating expenses charged to investors, making mutual funds a more cost-effective proposition.

4. **Simplified KYC** process through e-verification has streamlined the onboarding process for new investors, removing a significant entry hurdle. The progressive measures have created a more transparent and investor-friendly environment, boosting confidence in the MF industry.

5. **Healthy AMC's** The impact of these reforms is evident in the burgeoning profitability of AMC's. Driven by rising AUM and streamlined operations, the net profit margins of major AMC's have consistently improved. The latest net profit margin of the four listed AMC's, ranging from 38% to 69%, is way higher than many of their US counterparts.

The MF industry's profitability underscores a sustainable and growing market where investors and AMC's flourish. BlackRock's return is likely driven by another factor beyond the market growth: India's burgeoning ESG movement. As a global leader in sustainable/transition investing, BlackRock's presence is expected to raise the bar for ESG practices in India, pushing for greater transparency and accountability within the market. This, in turn, will encourage more companies to adopt sustainable practices, making it easier for investors to make informed decisions based on ESG metrics.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Reading Cartoons In the Newspaper

There's an unalloyed pleasure in giving your finger a rest from online scrolling, and quietly devouring cartoons in the morning newspaper. As a daily ritual, it offers amusement, continuity and, in those re-runs, safe nostalgia away from the gritty headlines that feed us dollops of gravitas. Printed cartoon strips are tangible, less liable to turn into a puff of ether, scroll away-able smoke.

Morning cartoons provide that levity by which you can leverage your day — with a smile, even an audible 'Ha!'. They capture the essence of life, whether through satire, sharp commentary or even the straight-up capricious route of strip cartoons that tell stories that have nothing to do with news. They make us dive for a few seconds into frames that are self-happy and eye-catching.

Sharing cartoons with family over your morning cuppa can fuel conversations and connections, bridging generational gaps, dismantling barriers of taste. Ultimately, they lay in their ability to provide consistent, lighthearted respite, reminding us of the enduring power of humour, and simple pleasures in life.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Of Ends and Beginnings

MARGUERITE THEOPHIL

A gift of a bracelet from Ghana at first looks like a series of linked hearts, but on closer inspection, the beads spell out: I learn that this is the Sankofa, a mythical bird from their culture that flies forward while looking backward, with a heart in its mouth.

The word Sankofa derives from the Akan people, a West African ethnic group that resides in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. For over centuries, developed a highly artistic and communicative system of ideographic and pictographic symbols, each representing a specific concept or proverb rooted in the Akan experience. Their beliefs were handed down mostly orally through proverbs and stories, or through pictorial symbols. A proverb from the concept and meaning of Sankofa is derived declares: 'It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.' It speaks of knowledge that has been passed on to the present and progress through the benevolent use of knowledge.

The Sankofa bird is stylised in a circular fashion to represent that there is no end and no beginning. It has an egg in its mouth, which represents not only the knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based, but also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from that wisdom. Culturally, the Sankofa bird represents the collective wisdom of a people, and teaches that a people must know its past legacy to understand the present situation in order to protect and create a future for generations.

Chat Room

For Opposition, No Ta-ta Birla

Apropos the news report, 'Speaker's First Action: A Resolution Condemning Emergency of 1975 (Jun 27)', the decision of the NDA government to re-elect Om Birla as Lok Sabha Speaker should make the wind out of the Opposition's sails as Birla's first years were an adroit exercise in partisanship. The ardent woman would have come true when Birla launched a tirade against the Emergency declared 50 years ago, chastising the PM's sentiments. The very first day of the 18th Lok Sabha conveyed an ominous portent, and unless the Opposition circle up its lions and leopards to fight for its rights, the treasury benches would continue to hold sway not just in the Lower House but in the Upper House as well.

CV ARAVIND

Bengaluru

To Catch Up With AI, Steed Up

This refers to 'Saddle Up the New Bronco' by T K Arun (Jun 26). Whether the world needs it or not, AI and its latest generative incarnation are going to be a way of life for the people across the globe, economy and society. The only caveat is that it should be, and made to be, egalitarian and equitable. Globally concerted efforts are needed to manage its side effects, be that in terms of benign regulation or self-regulation. There's no denying the fact that a lot of economic and material problems could be solved through AI, but we're reining and riding appropriately the AI bronco that has bolted.

RAMAN AGRAWALA

Bhubaneswar

Law, Funds to Destress Water

Apropos the Edit, 'Water Stress Pouring Into Economic Stress' (Jun 27), there is an urgent need to specify water conservation and rainwater harvesting as a responsibility of municipalities, municipal corporations and village panchayats by including the same as a mandatory item in the 12th Schedules to our Constitution, read with Articles 243G and 243W. This will ensure availability of funds for municipalities. The current efforts by NGOs, corporates and volunteers are commendable, but responsibility as well as empowering local bodies. The current efforts by NGOs, corporates and volunteers are commendable, but responsibility as well as empowering local bodies.

L K KHATRE

Bengaluru

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



Opinion

FRIDAY, JUNE 28, 2024

SELF-RELIANCE AMBITION

President Droupadi Murmu

The government is giving equal priority to all three arms: manufacturing, services, and agriculture. India is becoming Atmanirbhar in every field at a rapid pace

Foxconn's labour pangs

Allegations of discriminatory hiring practices must be probed fairly and quickly as the charges are serious

ATATIME of heightened US-China rivalries and de-risking of supply chains from the mainland, the growing scale of Apple's local iPhone production is definitely good news. India must step up its efforts to capitalise on this process and also ensure that the US tech giant's preferred contract suppliers — which include the Taiwanese Foxconn and the Tata Group — adhere to its highest supply chain standards in hiring and practices in the workplace. A case in point is an investigative story by Reuters that Foxconn's iPhone assembly facility in Sriperumbudur, in Tamil Nadu, prefers not to hire married women. As the laws of the land do not bar firms from discriminatory hiring on the basis of marital status, this merits closer attention.

On its part, Foxconn has reportedly informed the government that the allegations are incorrect and may have been made by vested interests. It has also stated that 25% of its new hires are married women. According to a PTI report, the company has also informed that the discussion around married women being discriminated against for wearing metals (ornaments and jewellery) is "entirely slanted" and wearing metal in such factories is a safety issue. Foxconn has also said that the Sriperumbudur factory currently has about 70% women. In view of Foxconn's submissions, it would obviously be unfair to pronounce the company guilty without adequate evidence. So the matter must be probed thoroughly as the report quotes several women as well as other stakeholders about discriminatory labour practices of the company. Thus, the Union labour ministry's decision to ask for a detailed report from the Tamil Nadu government is a welcome signal. The matter must be fast-tracked.

The way forward obviously is for Foxconn to hire all women regardless of their marital status. With wages of \$200 a month, it is definitely a ticket out of extreme poverty for all women as they head to the towns and cities from villages to seek better employment opportunities. While there is a critical need for replicating the local iPhone ecosystem to facilitate Apple's growing level of ambition, it is necessary that workplace practices of its contractors also meet its highest supply chain standards. Foxconn has big plans to deepen its presence in India and is being aggressively wooed by several state governments like Karnataka and Telangana. Their temptation is to race to the bottom by enacting amendments to labour laws that extend working hours.

In February 2023, the Karnataka legislature passed an amendment to the Factories Act of 1948 to allow industries to extend working hours up to 12 hours a day while keeping the maximum weekly work hours at 48 hours. While this suits Apple's preferred contractors, one of them, Wistron, which has been taken over by the Tata Group, had a bitter experience with local work culture four years ago with workers violently protesting against unpaid wages and arduous hours. Three years ago, Foxconn also faced protests against the conditions in its dormitory facility in Sriperumbudur when 250 women were treated for food poisoning. The upshot is that Apple must ensure that its contractors adhere strictly to its highest supply chain standards instead of running sweatshops. In its 2024 supply chain report, Apple states that since 2009 it has removed 25 manufacturing supplier facilities and 231 material processors for failure to meet its standards. Discrimination against married women in Sriperumbudur, if true, fails to meet such standards.

Beyonce and blue jeans weren't enough for Levi's

WALL STREET MISTOOK a fashion trend for a turnaround.

Shares in Levi Strauss & Co. fell as much as 16% in pre-market trading after second-quarter sales missed expectations. Although revenue in the three months to May 26 came in at \$1.44 billion — only just below the \$1.45 billion average of analysts' estimates — the performance should have been better given that denim is one of the hottest looks around right now. Let's not forget that shout-out from Beyonce in March, prompting the company to change its Instagram name to "Levi's". That's the kind of publicity that other apparel companies can only dream of.

Denim is having a moment, with wide-legged styles in the ascendance. And Michelle Gass, the former Kohl's Corp. chief executive officer who took the helm at Levi's at the start of this year, is certainly taking advantage of the swing from slouchy leisurewear to so-called "hard pants".

Straight, loose, and wide-legged styles now account for more than 50% of bottom-half apparel at Levi's, and sales rose 21% in the second quarter. Demand for women's clothing was particularly strong, with sales up 22% through Levi's stores and its own website. It's now America's biggest seller of women's jeans.

Gass' strategy of selling more denim clothing that isn't jeans, such as tops, dresses, and skirts — what she dubs the "head-to-toe denim lifestyle" — is contributing to this success. Products beyond pants were "selling like crazy", Gass told analysts on Wednesday. Sales of western-style shirts rose 40%, with denim skirts and dresses up by a triple-digit percentage. This has helped the company to avoid markdowns, contributing to a record gross margin of 60.5%.

Yet this looks at odds with the slight second-quarter sales miss, as well as the company's forecast for full-year revenue to be up only between 1% and 3%. Of course, Gass might be hoping to under-promise and over-deliver. After all, sales in the US and Europe, while China's post-reopening recovery has stalled. But there are other risks that Levi's must manage.

First of all, the company wants to sell more of its products through its own website and stores. This should be more profitable as there's more control over what to put on sale rather than at, say, a department store.

But this strategy also has pitfalls. Not only does online delivery incur costs, but Nike Inc. has demonstrated that selling less through third-party stores can give oxygen to rivals. Given that everyone from Associated British Foods' Pils Primark to premium players like Paige are doubling down on the category, Levi's must avoid ceding sales.

It's also trying to move into non-denim categories, such as T-shirts, which consumers tend to buy more often. So far, this is paying off. But it does pit the company against brands already well-known for these products, as well as cheaper rivals.

Meanwhile, Gass is overhauling the business, cutting costs, and moving from a logistics network that it wholly owns and operates to one that includes other providers. For the remainder of the year, this will mean that it bears the cost of running both types of facility. There is also a danger of supply-chain snarl-ups during any such transition.

Luckily for Gass, denim trends move at a glacial pace. Skinny fits ruled for roughly a decade, from about 2005 to 2015. So the current fashion for bigger jeans should have more room to run.

Denim is continuing to sell well, although it's performing better in women's apparel than men's, according to retail intelligence company EDITED. Wide-legged and bootcut styles are the most in demand, it said.

But Gass and Levi's investors must be on watch for signs that we are at peak denim. Whether the popularity endures into the fall will be telling. After the shares almost doubled in the summer through to early June, they won't want to be caught out wearing the wrong pants.



ANDREA FELSTED

Bloomberg

ECONOMISTS ARE STRUGGLING to reconcile their upbeat views on the US economy with the angst of average Americans. The key measures of economic performance — growth, unemployment, and inflation — are almost perfect, putting the United States in an enviable strong position. But ahead of November's presidential election, voters continue to cite the economy as a top issue. The main problem: inflation.

How can this be? To the exasperation of most economists, all this hand-wringing seems terribly misplaced. The Covid-19 shock to US prices from the spring of 2021 to late 2023 has subsided dramatically. Yes, we are still waiting for an all-clear sign that inflation is settling back down to the 2% target that the US Federal Reserve judges to be consistent with price stability. But there can be no mistaking a significant reduction in inflation risks.

Of course, there is an important catch: Even if inflation were to return to the promised land of price stability — although not as quickly as the optimists of the "transitory camp" initially expected — there is still a serious political problem with that result. Namely, prices are too high — and will likely remain elevated for many years to come.

By using the word "prices" instead of inflation, I am not splitting hairs. Inflation depicts changes in aggregate prices, which is very different from the level of the price index. That distinction bears critically on the political debate ahead of the election: President Joe Biden's team is focused on the inflation rate while the American public is more concerned about the price level.

There is little debate over the progress on inflation. After surging to a post-pandemic high of 9.1% in June 2022, the overall inflation rate as measured by the consumer price index (CPI) has since receded to a 3.3% average over the past 11 months — an extraordinary reduction, or "disinflation", over such a

ELECTION PLANK

ELEVATED PRICES & LOWER INFLATION SHAPING UP CORE DEBATE BEFORE US PRESIDENTIAL POLL

The defining economic issue

STEPHEN S ROACH

Faculty member, Yale University, and former chairman, Morgan Stanley Asia



short period. However, inflation remains more than double the 1.5% average rate over the seven years prior to Covid and is significantly above the Fed's 2% target, as seen through the lens of a slightly different metric, the GDP-based personal consumption expenditures price index.

But this near-complete recovery from the inflation shock of 2021-23 contrasts sharply with the still-elevated price level. Therein lies the political problem for Biden: As the chart shows, notwithstanding recent disinflation, the headline CPI in May was still fully 20% above its level in January 2021, when he took office.

Since January 2021, price levels remain especially elevated for energy (41%), transportation (40%), shelter (22%), and food (21%), which together

account for 63% of the typical US consumer's basket of goods and services. They are called essential purchases for good reason: Families can't live without them.

A back-of-the-envelope estimate suggests that, as of May, the aggregate price level, measured by headline CPI, is fully 15 percentage points higher than it would have been had the CPI maintained its 1.5% pre-Covid trajectory. No wonder Americans are so pessimistic about the economy. The big jump in prices, especially for basic necessities, overwhelmingly outweighs the drop in the inflation rate. And even if inflation were to fall further, as expected, the price level would remain uncomfortably high and continue to rise, albeit at a slower rate. A sustained period of outright deflation — a dangerous development

for any economy — is the only way to push down the overall price level.

The juxtaposition between elevated price levels and sharply lower inflation is shaping up to be the defining economic problem of the upcoming US presidential election. In normal times, campaigns would feature a debate about which candidate has the best solution. Unfortunately, these are not normal times. The current state of US politics means that more attention will be paid to assigning fault. Ever since former President George H.W. Bush famously mocked the "vision thing" ahead of the 1988 presidential election, a myopic American public has placed much greater weight on the blame game.

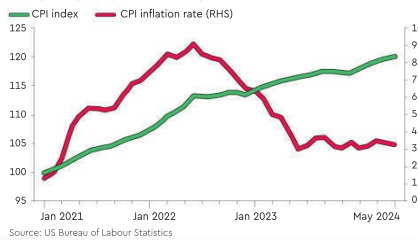
Biden has offered a vision for solving this thorny problem, featuring, most notably, the Inflation Reduction Act and a strategy for de-bottlenecking supply chains. The presumptive Republican nominee, former President Donald Trump, would likely take a different approach, especially given his penchant for even higher tariffs, increased trade conflict, and a weaker dollar, all of which could stoke inflation.

But as the more likely blame game erupts, Trump will undoubtedly hold Biden responsible for the excessive rise in the aggregate price level since January 2021. Of course, Biden could turn around and blame the pandemic price shock — and, for that matter, America's botched Covid response — on Trump.

Will the candidates take the high road of vision, or the low road of blame? Which one will make the more compelling case? I wish I could be more optimistic, but there seems to be little chance of a civil debate over common-sense economics. My advice is to hope for the high road but to be prepared for the low road, while simultaneously recognising the important distinction between the level and the rate of change in prices.

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TWO FACES OF INFLATION



Source: US Bureau of Labour Statistics

Data protection board: A way forward



KAMESH SHEKAR

Senior programme manager, privacy, data governance and AI, The Dialogue

THE FORMATION of the Data Protection Board (DPB), a pivotal adjudicatory body under the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDPA) Act, 2023, will be the cornerstone of India's data governance efforts. The DPB will be essential in determining relationships with other sectoral regulators such as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India while adjudicating matters. Nevertheless, establishing a DPB is essential for setting a precedence on matters related to India's data protection to secure informational privacy of individuals. As forthcoming Digital Personal Data Protection Protection rules will delineate the procedure for appointing members and the chairperson of the DPB, it is essential for the rules to be guided by the best practices followed internationally and by other Indian regulators in order to ensure an effective board is established.

Constitution of selection committee

The selection committee should comprise a combination of the judiciary, executive, and legislative panels to ensure a balanced and effective constitution of the DPB. Besides, having a combination of the three organs of the government would aid in accounting for different perspectives. For instance, as the DPB will be an adjudicatory body,

having a judiciary in the selection committee could help find an individual who could interpret and apply the law depending on the specificities of individual cases. Similarly, having legislative members as part of the selection committee would bring accountability to the process of selecting members and a chairperson.

Therefore, it is essential to have a representation of retired/sitting Supreme Court judges, practising lawyers, etc. Secondly, it should include the opposition party leader (similar to the Right to Information Act), chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology, other relevant standing committee chairpersons, and members elected from both lower and upper houses of Parliament (similar to the structure followed in France). Thirdly, cabinet secretary, secretaries of Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, and department of legal affairs, etc. (similar to the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019); and finally, academic, civil society members, business representatives, and industry experts nominated by the President of India.

Composition of the board

While the DPDPA Act, 2023, discusses the qualification of the members and chairperson, the board must be expanded significantly to include full-time as well as part-time members like other regulators in India to carry out its functions. The full-time members must bring in diversity in terms of representation, including expertise on law, technology, cybersecurity expertise, industry, legal enforcement, and on economic, cultural, and sociological issues. Provision for having part-time members will allow the DPB to engage with a diverse range of experts on an ad-hoc basis depending on the needs. Various jurisdictions, including Japan and South Africa, follow the provision for part-time members. The qualifications of part-time members must be kept broad so that the board can extract much from its intricacies. The upcoming Budget should consider capital gains tax reforms beyond tax rates and holding periods. The top priority for the government is manufacturing, which is the biggest source of revenue and job creation, and the highest contributor to GDP. The private sector

A tiered model

would clarify structuring the DPB using a bottom-up approach where tasks and responsibilities are mapped and partially calibrated

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Appointment of officers and employees of DPB

To enhance the capacity of the DPB,

we propose that the rules provide a tiered structural design for enforcing data protection and privacy. The proposed tiered approach is a combination of models followed by jurisdictions such as Brazil, Japan, South Africa, and other Indian regulators. A tiered model would clarify structuring the DPB using a bottom-up approach where tasks and responsibilities are mapped and partially calibrated.

Similar to Brazil's National Council for Personal Data Protection and Privacy, the DPB must have an advisory expert council as part of the tiered structure. This council would aid the central government and the board in delivering their responsibilities. Like the Centre for Advanced Financial Research and Learning, an independent research institution promoted by the RBI, the DPB too should have a research wing that aids the advisory expert council with its functions. The DPB must also have sufficient permanent and temporary office staff to assist functions of the proposed tiered model. To have a qualified staff, the DPB can borrow learnings from the Italian style of competitive public examination to fill positions, where it can also adopt a civil servant recruitment model. Moreover, there should be a consumer dispute redress wing as part of the tiered structure, where individuals can raise their complaints unresolved by data fiduciaries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Caution advisable

Apropos of "Wake-up calls for MFIs" (FE, June 27), in a capitalist economy the smell of money attracts financial crooks like blood attracts sharks. There are far more cases of front-running in the nation than are found out. Every retail investor needs to be careful about his or her money for there are numerous predators waiting to fleece. Usually, it is the greed to make money that draws most people

to the stock markets. This greed is exploited by smart operators to trap them. The Securities and Exchange Board of India's investigators are a new breed of tech-savvy financial experts. But the problem is too huge and evidence to arrest and jail is hard to find. It is up to the investing public to vet the funds and their managers. A little more caution will go a long way in keeping the crooks from getting their hands on retail investors' money. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Capital gains tax reform

"Decoding capital gains tax regime" (FE, June 27) elaborated Income Tax Act provisions on capital gains with all its intricacies. The upcoming Budget should consider capital gains tax reforms beyond tax rates and holding periods. The top priority for the government is manufacturing, which is the biggest source of revenue and job creation, and the highest contributor to GDP. The private sector

needs investment in industrial land, building, plant and machinery. So, provisions should allow deduction of investment in commercial and industrial assets from the sale proceeds and capital gains from any source and assets to facilitate monetisation of disposable assets, thereby reducing borrowing load on banks and financial institutions. —Vinod Johri, New Delhi

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[OUR TAKE]

Challenge and an opportunity

Rahul Gandhi could use his elevation as Leader of Opposition to hold the government accountable, offer constructive criticism

The Lok Sabha will have a Leader of Opposition (LoP) for the first time in 10 years in Congress MP Rahul Gandhi. For Gandhi, who has established himself as a mass leader with his two Bharat Jodo Yatra and the revival of the Congress in the recent general elections, this will be a test of his abilities both as a politician and parliamentarian.

The LoP is a statutory office, under the Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977, with the rank and perks of a Cabinet minister. As LoP, Gandhi will be the chairman of the crucial Public Accounts Committee, which examines various CAG reports that audit government schemes, and be a member along with the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of India in panels that select the heads of various central agencies and institutions such as the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commission members and the Central Bureau of Investigation. The PM and the LoP will need to keep a channel of communication open, and the former is expected to brief the latter on government policies in the best traditions of parliamentary practice. In the last two terms, the government, which enjoyed an overwhelming majority in Parliament, showed no inclination to accommodate the views of the Opposition. It will not be easy to ignore a 236 MPs-strong Opposition.

The office of LoP will be both a challenge and an opportunity for Gandhi. First, Gandhi, though a five-term MP, is yet to make his presence felt as a forceful speaker in the House. In the Westminster tradition, the model for the Indian parliamentary system, the LoP is considered the PM-in-waiting. The office expects its incumbent to be the counterpoise to the government and hold it accountable on behalf of the House. The easy option is to oppose every action of the government, but a more productive path would be for the LoP to engage in constructive criticism of the executive by offering alternative policies and programmes. This can help to raise the quality of debates in Parliament as well as force the executive to improve governance. Second, the LoP is not just the leader of the largest Opposition party; Gandhi will represent the entire Opposition. This can be an onerous task since the Opposition is not a cohesive unit and the Congress does not have the numbers to impose its will on allies. Gandhi's abilities as a leader will be tested though, of course, he can seek help from seasoned politicians in his party and the INDIA bloc to help him. The LoP has to be the voice of the restive Opposition and hold it together in Parliament, and he needs to do that without compromising the dignity and decorum of the House. Though it offers no real powers, astute conduct in office can help burnish his credentials.

New T20 powerhouse rises in world cricket

Afghanistan's dream run in the T20 World Cup is over. They lost a one-sided match on an undercooked pitch to South Africa in the semi-final on Thursday, but every cricket fan knows that this was not a true reflection of their class. The Rashid Khan-led team have made rapid strides in every format but T20 is the one where they truly shine. Much of this is down to their players participating in T20 club leagues around the world and gathering the experience needed to excel against top-tier teams.

The problem for most Associate nations is that the top teams rarely play them. Afghanistan, who have since gained Test status, are no different. Australia and New Zealand have played just two T20s against them, England and South Africa have played three, India have played nine by comparison, a simple statistic that tells the story of the bond that the two teams continue to share. India hosted the first-ever Test match of the Afghanistan cricket team in June 2018 and also designated two cricket fields in the country for the Afghans, helping them take their first steps in the game. The success now will push them even further, but the beginning was crucial.

Just after the team made the semi-final, the Afghan government expressed appreciation to the Indian government for supporting their cricket team. On a different note, this is a reaffirmation of Indian cricket's potential as a soft power, which could be used more judiciously to improve Indian diplomacy in the neighbourhood. Cricket can help build favourable constituencies within civil society.

[BEYOND THE BYTE]

Rajdeep Sardesai

OPINION

Reading continuity in fractured verdict

In the third term, the NDA government will have to engage with multiple governance challenges and an energised Opposition

In an extraordinary Lok Sabha verdict was meant to humble the political leadership, it appears to have had just the opposite effect. The Modi government is acting as if it has actually achieved its 'chur sur pa' or 400 seats objective and the Congress is as if it has crossed the journey mark. The result is a renewal of hostilities at a time when Indian politics desperately needs a breath from hyper-polarised politics. The entirely avoidable confrontation over the Lok Sabha Speaker's election is only the latest example of a lack of conciliation and consensus-building.

There are other worrying signs too. Delhi chief minister (CM) Arvind Kejriwal is still being hounded by law enforcement agencies. Just hours before his bail petition in an Enforcement Directorate case was to come up before the Supreme Court, CBI moved in to re-arrest him. An 14-year-old case against novelist Arundhati Roy has been revived and sanctioned for her

prosecution given under an anti-terror law. Bulldozers continue to demolish homes. And cow vigilantes have resurfaced in Chhattisgarh. Three cattle traders were brutally killed earlier this month.

Nor should one be surprised at the unrelenting disregard for the mandate. An integral part of the Narendra Modi power playbook is never to reveal any trace of political vulnerability, at least not in public. In 23 years of uninterrupted stints in power, both in Gandhinagar and Delhi, not once has the Prime Minister (PM) acknowledged weaknesses or errors of judgment. Which might explain why despite the diminished mandate of June 4, Modi has gone about giving the impression that nothing has materially changed.

With a similar-looking cabinet and series of well-choreographed events at home and abroad, Modi isn't in any mood to let up in his third term, even if he now heads a coalition arrangement. Instead, stability with continuity is the buzzword. But is it really business as usual or is this a great rebranding exercise? The ruling arrangement still trapped in hubris before his bail petition in an Enforcement Directorate case was to come up before the Supreme Court, CBI moved in to re-arrest him. An 14-year-old case against novelist Arundhati Roy has been revived and sanctioned for her

prosecution given under an anti-terror law. Bulldozers continue to demolish homes. And cow vigilantes have resurfaced in Chhattisgarh. Three cattle traders were brutally killed earlier this month.

Pradhan was the education minister in the previous Modi government as well. So he can't even act as if this is all a novel experience for him. The fact is the paper leak mess is a classic case of chickens having come home to roost. In the last seven years, more than 70 national and state-level papers have been leaked as the authorities struggle to cope with the menace.

much-needed political outreach that could provide a healing touch? Turn to an area where the Modi government prides itself: Railway infrastructure. The most recent rail accident — a collision between the Kanchenjunga Express and a goods train — once again revealed gaps in the rail safety system. The much anticipated 'kanva', the anti-collision system, still covers only a fraction of this country's vast rail network. Like the education minister, railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw is also a symbol of continuity in governance, with the ministry of information and broadcasting added to his existing portfolios of railways and information technology. Ironically, on the day of the tragic accident, the multi-tasking minister was also given the added responsibility of being in-charge for the crucial Maharashtra elections. Shouldn't the country have a full-time railway minister? And if credit-taking accompanies the flagging off of every new Vande Bharat Express, who takes responsibility when things don't go as planned?

Truth is, a deeper governance deficit stares at a regime which is tightly controlled by a handful of people, where lines between the government



In the last seven years, more than 70 national and state-level papers have been leaked as the authorities struggle to cope with the menace.

and party remain blurred, where opaque decision-making leaves little space for accountability. This is where the business-as-usual approach may be subject to diminishing returns. A brute majority allowed the Modi government to proceed with unilateral action, to treat the Opposition with disdain and brand any criticism as 'anti-national'. But the 2024 general elections have shown that narrative setting is no longer a Modi monopoly. A revitalised Opposition also has an effective voice and can even set the agenda at times. A putative autocrat may not change his spots but sooner or later, fantasy does catch up with reality. After more than a decade in power, living in denial is no longer a wise option.

Post-script: This weekend, the PM resumes his monthly *Mann Ki Baat* radio address. It is, perhaps, his way of showing he isn't changing his communication style either. Well maybe then PM Modi could address some of the troubling questions raised in this column in his *Mann Ki Baat*, however inconvenient they may appear?

Rajdeep Sardesai is senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

Building on gains in the foreign policy domain

Now that the new Lok Sabha has convened, here is a catalogue of foreign policy issues that call for priority attention from the Prime Minister (PM) and the external affairs minister.

Relations with the US will continue to be the most salient for India. And yet, extraneous issues keep cropping up acting as a brake in the otherwise vital partnership. It is time both sides recalibrated what they rightly call the most consequential relationship of the 21st century. More fundamentally, it will require re-imagining ties between the two countries leading to a fresh bargain. This could, inter alia, involve India significantly upgrading its defence and security ties with the US, in exchange for the latter's substantial commitment to advancing India's strategic interests in its neighbourhood and the Indo-Pacific. It was appropriate that the US national security adviser Jake Sullivan was one of the first foreign visitors to Delhi after the elections, for advancing the bilateral Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies. Discussions on the joint manufacture of jet engines and armoured infantry combat vehicles are also making progress. All these are steps in the right direction. Making the Indo-US strategic partnership the fulcrum of an emerging order in Asia and the Indo-Pacific should be the goal.

There is widespread consensus that China constitutes the main strategic threat to India. Confronting this threat will require a two-pronged strategy on India's part. The first is external balancing in the form of Quad, ties with the US, joint exercises in the Indian Ocean with countries like France and India with Japan, which are all extremely important and must be intensified. More recent steps to develop a serious defence relationship with the Philippines and Vietnam must also be pursued more vigorously. India has also quietly become a full-fledged member of the Combined Maritime Forces (based in Bahrain) which maintains the international rules-based order in the high seas. The bottomline is that India cannot afford to lose its side of the Himalayas to China. Equally, it cannot afford to lose the Indian Ocean to China. This then is the twin security challenge that confronts India.

The second part of this hedging strategy is to keep the strategic dialogue with China going. Ideally, there ought to be a tete-a-tete between our PM and Chinese strongman Xi Jinping. But that may have to wait since PM is not going for the SCO meeting in Astana. The other part of this hedging strategy is to keep the strategic dialogue with China going. Ideally, there ought to be a tete-a-tete between our PM and Chinese strongman Xi Jinping. But that may have to wait since PM is not going for the SCO meeting in Astana. The other part of this hedging strategy is to keep the strategic dialogue with China going. Ideally, there ought to be a tete-a-tete between our PM and Chinese strongman Xi Jinping. But that may have to wait since PM is not going for the SCO meeting in Astana. The other part of this hedging strategy is to keep the strategic dialogue with China going. Ideally, there ought to be a tete-a-tete between our PM and Chinese strongman Xi Jinping. 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Water woes

India is facing a water crisis that could significantly undermine its economic stability and growth prospects, according to Moody's Ratings. As the country continues to experience rapid economic expansion, the demand for water in agriculture, industry, and households has skyrocketed. Yet, the supply remains perilously limited, a situation exacerbated by climate change and increasingly frequent natural disasters. This imbalance poses a profound threat to India's sovereign credit strength and overall economic health, as highlighted by Moody's. The severity of the water shortage is underscored by alarming projections from the Ministry of Water Resources, which estimates that India's per capita water availability will drop to 1,367 cubic metres by 2031, down from 1,486 cubic metres in 2021. Given that levels below 1,700 cubic metres indicate water stress, and those below 1,000 cubic metres signify water scarcity, the future looks troubling. The current scenario, marked by a prolonged heat wave affecting major cities like Delhi and Bengaluru, underscores the urgency of addressing this crisis. Water is a critical input for many sectors, particularly agriculture and industry. In agriculture, reduced water availability can devastate crop yields, leading to food shortages and rising prices. This not only affects the livelihood of millions of farmers but also fuels inflation, impacting the economy. In the industrial sector, water-intensive industries such as coal power generation and steel production face operational disruptions, which can ripple through the economy, affecting employment and industrial output. Moody's notes that these disruptions can severely impact the credit health of the sovereign and heavily water-dependent sectors.

The social implications are equally dire. Water scarcity can lead to social unrest as communities and regions compete for limited resources. The rural-urban divide could widen, with urban areas often prioritised for water supply, leaving rural areas to suffer. This can exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities and fuel migration from rural to urban areas, adding further strain to already overburdened urban infrastructures. The threat to India's sovereign credit rating, as highlighted by Moody's, is a reflection of these cascading effects. Economic instability, driven by disruptions in agriculture and industry, coupled with social unrest, can lead to volatility in economic growth. This, in turn, affects investor confidence and the country's ability to attract and sustain investment. A lower credit rating would increase borrowing costs, making it more expensive for the government to finance development projects and social programmes. To mitigate these risks, India must invest heavily in water management and conservation. This includes modernising irrigation techniques to reduce wastage, implementing rainwater harvesting on a large scale, and investing in technologies for efficient water use in industries. The sustainable finance market offers a potential lifeline, providing avenues for companies and state governments to raise funds for water management projects. Moody's suggests this could involve issuing green bonds or tapping into international funds dedicated to climate resilience and sustainable development.

Assange saga

The resolution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's long-standing legal battles with the US Justice Department is a significant moment that invites reflection on the delicate balance between national security and freedom of the press. Mr Assange's decision to plead guilty to a felony charge in exchange for his freedom marks the end of a saga that has polarised public opinion and raised critical questions about the boundaries of journalism and the responsibilities of those who uncover and disseminate classified information. For over a decade, Mr Assange has been at the centre of a global controversy. His role as the founder of WikiLeaks, which published a vast trove of classified documents, brought him both acclaim and condemnation. On one hand, many have hailed him as a champion of transparency, revealing truths about government actions and military operations that were hidden from the public. Notably, WikiLeaks' publication of the Apache helicopter attack video in Baghdad, which killed several people, including two journalists, shed light on the brutal realities of war and spurred a global conversation on military conduct and accountability. On the other hand, Mr Assange's detractors argue that his actions jeopardised national security and put lives at risk. The US government has long maintained that by encouraging and assisting in the leak of classified documents, Mr Assange crossed the line from journalism into criminal activity. The Espionage Act charge to which he has pleaded guilty underscores the government's stance that his actions were not protected by the principles of free speech and press, but rather constituted a direct threat to the safety and security of the nation. This case has forced the world to confront uncomfortable questions about the limits of press freedom. While the role of the media in holding power to account is undeniable, there is a fine line between responsible journalism and the reckless exposure of sensitive information. Mr Assange's actions have highlighted the need for a nuanced understanding of this distinction. The plea deal, which allows Mr Assange to avoid further imprisonment and return to Australia, reflects a pragmatic resolution to a deeply contentious issue. It acknowledges the gravity of his actions while also recognising the complex motivations behind his pursuit of transparency. This outcome can be seen as a compromise that seeks to uphold the rule of law without disregarding the broader context of Mr Assange's work and the impact it has had on public discourse.

Moving forward, it is crucial that we learn from this episode. Governments must strive to maintain a balance between safeguarding national security and respecting the fundamental principles of free speech and press freedom. Journalists and whistle-blowers, in turn, must navigate their responsibilities with an acute awareness of the potential consequences of their actions. The Assange saga serves as a potent reminder of the challenges inherent in this dynamic and the importance of on-going dialogue to navigate these complex issues.

Failed Revolution~ II

Had the panchayats functioned as apolitical bodies in accordance with the Constitutional objectives and implemented the government's plans and programmes, the face of rural India would have changed substantially. This has not happened. The mammoth panchayat structure and inherent conflicts with the State and the district administration have created more complications and bureaucracy than serving the cause of the common villager. What was supposed to be a silent revolution to bring about Gram Swaraj and decentralized democracy has lost its way



The Constitution-powered new-look Panchayati Raj was launched with great fanfare to achieve Mahatma Gandhi's dream of Gram Swaraj heralding a silent revolution to transform the face of rural India. The broad objectives had been: (a) to establish constitutional democracy at the grassroot level as the third tier of governance; (b) to empower every adult citizen of the village involving them in direct election process; (c) to empower women by reserving one-third seats for them; (d) to make the villages self-reliant; (e) to deliver social justice and (f) to establish social equality and eliminate caste and communal conflicts.

Apart from these broad objectives, the Panchayats were also required to undertake specific tasks of economic development and "are responsible for managing local affairs, including infrastructure development, public health, sanitation, and urban planning, minor irrigations, fisheries, social forestry, small scale industries, social welfare, electricity, sports and cultural affairs, poverty alleviation, housing etc."

Installation of the Panchayati Raj throughout India has been revolutionary in many ways. First, it laid the foundation for a decentralized democracy.

Secondly, it empowered the faceless village womenfolk to participate and hold leadership positions in the governance structure. Thirdly, it was supposed to deliver social justice. Finally, it gave a roadmap to make the villages self-reliant and progressive.

To say that the achievement of the Panchayati Raj has been disappointing would be an understatement. The rural distress, massive migration from rural areas, decreasing rural income, lack of quality education and healthcare, lack of employment, violence against women, caste and communal tensions do indicate that everything is not well with Panchayati Raj and beg the questions: where are the panchayats and what are the panchayats doing?

Where are the 31.5 lakh representatives hiding? How many panchayats have endeavored to solve the basic problems of the

villages ~ safe drinking water, electricity, cooking gas, primary education and health facilities, agriculture, employment, cooperatives and marketing?

Had the panchayats been fully functional and effective, there would have been no communal riots, rampant rapes and murders in rural areas. An effective panchayat should be able to deliver social justice, establish social harmony and prevent caste and communal conflicts.

Three decades have elapsed since Panchayati Raj was installed with great hope. Mahatma Gandhi wanted Panchayati Raj to be the basic framework for the free political order. Has it moved in that direction? The experience so far has not been uniform and has been as diverse as the diversity of the country and all the states cannot be painted with the same brush. Panchayati Raj has been successful to a limited extent in a few states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Kerala is the only State where there has been considerable devolution of powers ~ the district panchayats have been given the responsibility of managing district hospitals and the schools and the panchayat Samitis to manage the sub-divisional hospital and schools.

Under pressure from NGOs, financial accountability of the panchayats could, to some extent, be established in Rajasthan where the audited accounts are required to be displayed on the notice boards of the panchayat office. Even in Rajasthan, in many areas, women have to travel five kilometers to fetch a pitcher of drinking water!

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has from time to time formulated grand schemes and programmes to equip and rejuvenate the panchayats to achieve the goals of Gram Swaraj.

Some of the ambitious schemes have been: (a) Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA); (b) Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP); (c)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); (d) Capacity Building and Training Programmes; (e) E- Governance Initiatives including Audit online; (f) Financial Devolution Scheme and (g) SVAMITVA Scheme. The Svamitva scheme has been a unique plan for survey and mapping of villages with improvised technology and giving property rights to the villagers. The question arises: What has been the net impact of these grand programmes on the village panchayats? Except in a few enlightened panchayats in the southern parts of the country, the impact has been minimal.

How is it that even after 30 years of its existence, thousands of villages are still without potable drinking water, household electricity, cooking gas, basic education, basic healthcare, isolated and without the benefits of economic development? This does indicate utterly lackadaisical development of this great project in many States of the country.

A plethora of reports on the functioning of Panchayati Raj in various States, emanating from the offices of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the statutory auditors and the NGOs suggest that while there has been some progress in certain States, in general, the elephantine edifice of Panchayati Raj (2.6 lakh panchayats with 31.5 lakh elected lawmakers) as the foundation of decentralized governance, is tottering, if not collapsing. The reasons for the stagnation or atrophy have been too many; some of them are mentioned below.

(a) The panchayats suffer from perennial financial crunch. There has been no satisfactory devolution of powers from the Central government and the State Finance Commission.

(b) While decentralization of powers has been the objective, the system has been moving in the opposite direction ~ all the plans, programmes, and schemes have been Central mi-

nistry-driven and are thrust on the State governments and the panchayats. There has been debilitating over-centralization of the system.

(c) One of the vital organs of Panchayati Raj is supposed to be the District Planning Committee (DPC) responsible for decentralized planning for each district. In most of the areas, the DPC has not been constituted and if constituted at all, they are not functional.

(d) The 3-tier Panchayati Raj (in practice it is 5-tier) is too complicated and bureaucratic. Induction of government officials and politicians at various levels imposing them on the elected representatives have made the whole system non-functional. The Gram Panchayat has to depend on the Panchayat Samiti, the Panchayat Samiti has to depend on the District Council (Zilla Parishad), the Zilla Parishad depends on the State government and the State government depends on the Central government ~ creating a web of dependency. This kills all local initiatives.

(e) Finally, total politicization and ingress of VIP culture have been the bane of the panchayats. While they are supposed to be apolitical, party politics has affected almost every panchayat often leading to violence during the panchayat elections. The Panchayat Pradhans have also inculcated the VIP culture and have developed deep vested interests and political ambitions, surrendering themselves to party politics. Also, in spite of 30-50 per cent reservation for women, male dominance and suppression of women continue unabated.

Had the panchayats functioned as apolitical bodies in accordance with the Constitutional objectives and implemented the government's plans and programmes, the face of rural India would have changed substantially. This has not happened. The mammoth panchayat structure and inherent conflicts with the State and the district administration have created more complications and bureaucracy than serving the cause of the common villager. What was supposed to be a silent revolution to bring about Gram Swaraj and decentralized democracy has lost its way. The Panchayati Raj has failed the people.

(Concluded)

Talks only way to prevent trade war

Although Vice-Chancellor of Germany and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck does not represent the European Commission, his three-day visit to China, which concluded on Sunday, has helped to ease tensions between China and the European Union over the issue to a certain degree.

In his packed itinerary that consisted of stops in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou, Habeck not only met with business leaders of both China and Germany, he also had face-to-face meetings with Chinese Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao and Minister of the National Development and Reform Commission Zheng Shanjie in Beijing on Saturday.

Habeck's respective meetings with the Chinese commerce chief and head of the country's economic policymaking body have served to reinforce the two sides' consensus on the need to avoid a damaging trade war and produced some concrete bilateral cooperation agreements and projects on trade facilitation, the green economy and energy. This year marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Germany. Both have been beneficiaries of economic globalization, and the two countries' economic interests are deeply intertwined. Both Beijing and Berlin know clearly that cooperation poses no risk, but that decoupling does. Habeck's hosts reaffirmed that China is willing to work with Germany to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation between

CHINADAILY

the two sides' enterprises, create an open and fair competition environment, and inject more positive energy into the healthy and stable development of China-Germany and China-EU economic and trade relations.

The productive exchanges during Habeck's visit clearly convey the common pro-free trade stance of the EU's largest economy and the world's second-largest economy, as well as their joint concerns over the dire implications of the European Commission's planned punitive tariffs on Chinese EVs. If implemented, the tariffs will unavoidably plunge the EU and China into a damaging trade war that will actually harm the EU's green transition and consumers' interests, as Habeck said. Beijing's announcement that it is launching an anti-dumping probe into imports of EU pork products indicates that China will resolutely defend its legitimate rights and interests.

The EU launched its anti-subsidy investigation on Chinese EVs in October, without any application from member states or the industry. And the details that have been disclosed regarding the investigation clearly indicate that the probe and the resulting planned punitive tariffs violate World Trade Organization rules. By adopting such protectionist measures, the EU aims to suppress the development of Chinese companies, which is doomed to failure, and will not help boost the global competitiveness of the EU's EV companies either.

As both China and Germany urge, Brussels should try and resolve its differences with Beijing through dialogue and consultation in good faith. In that sense, it is good to hear that after a video conference between the Chinese commerce chief and Executive Vice-President of European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis on Saturday, the two sides have agreed to launch consultations on the EU's anti-subsidy investigations into Chinese EVs.

If the EU is sincere in sitting down at the negotiating table, China is also willing to engage in dialogue to try and resolve the reasonable concerns of the EU. It is to be hoped that the EU will strive to avoid the expansion and escalation of trade frictions in a rational and professional manner by meeting China halfway in that direction.

Seed diversity

SIR, I refer to "Indigenous seeds help rural empowerment" by Bharat Dogra published in your columns. Based on rice and wheat, the Green Revolution was launched on account of the apparent threat of famine. India's vast traditional arena of ecofriendly cereals like millet and maize was ignored.



The Green Revolution eliminated food diversity and has reduced the importance of millets on our farms and plates.

Of the 30,000 edible plants just 30 crops account for 95 per cent of human food and that is dominated by rice, wheat, maize, millet, and sorghum.

Scientists say that over half of common plants and one third of the animals could decline this century due to climate change.

"The line between abundance and disaster is becoming thinner and thinner and the public is unaware and unconcerned," Dan Saladino writes in his book Eating to Extinction.

India is the world's largest producer of millets, harvesting about 11 million tons per year.

Pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi) and sorghum (jowar) are the most popular. Millets do not come under IPRs or patents that agro-monopolies are so keen to capture.

Seeds were in farmers' hands

and often preserved or exchanged for free. Patented seeds is where a company holding the patent makes money by selling those seeds year after year, upsetting the traditional system of farmers saving seeds from each year's

harvest to sow the following year. Reliance on ultra-high-tech seeds to produce and seed control is moving in the wrong direction.

Yours, etc.,
H N Ramakrishna,
Bengaluru, 26 June.

MANUFACTURE

SIR, In a global marketplace reshaped by volatile forces ~ especially the animosity between the U.S. and China ~ some multinational retailers are turning away from Chinese factories. Instead, many are looking to India, which may be on the verge of becoming a major manufacturing power. The shift could fortify the global supply chain and lift fortunes in India.

The country has roughly one billion people of working age, but about only 430 million jobs, according to an independent research institution. Growing exports could be a source of new jobs ~ especially for women, who have been largely shut out of the formal working ranks. The shift to India could make the global supply chain more resilient, reducing its susceptibility to shocks.

It could also boost fortunes in India, which missed out on the manufacturing boom that lifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty in East Asia ~ first in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, then in China and, more recently, in Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. India presents a unique proposition as a country of 1.4 billion people, making it even larger than China. With abundant raw materials, from cotton to iron ore to chemicals, it holds the potential to develop its own supply chain. If any country might someday replicate China's role in the manufacturing realm, India may possess the best shot.

Yours, etc., Shovanlal Chakraborty, Kolkata, 27 June.



A thought for today

A woman is as young as her knees

MARY QUANT

Physical, Failed

Can a country get sedentary before it gets rich?
Yes. And it's terrible for health

Physical inactivity is called "the silent killer". Because of how its effects can creep up unnoticed year after year, decade upon decade. Until one day, one is diagnosed with a serious non-communicable disease. But aren't sedentary lifestyles kind of the zeitgeist too? Readers will surely have seen sedentariness increase around them since their own childhood. And yet a pooled analysis of 507 surveys across 163 countries and territories, published in *Lancet* this week, surprises with the scale of its estimate of the malaise. As much as a third of the global population and half of India's adults do not meet WHO recommended levels of physical activity.

Shock treatment | Another surprise is that insufficient physical activity is generally higher among women. South Asia shows the maximum sex difference, of 14 percentage points. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is 20 percentage points. Why are we surprised? Because India is an agricultural society and even other kinds of physical labour are a significant income source, we wonder how so many Indians can afford to be sedentary. Because women have so much household responsibility and many have farm responsibility on top, we wonder how women of non-rich countries can be lagging men in physical activity.

Alien medicine | These disjunctions call for deeper health profiles. They need to be taken seriously because they track with other studies. One shows that India's rural areas are closing in on urban BMIs, another that abdominal obesity is 40% among women compared to 12% in men. Dietary transformations are underway at supersonic speed. Women's liberty and safety are advancing, but at snail's pace in some places, and even reversing in others. Maidans for playing are also in retreat, be it in villages or cities. In other words, we need to begin investigating less physical activity as privilege rather than luxury.

Tech therapy | Better documentation has to be the building block for effective diagnosis and treatment. Here, the smartphone whose addition has cut our sprightliness at the knees, can help pool together stronger national health data, and also help us be healthier. From counting our calories to steps, serving the alert to changes in our gait or menstrual cycle, the phone can redeem itself.

Mother Of All Biases

That married women aren't hired in a major manufacturing plant shows how deep discrimination runs

A recent Reuters investigation revealed labour contractors for Apple supplier Foxconn are not hiring married women for an iPhone assembly plant in Tamil Nadu. Reasons informed cited include married women's work burden at home, the fact they get pregnant and need more time off, and that they wear jewellery that interferes with the production line. Obviously, these are not "reasons" but all the bad excuses, oppressive norms that trip women at every step. Women's labour force participation is appallingly low in India. Women have dropped out at all levels of education, age and income. Whether in casual work, formal salaried work or self-employment, the gulf persists. Women who face intersecting forms of disadvantage, of poverty, caste or minority status, are the worst off. In white-collar work, women are labelled as less than committed, given less challenging assignments and put on a career plateau. The cost of maternity leave is held against them.

While these are global problems, India is hamstrung by the lack of a clear anti-discrimination framework in employment. So, a social bias endures in barely disguised forms, despite an equal remuneration law that prohibits discriminatory hiring and pay and several court judgments to that effect. Individuals are less able to litigate or seek remedy. Employers find ways to justify their stance.

It's telling that many employers welcome married men, and begrudge married women. Women are indeed burdened with childcare, eldercare and household duties, because of oppressive social norms. And when they seek paid jobs, they are done in by the same norms. The deeper tragedy is that this domestic labour dumped on women undergirds the family, and effectively subsidises male workers and their employers. Both businesses and the state owe women for this unpaid work. In the Foxconn case, the tacit rule against married women simply writes off a whole category: not even asking if a person is willing to put in the time or take off their jewellery. It says something about our society and the state that we allow any employer to get away with such sweeping discrimination.

Holy terrors

The feisty womenfolk of Kutch Mandvi continue to tick off deities who are seen to be not doing their job

Jug Suraiya



It was a scene of high drama. In a forest, a woman desperately calling out for help was being abducted. While the spectators, which included me, could hear her cries of distress, her husband seemed oblivious. A witness to the affray could contain herself no longer and called out in a loud and piercing voice. Arre, what's the matter with you? Can't you hear your wife? Go on once to save her!

The urgent injunction was taken on by others: What are you doing, you silly fellow! Hurry and go! Other women joined the chorus of alarm until, as though hearing these late instructions if not his wife's cries for succour, the husband rushed to the rescue, only to find the kidnapping already accomplished. Amidst muttered disapproval of a husband who couldn't save his wife, the audience would settle down to watch the agelessly retold story of Ram, Sita, and Ravana enacted on the tiny screen of the only cinema hall in Kutch Mandvi.

In those far-off days of my childhood, Mandvi was an overgrown village where my grandmother lived, and to which the rest of the family would make an annual visit.

There wasn't an excess of entertainment in Mandvi. There was the temple, a meeting point as much for the exchange of community intelligence—who was marrying whom, which venerable patriarch had passed on—as for devotion.

The cinema hall, where the projectionist routinely got the reels mixed up, showed mainly mythological movies. The audience was composed mostly of women and children, the men disavowing such frivolous diversions.

The soundings that the on-screen divinities often received were occasioned not by irreverence or disrespect, but by the deep and intimate love one has for a close family member who proclaims devotion in equal measure to devotion.

I recall those high-spirited women of Mandvi and wonder if their successors, equally feisty, bestowed electoral strictures on once-venerated icons who'd been seen to be less than on the ball in tackling the task at hand.

Keep Your Enemy Closer

New Delhi building deterrence against Beijing is welcome. But without political dialogue, chances of miscalculations rise. The two are not mutually exclusive

Vijay Gokhale



Since 2020, dealing with China has been the most debated topic of Indian foreign policy. That the old bilateral framework has irretrievably fractured because China violated a basic principle—non-use of force in resolving disputes—is not in doubt. The debate is about the way forward in building a new relationship based on the current realities. The new framework will be built in circumstances that are very different from 1990. Then, the economies of India and China were comparable, and their respective military capacities were fairly balanced. Now, China's GDP is more than four times ours, and the two militaries are not evenly matched on paper. Nor is it likely even by optimistic growth projections for India to significantly reduce this gap in the next 10 years. And the common challenges are outweighed by geopolitical differences that are unlikely to subside as China expands its global footprint.

Commendable work is being done in building deterrence against adventurism. Aside from the augmentation in men and materiel, the idea of strategic risk is being re-defined. Deployment patterns are being altered to send the clear signal that there is no tolerance for grey-zone warfare tactics by PLA. The breach of trust triggered by the Chinese behaviour in Galwan requires clear and tangible counter-displays of goodwill, and remedial action by China along LAC, before trust can be rebuilt.

But is deterrence in itself an adequate policy response? At the height of the Cold War, the two superpowers navigated a distasteful detente. Mechanisms were built to prevent nuclear war, and mutual understandings were reached on managing competition and limiting the prospect of accidental conflict. An important lesson from the Cold War was that dialogue and deterrence were not mutually exclusive.

In the past four years, there has been no direct bilateral engagement between

the executive heads of Indian and Chinese govts (aside from fleeting conversations in Bali and Johannesburg), and a single bilateral meeting between the foreign ministers when Wang Yi visited India in March 2022. Nor have the defence ministers or national security advisers of both sides visited each other.

A few 'pull-asides' or 'meetings in the margins' at multilateral conferences may not allow for the sort of discussion that is required when a new framework

than 20 rounds of talks between the two militaries, the status quo still prevails. Military dialogue has its limitations. Without political dialogue, the military cannot evolve a new framework of border management. Is it not possible that the withholding of sustained political-level engagement might, perhaps, have run its course?

The values in this policy lay in raising greater awareness among citizens about the reasons for the abnormalities in

Import substitution, even under the PLI scheme, might not work in practice despite the enabling policy and incentives. Predictable relations with countries in our proximity will help to focus the efforts on economy building. The chances of unintended mishaps derailing these efforts are likely greater when political dialogue is absent.

Dialogue with China does not imply that deterrence-building must cease. India always has the sovereign right to defend itself upon its soil. Nor does the act of dialogue imply in any manner that a compromise in national security interests is on the cards. Deterrence and dialogue are two sides of the policy coin.

If deterrence is combined with dialogue, a positive outcome is possible. The aftermath of the Sino-Indian border crisis in 1967, in Arunachal Pradesh, established this point when, after eight years of holding our ground without suspending political dialogue, India achieved its goals.

What objectives might a resumption of the political dialogue serve? To begin with, it might allow for an in-depth understanding at a political level of each other's positions. Such dialogue might help to permit both sides to find some common ground to start building a new framework. It might benefit risk management, not only in terms of minimising unintended conflict, but also in terms of modernising the 1993 and 1996 agreements in order to make them relevant to contemporary needs.

From our perspective, it might provide political platforms to express our concerns, as well as to find solutions, over unfair Chinese trade practices. Dialogue is also a logical step in building multi-alignment diplomacy.

Only govts can ultimately decide what is the right policy. But a healthy debate on the question is now needed more than ever because participation in foreign policy is an important requisite for citizens who aspire to make India a global powerhouse.

The writer is a former foreign secretary



for the relationship needs to be built.

It is important to posit the question as to whether the 'detente' in the political dialogue since 2020 has addressed Indian concerns over the steady militarisation of LAC by the Chinese. By various accounts, this may not be the case. China appears to have augmented its military capacity, including air-power, along the entire front. It remains obdurate on reeling back its forward posture in two areas in eastern Ladakh. Despite more

India-China ties. It also helped to adjust economic and procurement policies to deliver sensitive sectors of the Indian economy from complete dependency on Chinese supply chains. But it is not likely that the Indian economy can decouple entirely. In some sectors like electric vehicles there might be greater, not less, coupling.

Some of our star export performers, notably pharmaceuticals, are also dependent upon Chinese supply chains.

The Law Of Not-So-Small Things

UN human rights body wants cases dropped against Arundhati Roy for her speech 14 years ago. The very sanction to prosecute raises legal questions about belated prosecutions and right to freedom of speech

Shyam Rajan Agarwal



Yesterday, activist Arundhati Roy was awarded the prestigious PEN Pinter prize for her "unflinching and unswerving" writing. Alongside the award was UN's call to New Delhi to drop cases against Roy and also review India's anti-terror law UAPA.

The backstory | In 2010, a complaint was filed by activist Sushil Pandit, based in Delhi, with the UN Human Rights Council against activist Arundhati Roy and Sheikh Shokat Hussain, former professor at Central University of Kashmir.

Both were booked for their speeches at a conference Azadi, The Only Way' in Delhi's LIT Auditorium on October 21, 2010. FIR was registered under IPC sections 153A (promoting enmity between different groups), 153B (making imputations/assessments prejudicial to national integration) and 486 (statements 'conducting to public mischief) and under UAPA section 13. Roy was accused of stating that Kashmir was never an integral part of India and advocating its secession.

Delhi LIT VK Saxena granted sanction to prosecute for the IPC offences in October 2023. Sanction to proceed on the UAPA offence was granted recently.

Time limits | The first question is whether LG's order may be rendered defective on account of delay. His sanction to proceed on IPC offences was granted under CrPc section 196. This prescribes no time limit for passing an order to either grant or deny sanction to prosecute.

However, since each IPC offence is punishable by imprisonment of up to three years, prosecution would be barred by 'limitation'—because CrPc sections 468 and 469 cumulatively state no court will take cognisance of an offence beyond a period of three years from date of offence or date of registration of FIR. Offences under UAPA section 13 are punishable by imprisonment of up to 7 years, so no limitation applies.

Missing steps | But there exists another strict time limit that LG seems to have given the go-by UAPA section 45(2) provides for an independent authority to review evidence against the accused. This authority is to submit a report to the state or Centre. Only after considering this, can govt decide on granting or denying sanction to prosecute.

Section 45(2) additionally envisages time limits within which the independent authority is to submit its report, and for govt's decision. These are prescribed under UAPA Rules, 2008, which provide 7 days each to the independent authority and to govt. Despite these strict timelines, LG granted sanction to prosecute 14 years after the case was filed.

Precedent set | Kerala HC in *Roopesh vs State of Kerala & Others* held that timelines stipulated under UAPA section 45(2), read with the Rules, are mandatory in nature. Non-compliance would render the order invalid. UAPA carries serious consequences for the accused, thus it must be interpreted strictly and literally.

Govt cannot be permitted to sit over a request for sanction indefinitely. Kerala challenged HC's judgment in the *Roopesh* case before SC, which observed that the question of law would remain open and permitted state to withdraw its petition.

Thus, this question regarding validity of a belated order granting sanction to prosecute is set to be conclusively decided. That said, allowing sanction for prosecution 10 or 20 years after registration of FIR is a mockery of the criminal justice system.

No call to arms | The case also tests the extent to which free speech may be accorded protection. A YouTube clip of Roy's 2010 speech shows her stating Kashmir isn't an integral part of India, but she did

not expressly advocate secession. Nor was there any call to take up arms against the state.

Does a person's opinion on a subject, regarding independence or freedom for a particular region, by itself, without incitement to violence, amount to an offence under UAPA?

UAPA's definition of "unlawful activities" is wide and includes any speech that questions India's sovereignty and territorial integrity or causes disaffection against India. But it can be argued that UAPA ought to be interpreted on its object and purpose, which is to combat terrorism and terror organisations. It isn't intended to be applied to penalise speech. Indeed, applying UAPA in Roy's case is akin to using a hammer to swat a fly.

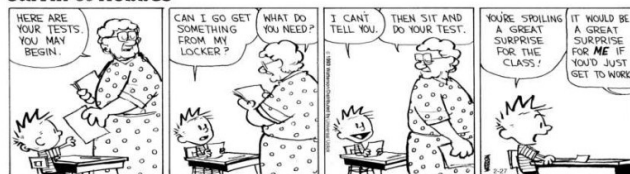
Disaffection no ground | The anti-terror law ought to be interpreted in consonance with right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a). This right may only be restricted for grounds specified under Article 19(2)—namely, disaffection against India isn't ground for restricting free speech under the Constitution.

Law on sedition under IPC section 124A, similarly stipulates that speech must be intended to incite violence would fall within its ambit.

Recently, SC even stayed operation of section 124A after noticing its rampant misuse by law enforcement to curb dissent. UAPA deserves to be similarly reined down.

The appropriate way to deal with Roy's ideas is to critique them openly rather than using the strong arm of law. The writer is advocate, Supreme Court

Calvin & Hobbes



Sant Rajinder Singh

Helplessness arises when life does not go our way. We feel everything is working against us and life will never be better again. The mind drives us into a negative downward spiral with every new thought. During such times, it is easy to lose faith in ourselves and our routines that could be helpful to us. Instead, we adopt unhealthy habits to cope and fill the void. When faced with various life challenges, we succumb to the difficulty and inevitably get weighed down from our path. We tend to worry and live in fear about what the future holds for us. That worry only wastes our time and energy. It does not solve anything.

The key is not to be affected by what is happening around us. We must remember the importance of focusing on the

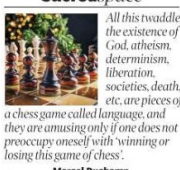
positive as we face life's challenges. Especially during these times of despair, we must work extra hard to keep the habits that will benefit us. Contrary to how we may feel, this is when we need to do the work to tap into our inner strength. We should develop the habit and skills to dig deep into the spiritual lesson hidden within such experience. We must find comfort and solace in tracing our way back to our normal state. How can we find comfort in times of helplessness?

When we learn to control our thoughts, still the mind, and focus our attention on God through meditation, we can experience the light of God, which has the power to illuminate and transform our lives. We are then

bathed in joy and bliss that eclipse any pain we may experience in the outer world. As we have a direct experience of God in meditation, our faith in God is strengthened. We recognise God's presence in our lives and realise that God always supports us. Anchored in God's abiding love, we can walk through life without fear or worry.

Our most precious capital in this world is the time we have been given. Yet, we are surprised by distractions and temptations, and enticement—things who compete for our time and deplete our precious capital. If we want to succeed in our goal, we must learn to develop filters that keep all distractions at bay to continue undeterred toward our spiritual goals.

Sacred space

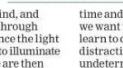


All this wobble, the existence of God, atheism, determinism, liberation, societies, death, etc. are pieces of a chess game called language, and they are amusing only if one does not preoccupy oneself with 'winning or losing this game of chess'.

Marcel Duchamp

Finding Hope When Chips Are Down

THE SPEAKING TREE



It happens when, through regular meditation, we strengthen our connection with God, the all-knowing source of all happiness, joy, inner wisdom, love, calmness, bliss. The Creator knows our past, present, and future. When we connect with this Divine Power through meditation, we partake of all the love and happiness already within us. This serves as a lifeline that pulls us out of a difficult situation. The key to navigating away from a state of helplessness is to defocus our attention from our current state of mind. We must tap into the infinite reservoir of joy and hope. When we experience God's love in meditation, we are reassured that we are loved and needed by God. We simply have to tap into this love, and we can do that when we take the time to sit in silence and reach out to God.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Minority report

US criticism of India can have repercussions

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has flagged a 'concerning increase' in anti-conversion laws, hate speech and demolition of homes and places of worship of members of minority communities in India. In his remarks at the release of the US State Department's 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, Blinken said Christian groups in India had reported attacks by mobs, allegedly in league with the police, over accusations of 'conversion activities'. The report claims that Christians and Muslims were arrested under laws banning forced religious conversion. The unusually scathing criticism comes weeks after the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led NDA government began its third successive term. It is bound to cast a shadow on India-US ties, which have made rapid strides in the strategic and defence domains in recent years.

Blinken had also mentioned India in his remarks during the release of the 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom two years ago, expressing concern over rising attacks on people and places of worship in the country. However, his comments this time may be seen through the prism of the US presidential elections, which are scheduled for November. With Christians accounting for two-thirds of the American population, highlighting alleged atrocities against them in countries such as India could be construed as a vote-catching tactic.

While talking about the minorities in the US, Blinken has confined himself to the observation that reports of hate crimes and other incidents targeting Muslims and Jews have gone up dramatically. America seems more keen to 'advance religious freedom across the globe' than to set its own house in order. The Indian government does need to do course correction on the minority front, but it won't appreciate the US playing the Big Brother. Antagonising a close ally will have repercussions for Washington, especially when the Gurtatwam Singh Panun case is already testing the strength and maturity of the bilateral relations.

SAD crisis

The party has to reinvent itself

THE drubbing in the Punjab Assembly elections in 2022 was a massive personal setback for the top leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Both stalwart Parkash Singh Badal and his son, party president Sukhbir Singh Badal, faced the ignominy of defeat. Early this year, Sukhbir embarked on a months-long 'Punjab Bachao Yatra', aiming to infuse energy into the party's demoralised rank-and-file ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. He had a bigger mission in mind — reconnecting with Punjab, something the party has been finding hard to do. Yet, 10 of SAD's candidates lost their deposit in the polls. Its overall vote share went down. The party slid to the fourth position, falling behind even its former junior partner, the BJP. As Sukhbir faces a fresh banner of revolt, the Akalis find themselves at a crossroads.

There is a school of thought that sees the SAD's decline as particularly worrisome, since it shrinks the space for divergent views that a party championing regional identity politics and a federal polity provides. The possibility of a radical streak filling the space that has been ceded only increases. Concerns have been raised about this scenario playing out in Punjab. Since it lost power in 2017, the SAD has faced dissension over Sukhbir's leadership and the Badal family's control over the party. The core support base is drifting away, veteran leaders have been warning, as the party struggles to regain trust. The 2015 sacrilege incidents continue to haunt the SAD. The flip-flop over re-aligning with the BJP hints at indecision and a lack of direction.

The SAD working committee has authorised Sukhbir to reconstitute and restructure the party. He may manage to retain control, but it would be self-defeating to ignore calls for the SAD to look within and reinvent itself.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JUNE 28, 1924

'Uncompromising' open letter

If there is one word which could correctly describe the purport and tendency of the open letter which Mahatma Gandhi has just addressed to the members of the All India Congress Committee, that word is 'uncompromising'. There is much in the letter that is characteristically fine. There is nothing in it, except perhaps a solitary word of reference to the Swarajists which is calculated to give offence, and even this solitary word is plainly conceived in sorrow and not in anger. Dignity, of course, is the very essence of the letter. But there is not a word in it which encourages or even permits the hope that a way will yet be found for the issue raised by Mahatmaji being amicably settled, for the two parties being able to work together not in the superficial and comparatively unimportant sense of remaining within the Congress and attending its annual or special sessions, but in the sense of participating actively in the carrying out of a common programme. On this vital point, the Mahatma appears to have burnt his boats. Let it be said frankly that there is no question here of the 'impulse of autocracy in the ordinary sense'. If it were not for the Mahatma's profound and unceasing faith in his own programme, we might easily say after going through the open letter that he does not care which party wins, and whether he himself is on the winning or the losing side. All that he wants is that there should be no compromise, that the Executive of the Congress should either consist of men who believe in the five boycotts, or of men who do not believe in them. "If you believe in the five boycotts," he says to his colleagues in effect, "then vote with me, and turn the Swarajists and other non-believers out of the Executive."

Indian Muslims on shaky ground

There is much that the community itself can do to change its image

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

I am an ardent admirer of Harsh Mander, a former IAS officer who resigned in 2002 in protest against the Gujarat government's failure to do its Raj Dharna of curbing the massacre of innocent Muslims. I do not have the courage Harsh has. I never had that level of courage. He recently informed his myriad admirers that his new article was on the subject of "the political demonisation, erasure and abandonment of Indian Muslims in recent elections". He aptly called it "the crisis of not-belonging".

An incident that occurred on polling day in Uttar Pradesh last month caught my attention. An educated Muslim girl arrived at a polling booth along with her sister. The officials on duty went through the voter list and informed the girls that their names were not on it.

The girl who reported this incident had earlier gone to the centre concerned for checking the voter list. Her name and that of her sister were there. She demanded a re-check, which the officials did. Their names were on the list. The girls voted, as was their right and their duty. They were educated girls, confident of their own capabilities.

On emerging from the polling station, she found groups of burqa-clad women who had been told that they could not vote as their names were not on the list. They were not smart like our girl to call their bluff. The BJP knew that minority votes would go against them. It was rumoured that it used different means to ensure victory. Yet, in BJP-ruled UP it failed.

The Election Commission of



IMPERATIVE: Strong leaders should emerge to challenge the fatwas of the mullahs. M

India (ECI) should have acted on the courageous girl's complaint and investigated the culprits and put them on the mat. It should also have published details of the action taken against them.

I agree with Harsh that Indian Muslims are on shaky ground after the BJP-led NDA government assumed office. The BJP's propaganda team may deny this so that the party's back is covered and the Western powers with whom we now seem to be aligned think kindly of our government. But there is much that the community itself can do to change its own image. Indian Muslims are not the target of only the Modi-Shah government but also the victims of its own narrow-minded religious establishment.

It is really sad to see that innumerable Muslim women are kept deliberately backward and treated as possessions in India. I am talking specifically of uneducated women in families living in penury. I have many Muslim friends, but they belong to the privileged, well-heeled category who will think like I do and approach life as I would.

No community that keeps women backward can advance in today's highly competitive world.

Presently, I am watching a Turkish serial called *Black Money Love*. Women in that Islamic country are totally liberated following the reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In India, the community needs to start internal reforms. First and foremost, it should ensure that all its women become literate. It should also ensure that they are well educated and able to think for themselves. Kerala has achieved 100 per cent literacy. It has thereby succeeded in controlling the reproduction rate.

The BJP's main accusation against the Congress was, and still is, that the community was pampered by the party for votes. In what aspects of their life were

Muslims pampered? It was only the religious dispensation that was pampered, ensuring that obscurantist practices were perpetuated. The Shah Bano judgment overturned by an ill-advised Prime Minister spelt the end of Congress primacy in India. It shocked the conscience of citizens like me, who nurtured no biases.

Poor Muslims, both men and women, remain as helpless and deprived today as they were then. Strong leaders should emerge in the community to challenge the fatwas of the mullahs. Like the mullah who ordered the wife of a soldier missing in action for seven years — who re-married and became a mother in his absence — to return to her previous husband when the Pakistanis released him from captivity. The woman was not consulted! She was a mere possession.

All obscurantist practices like keeping women in subjugation and forcing them to wear monk's clothing with only slits for the eyes should go. No community that keeps women backward can advance in today's highly competitive world.

The Mohalla Committees set up in my city, Mumbai, helped to bring Hindus and Muslims in the city's slums together after the riots of 1992-93. I had returned

from my four-year stint in Romania. Satish Sahney, a forward-thinking IPS officer, was the Police Commissioner. Without his help, the movement would not have gone beyond the first stage. The people's representative who had asked for my involvement in the venture was Sushobha Barve of the Moral Re-Armament, with which Rajmohan Gandhi has been associated. The three of us combined to ensure that the implementation of the project went as planned. Muslims, who had become disenchanted with their lot, regained their zest for life.

When Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the Prime Minister, he wanted me to accept the governorship of Jammu & Kashmir. I met him at his residence in New Delhi and explained the details of the work I was doing to ensure peace and harmony in the city of my birth. I had to repeat the details to Farooq Abdullah during the two phone calls he made to me from London. The most difficult customer, though, was not the PM or the Chief Minister of J&K but the then father figure in the police hierarchy, KF Rustamji, who had settled in his wife's family flat in Mumbai after his retirement from the BSF. The PM had entrusted Rustamji with the job of convincing me to accept his offer. It was a difficult task to say 'no' to him, but Mrs Rustamji was kind to my rescue. She understood that the concept of communal peace in our (hers and mine) city took precedence.

I mentioned this to the Mohalla Committee workers when they belatedly celebrated my 95th birthday a few days ago. They were thrilled that their mentor had put the work they were doing on a higher pedestal than what governors were expected to do. During Vajpayee's tenure, governors were not tasked with bringing down Opposition-ruled governments. It was an honour to be asked. But the smiles on the faces of slum-dwellers were a more compelling attraction.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Anger and intolerance are the twin enemies of correct understanding. — Mahatma Gandhi

The portrait of a gutsy family

NJ RAVI CHANDER

IN the 1950s, my grandfather was tasked with finding a suitable life partner for his brother-in-law Jeevarathnam. One day, his chance encounter with Angamuthu, an old neighbour and childhood friend from Shivajinagar, Bengaluru, rekindled a dormant connection. During their conversation, Angamuthu talked about seeking an alliance for his teenage daughter. Seizing the opportunity, grandpa suggested that the girl marry his brother-in-law if their horoscopes matched and everything else fell into place. Despite the considerable age gap (14 years) between the boy and the girl, her father gave the go-ahead.

Jeevarathnam was not keen on wedlock, but his relatives ferried him to the girl's place. In those days, the girl would touch her prospective husband's feet to catch his attention. The meeting ended with both parties giving the green light for the betrothal.

Relatives from both families gathered at the bride's house on the engagement day. There was fun and laughter as the ladies chatted indoors while the men conversed outside, seated or standing. The stage was finally ready for the ceremony, but to everyone's astonishment, an unruly man showed up in an autorickshaw and started raising a hue and cry.

The man was the girl's maternal uncle, who had harboured intentions to marry her. Upon discovering that she was engaged to another man, he threatened to disrupt the ceremony. Besides, he cautioned the groom and his family about severe repercussions if they proceeded with the ceremony. The entire gathering was taken aback. However, the groom's younger siblings refused to be intimidated by the threats. They swiftly rallied a group of young people, bundled the irate man back into the autorickshaw and watched him depart. Subsequently, the engagement proceeded without a hitch.

Later, the bride's family hid her in a relative's house to keep her uncle at bay. The frustrated man desperately tried to locate her but was unsuccessful. On the wedding day, the groom's family took the help of the police. As expected, the girl's family chose not to involve the troublemaker in the wedding celebration. The anxious groom voiced his concerns about his and his spouse's safety post-wedding, but his brothers assured him that everything would be fine. The nuptials went off smoothly, and as the tension eased, everybody breathed a sigh of relief.

The couple eventually found their place in a harmonious joint family, which included the groom's mother, siblings, nieces and nephews, and they lived happily ever after. Accepting his fate, the troublemaker refrained from getting into more misadventures. Despite the joy and laughter that filled their home, the drama leading up to their wedding remained etched in their minds. It served as a powerful testament to the unwavering strength of their family. Their story shows that anybody can overcome adversity with tact, cooperation and guts.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Opposition must be heard in House

Apropos of 'Rahul as LoP', an adequate representation of all sections of society in Parliament is a prerequisite for a vibrant democracy. Members of the Opposition must be given sufficient time in the House to raise the issues facing the common man. So often, Opposition leaders do not get a chance to be heard. For a healthy debate, those on the treasury benches must lend an ear to the Opposition. Long sessions should be held in Parliament as well as state Assemblies to ensure that Bills are passed only after lengthy deliberations. Ours should be a government by the people, of the people and for the people in every sense.

ROOP SINGH NEGI, SOLAN

Rahul at the helm

Refer to the editorial 'Rahul as LoP'; the Congress leader's assumption of the mantle of the Leader of Opposition in the 18th Lok Sabha is good news for the country. The goal of a robust Opposition in Parliament should be to raise the issues that matter on behalf of the public and not to corner the ruling regime on everything. Rahul has his work cut out. It is now on him to steer the Opposition in the right direction so that constructive and productive debates can be held in the House. Most important, there are times when the ruling dispensation and the Opposition must rise above politics and reach consensus on certain issues in the interest of the nation.

RK ARORA, MOHALI

The fresh face of Opposition

Refer to 'Rahul as LoP'; the Gandhi seism is set to lead a resurgent Opposition to keep the Narendra Modi government on its toes. Remarkably, it is the first constitutional position that Rahul has held in his two decades of political career. What makes it all the more significant is the fact that his party has secured the post after a gap of 10 long years. His opening speech in Parliament, where he stressed the 'voice of India' must be heard in the House, is a promising start. As the LoP, Rahul will play a crucial role in shaping the discourse in the House.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

When the messenger was shot

The release of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who exposed the misdeeds of the US government with the 2010 publication of classified documents relating to the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, after 14 years of legal woes is welcome. Australia, which stood firmly behind the whistleblower and persuaded America to drop the charges against him, deserves kudos. Assange's case is a sad commentary on the state of affairs in the democratic world. He deserves credit for speaking truth to power. He could have bagged several coveted prizes for his works and his professionalism. But instead, he was made to languish in prison for years.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM

India-Canada ties in peril

Canada's persistent provocations against India are alarming. Allowing a 'mock trial' with an effigy of PM Narendra Modi in front of the Indian Consulate in Vancouver marks a disturbing low. This spectacle, organised by the supporters of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, blatantly ignores the implications of endorsing separatist and violent sentiments. Justin Trudeau's subordination of his foreign policy to Canada's domestic politics, particularly to bag Sikh votes, undermines diplomatic relations and fuels extremism. Trudeau's recent handshakes with Modi at the G7 summit rings hollow in the backdrop of what his government has allowed in the name of free speech. It is high time that Ottawa recognised the gravity of the situation and adopted a more responsible and measured approach.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

Misuse of laws to stifle dissent

It is condemnable that Delhi Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena has sanctioned the prosecution of author-activist Arundhati Roy and academic Shovikat Hussain for allegedly making provocative speeches at an event in 2010. The move seems vindictive and comes off more like an attempt to silence dissenting voices. It is an attack on the right to freedom of speech. Notably, the development came close on the heels of the Lok Sabha election results. Stringent and outdated laws must not be used to target activists or dissenters.

SK KHOSLA, CHANDIGARH