



CONTRAPUNTO

A Parliament is nothing less than a big meeting of more or less idle people

WALTER BAGHOT

When The Drama Ends

LS began with good political theatre. A tougher test of its efficacy will come once legislative biz starts

Lok Sabha's proceedings, starting with the oath ceremony, were loud. And clear. Voices carried. Rhetoric-tipped arrows flew. Barbs found their targets. Quarrels over election of Speaker, and debate around President's address, have—almost reassuringly—demonstrated the House is in raucous form. The theatrics were almost entertaining and as integral to an opening session, say the administering of oath.

Role play | If Rahul Gandhi hit the deck running, an aggressive LoP with clarity of purpose, and BJP firmly in his sight, Modi in his third term was campaignesque sharp, targeting Congress and defending his govt. Powerful speeches from opposition politicians and feisty counters from govt brass—mostly Union ministers spoke—lit up the session expected to end today. The House will reconvene around the third week of July when govt presents its Budget. Parliament is the politician's stage. Good theatrical performances burnish political credentials. As things stand, opposition parties have little to complain about—of not getting a chance to speak, or not being heard. Plenty was said, including sloganeering almost throughout PM's speech yesterday.

Tough act | For the coalition in office, legislative business will be Modi-led govt's primary test—a first for a PM who led two BJP-majority govt. For any new bill, or to carry forward bills pending from its earlier tenure, it will need to have ally TDP and JDU on board. Even in RS, it has work to do, given BJP has decided to not support BJP. The onus is on Modi, around whom everything-NDA revolves.

No drama | The real test of the House will be in the business it gets done. Can Parliament hold a robust debate on NEET, which impacts almost 3m youngsters every year? And when—if it does so, will it be a war of words or outcome-oriented? Can the 18th LS have relevant debates on jobs, on the extent and causes of underemployment? Creaky infra in the world's most populous country is a debilitating factor for any development agenda—Parliament should focus on it. And a sobering reminder came yesterday to MPs about real questions they must ask—over 100 died in a stampede in a religious event in UP's Hathras.

Online Won't Do

NEET should follow JEE test model that uses offline computers & two-level examination

Allegations that this year's NEET-UG was a compromised affair have been validated since CBI began probing the matter. That irregularities have been reported from several states should leave no one in doubt about terrible safety protocols followed by National Testing Agency (NTA).

Format's the problem | It is all very well to make arrests. But what about the very nature of the exam? To the 2.4 million students taking the exam in one single day across India is, experts say, a recipe for trouble. By one reckoning, there are as many as 11 points of human interface for paper-based NEET. Thus, the potential for leakage and manipulation in a high-stakes exam is huge.

It's good that govt is considering doing away with offline mode for NEET. But this should not mean switching to 'online' exams. Rich US, with its huge infra, can do it, we can't.

CBT way forward | What we need are computer-based tests, as is the case for JEE—CBTs involve use of a computer at a designated centre, but no internet. But a simple switch to CBT won't be enough. Most important in this context are the credentials of exam centres. There have been cases of cheating and impersonation even in JEE.

Still, CBTs have evolved into a scientific discipline and there are reputed companies in the business. IIMs have used the services of such entities to conduct a fair CAT for years. There is no reason NTA cannot do the same.

Tech. ownership are key | Several other changes will be needed. Proper use of technology for safety protocols and ensuring examinees answer a random set of questions drawn from a bank is one. The question of ownership is another. For instance, while JEE Main conducted by NTA has seen glitches, JEE Advanced, in which IITs are involved, hasn't. So, it seems like a good idea to conduct a screening test for NEET and a second one for selected candidates in which medical institutions are involved. Most importantly, the practice of conducting NEET only once a year must be done away with. Giving examinees more than one chance will lower their stress levels.

Atlantis revisited

A thousand years from now archaeologists might find evidence of a repeatedly sunken civilisation

Jug Surayya



Two archaeologists, Prof Indiana and Prof Jones, in a museum full of ancient manuscripts, fossils, and crumbling statues. A digital calendar on the wall reads July 3, 3024.

Prof Indiana peers through a microscope at a preserved fragment on which the letters TOI can be faintly discerned. Indiana: There's no doubt about it, Jones. This conclusively proves that there really was a long-lost civilisation which was like the fabled continent of Atlantis.

Jones: That's amazing, Indiana. For thousands of years historians have believed that the sunken continent of Atlantis, which was first written about by Plato in 360 BCE, was an allegorical myth.

Indiana: Plato's Atlantis might have been a myth invented by him to symbolise the hazards of excessive pride in human advancement. But it seems there was a real-life Atlantis that got submerged in water not just once, but repeatedly.

Jones: Golly, that really is fantastic. A place that goes underwater over and over, only to bubble like a perfume in a water park!

Indiana: What's even more astonishing is that that Atlantis lookalike considered itself to be an advanced civilisation that sent spacecraft to the Moon and Mars, and could do brain surgery.

second opinion | Jones: No kidding. So how come it couldn't prevent itself from sinking into water time after time?

Indiana: That's the great mystery that no one can solve. No one can figure out why a society that could devise something called IPL, the impenetrable intricacies of which continue to baffles scientists till today, couldn't devise the means to prevent itself from sinking annually, and always at this particular time of the year.

Jones: Do you think it might have some sort of mystical significance?

Indiana: It might well have had. Like the unfathomable workings of kismet and karmic consequence.

Jones: I guess you're right. No one will ever know why a place called Dilli would, year after year, be submerged by something named the monsoon...

Snake Hands For The House

LS has started with fireworks. But this Parliament is tasked with greenlighting major changes like delimitation. Treasury & opposition will have to talk, do backroom negotiations & arrive at workable solutions

Saurabh Todi and Shrikrishna Upadhyaya



Though it is early days, a stormy inaugural session of the 18th Lok Sabha has been setting expectations that national politics has re-entered a coalition phase that will bring consensus-building, effective floor management, and backroom parleys back to Parliament.

But it is very important that the parliamentary form be once again tilted towards its intended purpose—democratic deliberation. That's the only way to take forward major impending legislative changes such as delimitation of constituencies, 33% women's reservation and the proposed simultaneous elections to Parliament and state legislatures. Ideally, the coalition phase should also reform parliamentary proceedings, to improve the functioning of our legislative system.

Delimitation | As per constitutional provisions, delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies is to be carried out on the basis of the first census conducted after 2026. Today, on average, an MP from Uttar Pradesh caters to about 3m citizens, compared to 1.8m by an MP from Tamil Nadu. Given the disparity in population growth between northern and southern states since the 1971 census, as per which delimitation is currently frozen, delimitation is set to exert pressure on NDA govt.

Unless govt decides to defer delimitation, the exercise provides an opportunity to redesign the structure of Rajya Sabha to compensate states for the loss of Lok Sabha seats and increase fiscal devolution to states as a bargaining measure. It remains to be seen whether northern and relatively developed states, such as Andhra Pradesh (governed by BJP's key ally TDP), achieve in terms of political bargaining.

Furthermore, constitutional amendments to enable 33% women's reservation in Parliament and state assemblies can take effect only after a delimitation exercise is carried out. Delaying delimitation would mean delaying a progressive reform as well.

Simultaneous polls | If NDA govt decides to implement the Kovind Commission report recommendations on 'One Nation One Election' and hold simultaneous elections, a key roadblock is the fate of governments that lose

majority midway through their 5-year term. The report provides that a re-election will be held in such cases, followed by a shorter, less-than-5-year term for the new govt until general elections occur.

Reducing the term of an elected legislature to less than 5 years may not place constitutional scrutiny on less intrusive alternative is to create a cycle of mid-term elections for such legislatures, with arrangements to enable a minority govt to continue until then.



Bilek Debroy and Kishore Desai, in their 2017 report for Niti Aayog, suggested holding elections in 2.5-year intervals, with general elections and half of the states going to polls together and the other half going to polls after 2.5 years.

Legislative council and local body elections | Only a handful of Indian states have a legislative council. Unlike Rajya Sabha, these legislative councils have limited powers to scrutinise legislation. In the absence of a counterbalancing force of legislative councils, the governing party in state assemblies enjoys complete dominance over the legislative process. Parliament must establish legislative councils with powers equal to Rajya Sabha for all large states with a threshold population of 5m. Timing this with Rajya Sabha reform and fiscal devolution mentioned earlier is crucial to ensure states' concurrence.

Legislative council elections must be carried out solely

through indirect election by elected members of local bodies after abolishing teachers and graduates' constituencies, similar to how MLAs elect Rajya Sabha members. Imposing a constitutional mandate on states to conduct elections to local bodies every 5 years is imperative. As a result, inordinate delays in local body elections, including in major cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru, will be curtailed.

Research support for MPs | India needs to establish a parliamentary research agency for its MPs, similar to US's congressional research service. This PRA should offer independent research and factual analysis to MPs, especially those from smaller regional or single-person parties that are disadvantaged in terms of financial and intellectual resources, to adequately scrutinise bills.

Besides, Lok Sabha has a high turnover rate. In the 18th Lok Sabha, 61.5% of MPs are first-time parliamentarians. This was 49% in 2019. In 2014, although many of these first-time MPs might have had legislative experience in state assemblies, a parliamentarian's domain is quite broad, and policies need in-depth study and scrutiny.

Standing committees | Disruptions and adjournments have impacted parliamentary discourse over the last two decades. This, in turn, affects the quality and depth of scrutiny that bills undergo. Rules of procedure should be amended to mandate that every bill introduced in Parliament be sent to the relevant parliamentary standing committee for scrutiny. This would ensure that bills undergo a multi-party consultative process away from the media glare before being passed by Parliament. Mandating committee scrutiny for bills must also be extended to state legislatures in due course.

Division of votes | Lastly all bills voted upon in Parliament should be decided by division of votes using automatic vote recorders and not by voice vote. The current practice of Speaker's discretion in holding a division must be abolished. Recording each vote will allow the public to hold their MP accountable. An official record also allows researchers to study and interpret policy preferences and diversity of opinion within Parliament.

Impending legislative changes like increase in the size of Parliament and women's reservation provide an excellent opportunity for implementing these reforms. The writers are researchers at Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru.

What Matters Is Not The Number, But The Safety Net

India's growing economy is lifting families out of poverty but often onto a precarious perch. A single disaster can push them right back. Policy, obsessed with counting the poor, ignores the question of helping 'newly poor'

Sonalde Desai



Two decades ago, controversies around the measurement of poverty in National Sample Surveys set off what became known as the Great Indian Poverty Debate. We seem to have come around the measurement of poverty, but about poverty measurement, leading to the Great Indian Poverty Debate 2. But is counting the exact number of individuals whose incomes fall below the poverty line, located around ₹1,000, as important as understanding the nature of poverty decline and its implications for social policy?

Some estimates based on Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) place poverty under 5%. The second edition of India Human Development Survey (IHDS) places it at about 8.5%. HCES probably underestimates poverty due to a change in methodology, while IHDS probably overestimates poverty due to its reliance on an older sampling frame that omits newly growing peri-urban areas. However, both suggest that poverty is declining. The multidimensional poverty index released by Niti Aayog also documents improvements in the conditions under which households live.

But due to an obsession with estimating the exact number of individuals in poverty, implications of this change for the provision of social safety nets are ignored. India's approach to social protection was developed when most of its population was impoverished. Unequal access to productive resources such as infra, land and education led to endemic poverty among some sections of the society (such as SCs and STs) and in some regions (such as poorest districts like Dahod, Gadchiroli, and Dhuri). Hence, the primary focus was on designating the poorest sections of society as BPL and providing them various benefits, including food grains.

As the economy grows, it presents both opportunities

and challenges. Poor rural residents find work as skilled masons, and urban slum-dwellers become drivers for delivery services. While this is a step out of absolute poverty, it also places them on a precarious perch where a single accident, natural disaster, or epidemic could push them back into poverty.

IHDS, organised by National Council of Applied Economic Research and University of Maryland, followed more than 40,000 households between 2004 and 2024. Its results suggest that poverty decline is closely coupled with increasing vulnerability.

Between 2004-12 and 2012-13, of the total 22.4% who were poor, 8.5% were newly poor. That is, if BPL cards were given based on poverty in 2004-05, they would miss out on nearly 40% of the individuals who were poor in 2012. This proportion grew between 2011-12 and 2022-24, although overall poverty declined from 22.4% to 8.5%. Of the 8.5% poor in 2022-24, 5.3% are newly poor, reflecting a decline in chronic poverty and growth in transient poverty.

Whereas accidents of birth largely shaped the fortunes of Indian citizens in the 20th century, the 21st century has seen a rising importance of accidents of life. The challenge is that an infusion of funds if we have access to the death of a wage earner brings debt and misery to one widow, the other may be able to get a loan from a bank to set up a small shop for raising pigs and support her family. Another may have a son who is grown up and can help his mother.

Our public discourse must acknowledge and celebrate movement out of poverty, but it must also recognise the precarity of this achievement and work towards building safety nets that protect against

unforeseen disasters. This involves developing social policies that provide risk insurance and strengthening institutions that can be mobilised to deliver assistance when needed.

Illness and death pose tremendous risks for vulnerable households. Hence, strengthening public health services and building an efficient health insurance programme are vital. Social safety programmes such as Ayushman Bharat cover only hospital expenditures, which can easily lead to escalating public expenditures as individuals who can't be treated in outpatient clinics resort to hospitalisation because they lack the funds to pay OPD fees.

Dealing with emergencies also involves building sustainable institutions. During the pandemic, PDS ensured that grains could be distributed despite price rises and transportation challenges. This helped avert hunger and starvation while highlighting the exclusion of migrants who didn't have proof of residence, giving impetus to setting up the One Nation, One Ration Card programme. Similarly, immediate cash needs during flooding or other disasters can be met through an infusion of funds if we have access to the link people's current residential locations with their bank accounts.

We must move past the futile debate about estimating the number of poor individuals. As poverty declines, requiring re-envisioning of our social protection programmes to ensure we don't fail those who need help the most.

The writer is Professor at National Council of Applied Economic Research & University of Maryland. Views are personal.

Calvin & Hobbes

WHERE'S CALVIN? DON'T HE COME BACK FROM THE DRINKING FOUNTAIN?

I'LL BET HE'S AT HIS LOCKER. MRS. WORMWOOD, HE BROUGHT SOMETHING SECRET IN A PAPER BAG TODAY. HE SAID HE'D HELP HIM ON THE TEST.

FIVE YEARS UNTIL RETIREMENT FIVE YEARS UNTIL RETIREMENT

STUPIDUS' MAN'S STUPIDOUS IN THIS CUNNING TRAP! ZOVHIS! IT'S STUPIDUS' MAN'S FENDISH TOGETHER. HE CRAB TEACHER, COMING TO FINISH HIM OFF!

CALVIN?

Calvin and Hobbes comic strip panels.

By invitation: Anant Goenka

India becoming T20 world champions was a fabulous moment for India, for cricket. For me, what makes the win special is that in an era of bullies, the nice guys are winning. It's not only accept, but rather the very cultured public persona of those who found thriving corporations like Tata, Rajni and Birla. In politics, young Republicans are more enamoured by the rhetorically charged personality of Donald Trump than of the warm, well-mannered George W. Bush.

Whether in sports, politics, or industry, the world is telling that it's easier to win if you are an insensitive, transactional, egotistical bully. The gentle but unyielding courage of the underdog, the idea of investing in valuing relationships, or of competing with oneself for the greater good of society rather than searching for

someone to defeat, are all unfashionable. And this is what scares me about the general rhetoric I hear among Indian voters after this unique 'Everyone's a winner' election result. For the voter, it's not so much that everyone won, and so everyone's happy with the results. The takeaway is a far more blinkered, self-centred view: 'The other side has lost, and so I'm happy!'

Fear that as a society, we're headed down this acerbic, forever-aggressive rabbit hole. And without urgent introspection, we will find ourselves in the dysfunctionally polarised mess that America is in today. So no matter which side of the political spectrum you identify yourself with, together we should try to make 'empathy' great again.

As readers, we must recognise—for instance—the trauma of a migrant in desperate search for a safe home, and also the fear of those who are forced to offer their neighbourhood to foreigners. This applies equally to liberals as it

does to conservatives.

The world's most hallowed educational institutions spend a lot of emphasis on developing convictions—always a wonderful skill—but much less on living and thriving with different ideas. So even when taught to win arguments, but we aren't taught to have empathy for someone else's truth.

It's always admirable to fight for the 'Truth', but holding on to dogmas, either liberal or conservative ones, and others makes a meeting of either side much more improbable. It aggravates polarisation.

Think back, in any setting of any scale, in your own country or elsewhere, how many times you have witnessed the imperative of winning an argument trump the larger objective of finding consensus.

After watching last week's US presidential debate, we desperately needed a nice guy to win somewhere in the world, to believe that decency can also deliver.

Which is why last weekend's cricket win is so extra special. The gentlemen won. The writer is executive director, Indian Express.

Sacredspace

Loving means being open to miracles, to victories and defeats, to everything that happens each day that was given us to walk upon the face of the Earth.

Paulo Coelho

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Making a mark

Rahul sets the tone for Opposition

SOME of Rahul Gandhi's searing remarks aimed at the Bharatiya Janata Party, made during his maiden speech as the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha, have been expunged. Truth is truth, he retorted, 'I said what I had to say, that is the truth.' Animated speeches and acrimonious exchanges are part and parcel of parliamentary proceedings. A discernible change in the inaugural session of the 18th Lok Sabha is the Opposition's new-found confidence. Numerically strong after 10 years and finally with an LoP, the leaders seem determined to exhibit a sense of purpose and make it a stage of equals. It's too early to form opinions, but the first few sittings have been a far cry from the days when the Opposition voices would get drowned in the cacophonic domination of the Treasury Benches.

In his counterstrike, the Prime Minister said the Congress got 99 out of 543 seats, not out of 100, questioning its aggressive mode in Parliament. To Rahul Gandhi's credit, he has set the tone for the Opposition. He and others in the INDIA bloc may well put themselves on the back for having made a mark. An Opposition speaking truth to power and picking up holes in policies infuses much-needed vigour in the quest for accountability in governance. A caveat persists. Facts are sacrosanct. Oppose, for sure, but only when backed by evidence and research, not hearsay. Else, the best of presentations can get reduced to an exercise in self-indulgence.

Be strong, do not fear — that's been the recurring theme in the Opposition ranks after the energising election results. When any of them has an iota of self-doubt, they must always remember who they have in their corner — the redoubtable, feisty Mahua Moitra is a force to reckon with.

Manufacturing push

Spurred by highest job creation in 19 years

THE resurgence of India's manufacturing sector in June, as reflected by the HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rising to 58.3 from May's 57.5, is a testament to the robust demand driving the economy forward. This uptick underscores the resilience and potential of India, which remains the fastest-growing major economy globally. The PMI data indicates a vigorous expansion in manufacturing activities, bolstered by domestic demand and sustained government spending on infrastructure. The manufacturing sector ended the June quarter on a stronger footing as new orders and output drove the PMI to nearly five points above its long-term average. Despite a slight dip in the future output index to a three-month low, it remains above historical norms, suggesting continued optimism in the sector.

One of the standout aspects of the latest PMI report is the record pace of job creation. Hiring surged for the fourth consecutive month, reaching the highest rate since the survey began in 2005. This is a crucial development for the ruling BJP which has faced political challenges, including a loss of parliamentary majority. The increase in manufacturing jobs could offer relief to the party. Emphasising the government's role in furthering this growth trajectory, the positive performance of the manufacturing sector is likely to be a focal point in Nirmala Sitharaman's upcoming Budget.

However, the sector's growth comes amid persistent inflationary pressures. While input cost inflation slightly moderated in June, prices charged to customers rose at the fastest pace in two years. This indicates that manufacturers were able to pass on higher costs to consumers, leveraging the strong demand to maintain profit margins. However, inflation is expected to average around the Reserve Bank of India's target of four per cent, with a leeway of two percentage points on either side, providing some stability.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1924

Victory and defeat-II

AS there is a tendency in some quarters to do exactly that with regard to the result of the last meeting of the All-India Congress Committee against which we have considered it our duty to sound a note of warning — interpret that result in terms of the victory of one party and the defeat of another — it is worth while examining the several resolutions passed by the Committee to show how misleading such interpretation is apt to be. Let us begin with the first and most important of the four resolutions — that relating to Khaddar. The resolution, as it originally stood, not only called upon all members of the various Congress organisations, except when disabled by sickness or prevented by continuous travelling, regularly to spin for at least half an hour every day and to send to the Secretary of the All-India Khadi Board two thousand yards of even and well-twisted yarn every month by a particular date, but laid down that any member failing to send yarn by the prescribed date shall be deemed to have vacated his office. Now the last part of the resolution, which was undoubtedly its most objectionable part and against which the Swamijis had chiefly directed their attack, was eventually deleted, though not until the resolution with this clause had already been formally carried; and so far the Swamijis must be said to have gained their point. But although its most offensive part is gone, the resolution itself remains, and its form shows that it is more in the nature of a command than anything else. What it says in so many words is that every member of a Congress organisation shall regularly spin for at least half an hour every day and shall send the prescribed quantity of yarn to the Secretary, All-India Khadi Board, by the prescribed date.

Bring big-ticket items into the GST net

There is no getting away from the fact that it is time to carry out rationalisation of the rate structure

SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

WHEN the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was launched seven years ago, on July 1, 2017, there were many fears over its implementation. The decision to go ahead with the launch was considered reckless, given that the country was barely recovering from the chaos of demonetisation the year before. There were dire predictions by economists and tax experts that the tax would fail in its aim as the country was not 'ready' for it. It was then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley who took the call to introduce the tax without any further delay. This proved to be the wisest move, as it would have taken an inordinately long time for the stakeholders in the economy to be fully prepared for the development.

It must be recalled that the concept of the one-point tax had already been deliberated on for about 18 years. The idea of replacing the innumerable indirect Central and state taxes with a single levy had been mooted way back in 1999 at the time of the Vajpayee government. The proposal emanated from the Vijay Kelkar task force, which recommended a unified tax system to simplify compliance and promote economic integration. There were also studies showing that the countries that had adopted this system benefited in terms of improved efficiency and enhanced economic growth.

An empowered committee of state Finance Ministers was set up in 2000, which was headed by then West Bengal Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta. This was



SCOPE: There is much that can be done to improve the implementation of the GST. STOCK

the forerunner of the present GST Council, which represents all states to ensure that revenue issues are considered by the Centre and the states in a consensual manner. It was this committee that prepared the first draft of the Bill and carried out complex negotiations to bring all states on board. The process took nearly two decades, but there remained hesitation over the launch even after broad consensus was achieved in 2016.

One reason was the complexity brought into the original concept of a single-point tax. This stemmed from the states' worries over losing revenues from the existing taxes. The result was a multi-layered system that is still in operation. So, there is an integrated GST levied on the inter-state movement of goods along with Central, state and union territory GSTs. Plus, there are four tax slabs, ranging from five to 28 per cent.

Not only that, states insisted on keeping the two biggest cash cows in revenue terms out of the purview of the GST. That is, petroleum and alcohol. The biggest concern at the time of the launch was whether the states would be able to manage with the

The original concept of a single-point levy will remain unachievable unless large segments of the economy are brought under its purview.

resources mobilised through the new indirect tax. All these fears have now been shown to be completely misplaced. In fact, revenue mobilisation has soared far beyond expectations. The latest data shows that GST collections touched Rs 1.74 lakh crore in June, compared to the average monthly inflow of about Rs 90,000 crore in the first year of its implementation. In addition, a Reserve Bank of India study has shown the states' share of own revenues has risen

in the last two years compared to the pre-GST era.

This means that the states may be able to manage without relying further on the compensation mechanism built into the GST framework at the outset. It was initially meant to be for five years, but it has now been extended as a result of Covid-19 till 2026. In case revenue buoyancy continues, it may be possible to finally end this provision.

Overall, there have undoubtedly been many hiccups in the implementation, especially in reducing red tape and simplifying procedures. But the GST Council, in which all states are represented, meets regularly to iron out problems and carries out firefighting wherever needed. The initial problem was to bring small and tiny businesses into the GST network by introducing computerisation. The disruptive effect on the small industry was tremendous, to the extent that the GST was reviled as being destructive to it. On the contrary, it has ended up bringing lakhs of small enterprises into the digital economy.

A major fear was that the GST would create a high-tax burden for the common man. This has

also been proven groundless as studies now show that 60 per cent of consumption items face the lowest tax slab of five per cent or nil tax. On the other hand, only three per cent of consumption items face the heaviest tax of 28 per cent.

Yet, there is no getting away from the fact that it is time to carry out rationalisation of the GST rate structure. The original concept of a single-point levy may not be achievable immediately, but the tax slabs need to be reduced to achieve more simplicity in the long run.

The other critical step needed is to bring big-ticket items into the GST net. This includes petroleum, though electricity and land are now also being mentioned for inclusion. As a first step, petroleum products like aviation turbine fuel and natural gas could be brought under the purview of the GST, though it is also high time for the inclusion of petrol and diesel. Alcohol is difficult to touch as it remains a sensitive commodity for states. Taxation from this sector brings considerable revenues, but it will also have to be roped into the GST net sooner rather than later.

In its recent meeting, the GST Council took some business-friendly measures to help micro and small enterprises by giving amnesty on legacy disputes and raising the ceiling for appeals on disputes. The need for a GST appellate tribunal is similarly being felt, as appeals on disputes need to be dealt with rapidly.

There is much that can be done to improve the implementation of the GST, and this includes further simplification of procedures and rationalisation of rates. Yet, the original concept of a single-point levy will remain unachievable unless large segments of the economy, like petroleum, are brought under its purview. The Centre has to take the initiative, but the states also need to adopt a rational and long-term view so that the GST can fulfil its avowed objective of speeding up economic growth.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The new India will create one tax, one market and for one nation. —Arun Jaitley

American hotels and Indian hospitality

SHANKAR GOPALKRISHNAN

INDIANS are used to certain perks. The moment we land in a hotel, half a dozen attendants are up and about. Someone opens the door of the taxi for us, someone unloads our luggage, someone leads us to the reception desk. Once the registration is complete, we simply head to our room. The luggage will arrive on its own. We are used to such royal treatment!

We have no such luck in the US. Once the registration is complete, the receptionist sums it up: 'You are all set. Here's your access card. The elevator is to the left.' There is no room to protest and say: 'Sir, are you serious? Do you know I am coming from India after a 20-hour flight? I am carrying two huge suitcases. Plus, I have carry-on baggage and a backpack. You expect me to carry them to the sixth-floor room? There is no one to hear the rant. We want to vent out our frustration, 'Hello! Is anyone there? Any attendants, hotel-boys, housekeeping staff? All we hear is silence amidst the yellow ambient lighting and the piped music in the background. You can huff and puff your way to the sixth-floor room.

These days, whether it is India or the US, there is a standardisation as far as entry into hotel rooms is concerned. It is an access card-based entry — no fiddling around with a lock-and-key anymore. In its ideal essence, the method is simple — we tap the card against the door, the door clicks, and lets us in.

Call it Murphy's law, but sometimes, try as we might, there is no response. We hold the card this way, the other way, rub it violently against the door, but it stays dead. After half-hour of absolute futility, we run down to the reception. 'Sorry about that. The access card had timed out. Let me issue a new card. You should now be fine!' says the receptionist, solving the problem.

In the hotel room, the first thing that comes to mind is the most crucial: how do we get coffee tomorrow morning? To answer our fervent call, the eye catches a coffee maker in the room. There are multiple items stacked around it — cups, coffee powder, sugar sachets, a 'creamer' and, finally, a wooden stirrer.

For the next hour, we feel like Thomas Edison crouched over his light bulb. How do we put these ingredients together to get that blessed cup of coffee? After immense toil, there is eventually coffee. The anti-climax cannot be put into words. The concoction is bitter to the core, so far from the Indian filter coffee we are used to.

How much we miss India! It would take just one phone call at 5.30 am to contact 'room service'. 'Can I have two cups of strong filter coffee immediately? And if possible, some munchies also to go with it?' And once we put the phone down, we hear the footsteps and a gentle tap on the door, 'Sir, coffee!'

Embrace new criminal laws

With reference to the editorial 'New criminal laws', keeping in mind that the three contentious farm laws were eventually repealed, the Opposition is likely to push for the scrapping of the fresh criminal laws, too. The repeal of the agricultural laws stymied much-needed reforms in the sector. It remains to be seen if the growers gained anything from their repeal. Hopefully, the new criminal codes will not be done away with despite the growing political pressure. After all, only criminals will benefit if the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam are thrown out. If the statutes have some shortcomings, they should be addressed through dialogue.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETI), JALANDHAR

Rahul's conduct disrespectful

Apologies of the report 'Rahul takes "not Hindu" dig at BJP in Parl, PM calls it attack on community', the Congress leader's remarks are despicable. Also, displaying pictures of Lord Shiva, Guru Nanak and other deities in the House during a political back-and-forth is a disrespect to them. Gods hold a special place in the hearts of their devotees; they must not be dragged into politics. What the Leader of Opposition (LoP) did was not only disrespectful but also a violation of the rules. Strict action should be taken against him.

TARUSHA, KAPURTHALA

LoP's remarks uncalled for

Refer to the news story 'Rahul takes "not Hindu" dig at BJP in Parl, PM calls it attack on community'. The Leader of Opposition's comments attacking the BJP in the Lok Sabha are proof that he lacks maturity. His tirade sounded like he was addressing a crowd gathered at a political rally and not Members of the House. With his criticism of the ruling party, he has lost another opportunity to present himself as a senior leader who can be taken seriously. Having said that, the BJP-led government needs to do a lot of soul-searching.

SHAM MURARI SHARMA, CHANDIGARH

Modi has failed NEET aspirants

It is disappointing that PM Narendra Modi did not discuss the alleged irregularities in

the NEET-UG exam or the last-minute postponement of the NEET-PG in the latest episode of his 'Mann Ki Baat' show. His failure to address the matter will send a wrong signal to the student community. Modi should have seized the opportunity to console the disheartened aspirants and assure them that their grievances would be looked into. The youth are the future of our nation. Their concerns must not be left unheard. More needs to be done to prevent a repeat of the NEET fiasco.

SUNIL CHOPRA, LUDHIANA

Biden still fit to lead US

With reference to the article 'Biden's debate fiasco deals a blow to his campaign', the incumbent's poor showing on the big stage has raised doubts about his ability to lead. Unfortunately, our focus has been shifted from the achievements of his administration to his advanced age. Americans must look at the larger picture and not be distracted by wide-spread concerns over Biden's health. Make no mistake, the 81-year-old is fit to be at the helm of affairs for another four years. The fact that Biden himself conceded at the recent rally in Raleigh that his debate performance was not up to the mark shows that he is self-aware and believes in being honest with the electorate. He still has a fighting chance to beat Trump.

JATINDER SINGH, BY MAIL

Need new Democratic candidate

Apologies of Biden's debate fiasco deals a blow to his campaign', the article has rightly highlighted the consequences of Joe Biden's shaky debate performance for US politics and the world alike. The President's faltering speech, lack of clarity and inability to string his thoughts together have sparked fresh concerns about his health. Despite having a number of achievements under his belt, Biden has shot himself in the foot by seeking an early debate and failing to perform in it. Many commentators have rightly noted that Biden, if re-elected, would be 86 years old by the end of his second term. The Democrats must understand the urgency of the matter and find an alternative candidate soon.

DILPREET KAUR, CHANDIGARH

Statistical forecasting is futile beyond a point



ATANU BISWAS
PROFESSOR, INDIAN STATISTICAL
INSTITUTE, KOLKATA

EVERY year, on March 8, International Women's Day, the world routinely recalls severe gender disparities in societies. The prevailing gender gap is also under scrutiny when the World Economic Forum (WEF) releases its annual report on the Global Gender Gap Index. A few days ago, the 2024 index was revealed.

The WEF calculates the index using predetermined procedures pertaining to several facets of lifestyle as well as a few preset measures. In 2006, the Gender Gap Index encompassed 115 countries, representing over 90 per cent of the world's population. By 2024, the index would have expanded to cover 146 countries.

How is such an index value read? For every given index, a value of '1' denotes the absence of any gender difference in that regard, whereas a value of '0' denotes the most extreme possible disparity. A higher value corresponds to a smaller disparity. Notably, these indices highlight the disparities in the achievements of men and women in a given

society, regardless of the opportunities that society may present, rather than the general level of economy, education, health or political stability of the society. It is not always true that indices representing highly developed nations have larger values. For instance, the US ranks 43rd, with an overall 74.7 per cent score of gender difference. It is far lower than that of countries like Namibia (80.5 per cent) and Nicaragua (81.1 per cent).

In which direction is the gender gap moving worldwide? Of the sample of 146 countries included in the 2024 report, 50.1 per cent reported overall score rises, 6.1 per cent indicated no change in score and the others reported score decreases. Seven European economies are among the top 10, along with New Zealand (ranked fourth), Nicaragua (ranked sixth), and Namibia (eighth). Importantly, no nation has yet attained complete gender parity. Iceland has closed 93.4 per cent of the gender gap, making it the country closest to achieving gender parity. Its only country to achieve a score above 90 per cent. Eight more nations have closed their gender gap by 80 per cent or more.

How about India? Well, we are approximately two-thirds of the way towards closing the gender gap, with a 64.1 per cent score in 2024. India is ranked 129th overall, slightly behind where it was a year ago (127th). Four pillars or dimensions are used to generate the Global



THE UNKNOWN: As per reports, full gender parity is estimated to be achieved in 134 years, ANI

Gender Gap Index. They are: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. India's scores according to the other three indices are not great, even if the country does pretty well in the political empowerment criterion (65th rank), according to the WEF report.

But how efficient are those kinds of specific measures? Well, any indicator pertaining to inequality, hunger, democracy, etc. may inevitably give rise to disputes and the accuracy of its particular conclusions is frequently called into question. Undoubtedly, there are a number of significant inherent problems with most of these indices, including the validity of the methodology and the nature and accuracy of the data.

It is exceedingly challenging to forecast social shifts and technological advancements in the moderate-to-distant future.

For example, the Global Gender Gap Report finds that 96 per cent of the gender gap in global health and survival, 94.9 per cent of the gap in educational attainment, 60.5 per cent of the gap in economic participation and 22.5 per cent of the gender gap in political empowerment have been closed. The overall index is the weighted average of these four with equal weights. These four pillars, together with their subdivisions, are undoubtedly not the optimal choices. There may be other important aspects of lifestyle that represent the gender gap, one may argue. And why are the weights of these four pillars precisely equal, which seems rather arbitrary?

And what about the quality of the data, which is gathered from many sources across nations? How reliable and accurate is the data as it is pro-

vided 'as is, as available' and 'without warranty of any kind, either express or implied, including, without limitation, warranties of merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose and non-infringement', as acknowledged by the WEF?

The WEF report has a humorous element, in my opinion, as well. The WEF typically projects when it will be possible to eliminate the gender gap worldwide. For instance, based on the current progress rates, the estimated timeframe for achieving full gender parity is 134 years, which translates to around five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) objective.

Well, how good is that prediction? I believe it to be, at the very least, a misinterpretation of statistics. It should be almost impossible to predict what will happen in 134 years based on data from 2006-2024. In 2018, the WEF report predicted that the world would take another 106 years to close the overall gender gap across the 106 countries covered since 2006. We observe that the anticipated time interval has grown by an additional 26 years after six years!

Keep in mind that such statistical forecasting makes sense within a reasonable limit beyond the data range. Take an example from a different scenario. As demonstrated by the 1986 catastrophe of the US space shuttle Challenger, which broke apart 73 seconds into its launch and killed all

seven crew members aboard, statistical forecasting is useless beyond a certain point. The failure of the primary and secondary redundant O-ring seals in a joint in the shuttle's right solid rocket booster was determined by retrospective investigations to be the reason for the accident. The Rubber O-rings' capacity to seal joints was diminished due to stiffness caused by the record-low temperature on the morning of the launch, which was 31°F outside. For any of the 23 previous launches (prior to the Challenger accident), 33°F was the lowest temperature five generations beyond the challenge. Thus, the Challenger was launched at a temperature that was much outside of the data range, a fully uncharted territory where predictions could occasionally become meaningless.

In actuality, even for fiction writers, it is exceedingly challenging to forecast social shifts and technological advancements in the moderate-to-distant future. Furthermore, we must never forget that decision-makers, extraordinary social reformers and other stakeholders can always expedite this process in order to attain gender equality ahead of schedule. None can predict when a society will get a figure like Raja Ram Mohan Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Kemal Ataturk, Begum Rokeya or Jyoti Basu, despite the fact that the two halves of the sky differ greatly in brightness and in nature across nations.

Bangladesh's Awami League no longer a party of the people



MAHFUZ ANAM
EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR

THE history of the Awami League (AL)—which started off as the Awami Muslim League (AML)—at 75 can be encapsulated under three headings: the AL at birth, the AL under Bangabandhu's leadership and the AL with Sheikh Hasina at the helm. From its birth in 1949 to our liberation in 1971, the AL can be credited with being either the author or the main mover and participant in all democratic and cultural movements working to strengthen the demand for the rights of the Bangladeshis in East Pakistan. No other party can claim to have singularly represented all our democratic aspirations as the AL during our days under Pakistan.

In the first phase, the two most important events that brought the AML to the forefront were: the Language Movement—which united the people of East Pakistan and crystallised the efforts of the AML to become the true voice of the people—and the 1954 provincial election under the banner of the United Front (Jukta Front), in which the

AML was the biggest and most active partner, getting 143 seats as the party and 228 seats as a part of the Jukta Front out of a total of 309 seats. The 1954 election proved that there was a far deeper significance of the AML's birth than many people realised then and even now. It has not been studied in depth, and its significance has not been fully evaluated in subsequent research and books. It was the beginning of the disillusionment with the ideology of Pakistan; it was the start of questioning as to whether religion could be the only foundation of a newly formed state; it presented evidence that people lost confidence in the founding party of Pakistan, the Muslim League, which never recovered later, except under military tutelage.

Almost all leaders who formed the new party were integral parts of the Pakistan movement. So, why after succeeding to carve out Pakistan, would these leaders and their followers move away from the party—the Muslim League—that had founded the new country?

The answer is simple. With Pakistan's birth, the Muslim League suddenly reversed itself to be devoted to serving the interest of the feudal landed gentry from West Pakistan, especially that of Punjab. The so-called Pakistani leadership was not concerned with its multiple and varied linguistic and cultural heritage. Bangalees, who constituted the majority of the new country's population, found their economic rights and cultural heritage ignored and their language, Bangla, denied the status of a state language. In fact, the death of the new country was signalled by the very man who founded it, Qaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, when he declared in Dhaka, "Let there be no doubt that Urdu and Urdu shall be the only national language of Pakistan." That was the beginning of the end of Pakistan founded in 1947.

It was under Bangabandhu's stewardship that the AL expanded its appeal to the masses. His Six-Point Programme galvanised the people as never before and hardened their resolve to fight for their rights. Those of us, as student activists, who were witness



75-YEAR PARTY: Sheikh Hasina has been leading the AL for the past 43 years, PI

his meteoric rise, who had the privilege to hear his mesmerising speeches and saw firsthand how he unified the Bangalees, felt in our hearts that finally we had a leader who could realise the dream of our freedom. The victory in the 1970 general election, under Bangabandhu's leadership, was the AL's biggest, most sweeping and politically critical achievement in that period. It was the precursor to our Liberation War. That electoral victory gave the AL the legal, moral and political right to speak on behalf of the people of East Pakistan and declare independence and start the armed struggle when genocide was imposed on our unarmed people. The AL's leadership, the role of the Mujibnagar government and especially that of war-time PM Tajuddin Ahmad were remarkable.

Money and muscle power have replaced people's power in the AL's operations. Except for a few at the top, party positions today are up for grabs by the rich and the corrupt.

During her last 15 years of rule, she brought about remarkable advancement in the country's economic field. However, her grand success came with some very damaging costs. A party in Opposition and the same party in power, especially when the stay is long, present two radically different pictures. The AL that began as the voice of the people has now ended up being that of an individual. From the smallest to the most significant policy decisions, they are no longer the result of debates within its ranks, but personal choices of the leadership.

Elections, a crucial measure of judging how a political party is faring in the public eye, is no longer valid in Bangladesh. It has lost its fundamental

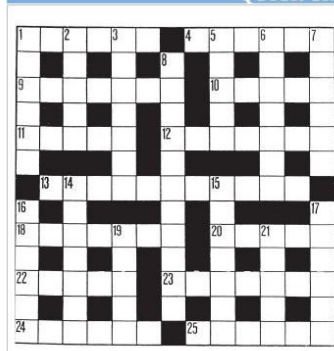
ability to elect genuine representatives of the people, due to both the ruling party's grip on all state institutions that guarantee free polls and the Opposition's unthinking boycott of elections.

As the AL celebrates 75 years of its existence, there are many reasons for it to be proud. But there is an equal number of reasons for it to be deeply concerned. Money and muscle power have replaced people's power in the day-to-day operation of this party. Except for a few at the top, party positions today are up for grabs by the rich and the corrupt. The victory of a large number of the AL's own 'disobeying' candidates in the latest election stands as proof of how corrupt the original selection process was.

The party today is its own judge and jury. It is a typical example of a political party living in its own bubble. And since it has monopoly control on all the levers of power, the bubble, as fragile as it is, can also be dangerous. This is so because the reality presented by the bubble can form the basis of decisions that can inflict harm on all. The handling of the issues of corruption, money-laundering, misuse of power, and, especially, that of defaulted loans and the treatment meted out to wild defaulters cannot be but the results of living in a bubble.

We hope we have given enough food for thought to the Awami League on its 75th anniversary.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Grassy treeless
- 2 Eurasian plain (6)
- 4 Distorted (6)
- 9 Uncouth (7)
- 10 Trite (5)
- 11 Proficient (5)
- 12 On the way (2,5)
- 13 Function with great success (2,5,4)
- 18 Earthshaking (7)
- 20 Insurgent (5)
- 22 The Hunter constellation (5)
- 23 Inferior in quality (2,1,4)
- 24 Cheap showy brilliance (6)
- 25 Nothing but (6)

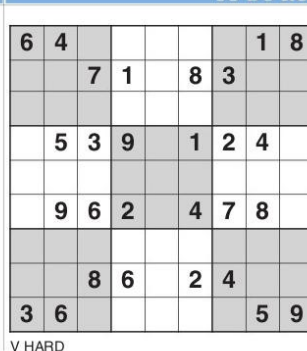
DOWN

- 1 Underground passage (6)
- 2 Inspire (5)
- 3 Indication (7)
- 5 Honey-yellow colour (5)
- 6 A flightless seabird (7)
- 7 Sweet-sounding (6)
- 8 Chief support in emergency (5,6)
- 14 Estimation (7)
- 15 Relevant (7)
- 16 Accompany as guard (6)
- 17 Bold-blank (6)
- 19 Grind into small pieces (5)
- 21 Financially ruined (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Ruffian, 5 Storm, 8 Pain in the neck, 9 Least, 10 Venison, 11 Adulter, 12 Uranus, 15 Sequoia, 17 Faint, 19 At a standstill, 20 Elect, 21 Relieve.
Down: 1 Repel, 2 Fair and square, 3 Diotic, 4 Native, 5 Sheen, 6 Ovensitive, 7 Makings, 11 Assuage, 13 Refusal, 14 Banner, 16 Octet, 18 Tulle.

SU DO KU



FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

SUNSET:	WEDNESDAY	19:28 HRS
SUNRISE:	THURSDAY	05:26 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	28
New Delhi	36	28
Amritsar	33	27
Bathinda	34	27
Jalandhar	33	28
Ludhiana	34	28
Bhiwani	33	27
Hisar	33	27
Sirsa	37	28
Dharamsala	30	20
Manali	25	16
Shimla	23	17
Srinagar	33	22
Jammu	36	25
Kargil	31	15
Leh	25	16
Dehradun	29	24
Mussoorie	22	17

CALENDAR

JULY 3, 2024, WEDNESDAY
 ■ Shaka Samvat 1946
 ■ Ashadh Shaka 12
 ■ Ashadh Purnima 20
 ■ Hajar 1445
 ■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 12, up to 7.11 am
 ■ Shrota Yoga up to 9.02 am
 ■ Rohini Nakshatra up to 4.08 am
 ■ Moon in Taurus sign

A Woman's Place is In the Boardroom

But it's crucial to expand female managerial pool

Women are growing their representation faster in Indian boardrooms than in corner suites, broadly in line with the relative time and effort that goes into directorial and managerial roles. Although India ranks low on both parameters by international comparison, placing women on company boards is easier to push through by fiat than placing them in senior management positions. The gap in the middle order of women executives leads to a thinning out at the top, and companies need to be more proactive to prevent this. In contrast, directors can move in laterally, avoiding the trade-off between professional and family responsibilities women face as they work their way up the corporate ladder. It also helps that business in India is driven by families, which makes it easier for women family members to find a place in boardrooms.

The corporate benefits of gender diversity, though, are derived from women's representation improves at all levels. Despite its faster growth, women's boardroom representation still trails that in senior management, and it is in the interests of corporate governance that the female managerial pool is widened to feed the needs of company boards. At the end of the day, directors' quality is related to the quality of managers a company produces. Improved choice among candidates for women directors would require a broader dissemination of managerial skills across the corporate sector.

The rule on women's board representation should have knock-on effects on managerial gender parity. Yet, this is a relatively weak force. HR policies to encourage women to find a better work-family balance and to sensitise male colleagues remain the predominant managerial intervention. To the extent that boardroom representation affects HR strategy, the top-down approach can considerably improve outcomes. Since the approach is also bottom up, with affirmative action in college and entry-level corporate hiring, India Inc could attain acceptable levels of gender parity if it pays more attention to its middle managers.



SWAMISPEAK Capitalism hasn't failed — we've actually greatly benefited from freer markets

How That Old Schumpeter!



Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar

A zillion criticisms of capitalism have come from the Left. But an increasing number are now coming from the Right. They come out with a ring: 'Joseph Schumpeter, where are you? We need you.'

Schumpeterians long for the churning of companies, with older less productive ones dying, and being replaced by newer, more productive ones. This is the 'creative destruction' that the 20th-century Austrian political economist saw as the heart and soul of successful capitalism. That, says critics, has been

The US Left, exemplified by Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, has long complained that the excesses of neoliberalism, hyperglobalisation and neglect of the working man explain what has gone wrong with capitalism. Schumpeterians say the problem is the other way round — of more and more state spending and regulation, less and less free markets.

Welfare spending in the US, taking all sorts of assistance into account, has soared to 30% of GDP. Not so long ago, this would have been viewed as madness. The register of US federal regulations rose eightfold since 1980 to 180,000 pages. This is the very opposite of supposed liberalism.

Europe has gone the same way. European tax collection rose from 10% of GDP in 1910 to 47% by 1980, and is still there. John Maynard Keynes advocated high fiscal deficits in recessions, and then fiscal surpluses in good times. This was supposed to be virtuous anti-cyclical macroeconomics. What supposed Keynesians are doing today would have horrified Keynes. Today governments want to keep stimulating the economy, while Keynes would have wanted to let it find its own way.

The biggest deficits since World War 2 were run during the Covid pandemic. This is defensible in a medical crisis. But since 2008, Western governments have been on a non-stop stimulus spree, both fiscal and monetary. In the US, trillion-dollar government spending bills are being passed, while the Fed's policy really was 'print money' to help the economy.

negative interest rates, robbing savers of any return on savings. Cheap money fuelled stock market and real estate bubbles, not the real economy. So, billions grew ever richer, while workers wondered why their share of the pie was falling. Indeed, one of the main reasons for the Fed's policy really was 'print money' to help the economy. It was the ideological intention of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to shrink the state. As it actually expanded under them, and has continued to expand since. Reagan had a great campaign line, that the nine most deadly words were, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'



The tool is out there

He claimed that government attempts to help were the greatest threat to progress. But while he shrank some parts of the state, he allowed others to expand.

Schumpeterians believe that government attempts to help, help and help again, and the root causes of all that has gone wrong. They link this to declining GDP growth, and among workers, 'decent jobs' are disappearing, rising inequalities, a soaring number of billionaires, rising inflation, crazy stock market valuations, Trumpist populism, protectionism and soaring fiscal deficits.

In 2022, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) found that since 1990, Indian companies, narrowly defined, rose from 4% of all companies to 15% in a sample of 15 advanced countries, and to 20% in the US. However, the Western narrative of rising inequality is contested by economist Branko Milanovic. He has pioneered international comparisons of how individuals across the world have fared in recent times. And it is a heartening story of the global poor getting better off, and global inequality falling.

NCAER economist Shekhar Aiyar has written a paper on this — 'Income inequality and the Liberal Economic Order: A Not Entirely Western Perspective'. He elucidates Milanovic's famous 'elephant' chart (see graph) showing income changes during 1988-2008 for individuals across the world. This shows stagnation from the 75th to 95th percentiles, the resentful Westerners.

But there is huge improvement from the 10th to 70th percentiles, the vast bulk of the global population living in developing countries — not just China and India but also countries in Africa. The trend strengthened in a later update to 2018.

So, far from widening inequalities at the global level have shrunk. The West may not be interested in this good news. But let us in India celebrate. Capitalism has not failed at all from our viewpoint. We have greatly benefited from globalisation and freer markets. Hurrah!

Growth Rates Across Percentiles of The Global Income Distribution, 1996-2008 (%)



Branko Milanovic's 'elephant' chart shows stagnation of income changes in 75th-95th percentiles, the resentful Westerners

thwarted by a constant expansion of the state, through regulatory overkill, non-stop stimulus and rescues in times of trouble. The result is mollycoddled corporations that are not allowed to fail, zombie banks keeping zombie companies alive and, hence, misallocation of capital that hits productivity.

In the long run, as Paul Krugman famously said, productivity is not everything, but it is almost everything. If productivity goes, so does everything else. That, say the Schumpeterians, is what has gone wrong with capitalism. A good example of this line of argument comes from Ruchir Sharma's new book, What Went Wrong With Capitalism.

Have It on Record, Even If Expunged

Never a dull moment in Parliament. The ongoing session, the first after Lok Sabha elections, was expected to be stormy. It lived up to the billing. On Monday, Speaker Om Birla expunged several parts of the speech made by Rahul Gandhi, the new leader of opposition in Lok Sabha. Later, Gandhi wrote to Birla, saying whatever he said was 'ground reality and the factual position', adding that while the chair has the power to expunge remarks from the proceedings, the stipulation is that only those kinds of words the nature of which has been specified in Rule 380 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha can be expunged.

Considering that parliamentary proceedings are telecasted and clips are shared across social media, does it make sense to expunge proceedings? It does, once seen through a different lens. In the pre-digital age, expunging records meant blacking out comments. However, in a hyper-digital age, expunging comments, like recording them, are part of a fact-gathering-cum-checking process. Since comments have already been shared, expunging them neither curtails the MP's right to make allegations (he or she needs to give prior notice) nor does it bar him or her from referring to the information. As due diligence, however, presiding officers can ask MPs to provide supporting documents underpinning their claims.

Instead of using the threat of expunging as a whip, let parliamentary expunction be used as a transparency tool. Proceedings can be marked as 'expunged'. However, at the same time, reasons and rules under which such an action has been taken must be provided. Old tools and provisions must be reworked for this effort, so that Parliament can keep functioning in a transparent and ethical manner.



South Korean parents are opting for 'imprisonment' to grasp their wards

In Solidarity With Their Solitary Kids

Parents routinely upgrade their parenting skills to deal with their children's various rites of passage, including strange ones. But, sometimes, this trial-and-error method touches an altogether new dimension. In South Korea, many parents are signing up for the rather ironically named 'Happiness Factory'. This features tiny rooms, with just a feeding hole in the door. Yes, hum-inducing, indeed. Communication devices are prohibited. Their only company is bare white walls for a 'confinement experience'. South Koreans are opting to go through this so-called 'understand' their children who have retreated from society. A recent government survey revealed that over 5% of 19-34-year-olds are isolating themselves in Japanese 'hikikomori' — 'pulling inward, being confined' — style. That's some 5.4 lakh young folks choosing solitude over socialising for reasons ranging from the personal to professional.

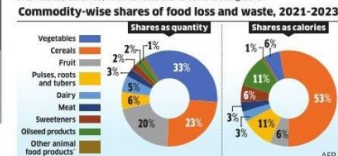
While their children's voluntary solitary confinement is befuddling, one also wonders why parents need to go through the same gig. They could try and 'understand' their state of mind, not the reaction to it. But on the bright side, this self-induced 'akela' rite may take the sting out of solitary confinement in prisons anywhere in the world. Especially when some ops start recounting similar experiences with the ominous opening line: 'During Emergency...'

ChatGPT SHAIPI OF THE DAY

There once was a trend quite absurd,
Where folks longed to be caged like a bird.
The new criminal laws were so cool,
That in jail they wanted a room.
'Arrest me!' were the most popular words,
...

Food Loss and Waste

Between 2021 and 2023, fruit and vegetables accounted for more than half of the lost and wasted food given their extremely perishable nature and relatively short shelf life, according to OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook. If food loss and waste shares are converted in terms of calories or protein, cereals, pulses, roots and tubers' account for almost two-thirds of the lost and wasted calories, with cereals alone contributing 53%.



These four are primary source of calories in most of the world's poorest populations. Note: Loss refers to all losses within the food value chain from post-harvest, slaughter or catch, right through to the retail stage. Food waste is waste in retail and final consumption. Other animal food products include eggs and fish.

Bell Curves

R Prasad



The Buddha taught that carrot is the root of all suffering.

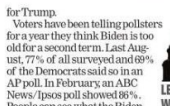
Then Dems Look Lost



Seema Sirohi

There are times when politics demands radical thinking and a change of tactics, cumbersome and painful as they may be. Anything short brings defeat closer, to say nothing of the burden of history to follow.

The Democratic Party faces such a time after Joe Biden's presidential debate performance last week. The question is no longer about one bad day's many good days, or 40 minutes vs 3% years, but about the next four years and 1,461 consecutive days riddled with domestic and international crises. With two wars raging, a world without order, a deeply contested geopolitical landscape and extreme polarisation at home, the 2024 US presidential election is more consequential than any US election since at least 1964. Democrats have been telling the world, they need an able defender. The Europeans are especially worried for obvious reasons: a second Donald Trump presidency scares them for what it might do to NATO and the status quo. It's time for the Democratic Party to establish to acknowledge the unpalatable. A more vigorous candidate could turn the race around more definitively, especially with all the help Trump is getting from the US Supreme Court. A 6-3 ruling on Monday said that Trump had substantial immunity from prosecution on charges of 'trying to overturn the 2020 results and sent the case back to the lower court for review. This means the case won't come to trial before the election. No gain for Dems and no pain



LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

For Trump. Voters have been telling pollsters for a year they think Biden is too old for a second term. Last August, 77% of all surveyed and 88% of the Democrats said so in an AP poll. In February, an ABC News/Ipsos poll showed 86%. People can see what the Biden campaign and his surrogates won't — that he struggles and mightily so. — These are times when politics demands radical thinking and a change of tactics, cumbersome and painful as they may be. Anything short brings defeat closer, to say nothing of the burden of history to follow.

inspect if risk-taking the election is worth the vanity because that's what it boils down to — the belief that he can defy nature. Blind loyalty is not smart politics, nor a winning strategy. Biden has not only his path to victory but the party's chances to win back the House and retain the Senate. Unsurprisingly, Democratic candidates in key races either stayed mum or said little about the election, hoping they would be immune from what happened. They have good reason to worry. They hope that enough independent swing voters would want to keep a check on Trump's presidency by giving Democrats the House and the Senate. But what if voters feel that a choice is being foisted upon them in the shape of Biden and Yes, it will be risky, but would it be better than the current scenario? Will the party do the painful and persuade Biden to step aside? Democrats have a deep bench of good candidates, and there's still time for them to throw their hat in the ring, compete for delegates at the convention and emerge the victors. Here's what will likely happen: everyone will go into the election pretty well and hope for the best. Recent history is a valuable guide to how the party can read the room wrong. In 2016, it did so most glaringly when Barack Obama told Biden to stand down because it was Hillary Clinton's turn. Out of touch with the country's mood and limited by arrogance, the establishment bombed. Ironically, Biden, with his working-class credentials and scrappy ways, had a better chance of beating Trump in 2016 and might have been ending his second term now. He was a different man eight years ago — a lot younger and feistier. But the party got the politics all wrong. It might be doing so again.

Dive Into the Antarctic

PEAS IN A PODCAST

Pied up with city life but don't have the option to explore 'The Great Outdoors'? Hang on, there is a way out: to 'Safari Safari' podcast, where Hadley Pierce and Ioni Krabb, co-founders of South Africa-based guides of wildlife and conservation, take you on a virtual safari. In the episode, Action of the Antarctic Peninsula, they plunge into those frigid waters and recount some epic sightings, including the elusive humpback whales.

A large pod of killer whales, known as orcas, were seen riding a ship, and leopard seals hunting penguins. In the 40-min podcast, Hadley's narration is so vivid that it makes us feel as if we are sitting in the boat, watching the wildlife unfold its minutest secrets. There is so every where, lots and lots of icebergs, some of which are many times bigger than the ship... they are very impressive,' recounts Hadley. It is so difficult to imagine the places. In another segment, he vividly describes the different kinds of whales and their characteristics, the 'Smiling faces' of orcas, and intelligent penguins, all living their lives to the fullest in one of nature's most breathtaking settings.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Faith Fuels Cricket Win

ULLHAS PACEY

India's recent T20 cricket victory serves as a compelling testament to the power of the human spirit. This triumph resonates deeply with the lessons found in Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a Harvard Business School professor and an expert in leadership, in her book, Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End, underscoring the spiritual and emotional dimensions of winning.

The team's unwavering self-belief and trust in their collective abilities were palpable throughout the tournament. Such confidence is nurtured through consistent practice, mindfulness and a positive mindset, sustained by a deep-seated belief in success.

The Indian cricket team's success was a collective effort, a harmonious blend of individual talents working towards a common goal. Each player's performance was amplified by their connection to the team, much like how individual energies are magnified within a community.

As motivational speaker Zig Ziglar succinctly points out, 'You were born to win, but to be a winner, you must plan to win, prepare to win, and expect to win.'

Chat Room

FM's Policy on Right Frequency

'Now to Craft the Politics in Policy' by Mythili Bhushanm (Jul 2) is right in expecting the FM to ensure policy continuity and continued harmony between monetary and fiscal policies. The stated reality that 'it is in the inflation rate only means a reduction in the rate of increase in prices' is followed by almost actionable prescriptions about possible fiscal measures that should find a place in policy formulation. The ball is in Govt's court as far as inflation management and employment generation are concerned. Budget 2024 will tell us the FM's best, notwithstanding the coalition pressures.

M GUARIERI

Mumbai

Good Morning, Parliament

This refers to the news report, 'Sparks Fly in LS Over LoP Speech' (Jul 2). It is a pleasant relief for democratic Indians to see such poise and forbearance in our legislators, from both sides of the aisle, in the parliament on Monday. A stronger Opposition having found its lost voice, however, kept the decorum, as did the treasury benches. In a welcome twist of listening to alternative views, the familiar disruption from either side was absent. God perhaps discovered the value of debate, which it had mislaid in a hubris of its majority numbers. The Speakers in both Houses, too, in a significant departure, showcased their real role as a moderator of the session, the essence of parliamentary democracy — a productive debate and willingness to listen. Is it too good to last?

R RAVANAN

New Mumbai

Governance 3.0 Hits a New Law

Apropos the news report, 'Easier Reporting, Faster Justice Now: Shah' (Jul 2), the introduction of the new criminal law seems harsh and misplaced. The outgoing system was already reeling under immense pressure from the non-reporting of the laws in Hindi and Sanskrit with no English counterpart makes the interpretation difficult for the non-lawyer-speaking states. The matter needed to be thought through in a better manner.

ANANYA SINGHAL

Delhi

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



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Delhi & a new London

Keir Starmer's Labour is more pragmatic than its predecessors. There will be opportunities for India, UK



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

THE FIRST FACE-OFF

Both Government and Opposition seem to be still locked in campaign mode. Each should hit reset, refresh — and respect

THE ELECTION IS over and for the country to move forward, a reconstituted government and a rearranged Opposition need to talk to each other in Parliament — it's just that India's new government and new Opposition don't seem to be in a hurry to acknowledge this. Listening to the Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi in Lok Sabha Monday, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the same House the next day — speaking on the motion of thanks to the President's address — the sense was as dispiriting as it was inescapable. Both spoke as if the campaign had not yet ended, and in fact, had begun all over again after a break. The PM and LoP also appeared to inhabit the same make-believe — that the people had not urged humility on both sides, that the mandate had not taken down the BJP-led government by more than a notch, and that it had not withheld by a bigger margin a majority from the INDIA bloc. If the Congress-led Opposition is unwise and plain wrong in its reading of the verdict as an outright victory for itself and decisive defeat for the BJP, the BJP's emphasis on stability and continuity, and its continuing disdain for its political opponent, is self-serving and disconnected from the responsibility cast on it for change.

Having said that, the government appears to be too thin-skinned. While Congress's exultation is jarring, it is possible to explain it as a cathartic outpouring after a decade of what had begun to seem like its unchecked decline. Gandhi's speech only reprised the range of well-worn themes of his election campaign: From the BJP's alleged peddling of hate and fear to the debilitating effect of demonisation on jobs and the informal economy. His show-and-tell with pictures of gods — a day after waving the Constitution — was jarring and an abdication of subtlety if not a breakdown of speech. But those shortcomings, and the unbefitting sloganeering during the PM's speech, were more than matched by the intelligence and narrow-spiritedness of those who spoke for a government-in-denial. The expunging of remarks made by Gandhi, and exhortations by the Treasury benches to the Speaker to act against the Opposition, show that the government is lapsing into its winner-take-all playbook and turning its back on the new political reality. The fact is that it confronts an energy-political opponent and its erstwhile dominance is now subject to checks and balances. Seeking to infantilise the Rashtriya Congress — as the PM did — by using terms like "balak buddhi (childish)", or labelling it as anti-Hindu, and anti-Dalit, or a "parjeyvi" (parasite on its allies), is so pre-june 4. It's so last government.

The first face-off in the House is an opportunity missed by both sides, but the term of the new government, and the new Opposition, has only just begun. Going forward, the ruling BJP must resolve to not play, by turn, vindictive aggressor and hapless victim of a sinister "eco-system" anymore. Let it learn to talk to a stronger Opposition, and listen to its voice, sometimes raucous though it may be. And let the Opposition also step back from the edge and use the political spaces that Verdict 2024 has opened up for it, judiciously and creatively. The points have been counted — they don't need daily scoring.

A HOME FOR THE CHEETAH

Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary must ensure a prey base for it. Officials need to be equipped to monitor the big cat's health

GANDHI SAGAR WILDLIFE Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh is set to be the second home for cheetahs in India. An assessment of the carrying capacity of Kuno National Park has revealed that the animal's current habitat in the country has exceeded its carrying capacity. The overabundance of cheetahs in the protected area (PA), also in Madhya Pradesh, has led to a 25 per cent loss in the big cat's main prey base — the chital. The animals from Africa, and their offspring, are not the only predators in the national park. Kuno's leopards compete with the cheetahs for herbivores. In an open savannah, the African animals can outrun the leopards, but the latter seems to have made the most of its home advantage. The forest department believes that translocating surplus cheetahs to Gandhi Sagar could restore Kuno's ecological equilibrium. However, the two feline predators will continue to compete for prey — now in two PAs. Project Cheetah will have to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated and translocation is not band aid.

At Gandhi Sagar, the cheetahs will initially be housed in a 64 sq km enclosure. The first challenge will be to remove leopards from this area. Project Cheetah's long-term plan, to develop a longer stretch of the 3,600 km sanctuary as habitat for the feline, will pose greater challenges. An insufficient prey base reportedly continues to be an issue at the sanctuary in Western MP. A 2021 study revealed that, despite the reasonably good health of the sanctuary, ungulate densities are extremely low. Apart from leopards, the sanctuary has other co-predators including sloth bears, striped hyenas, gray wolves, golden jackals, jungle cats, Indian foxes, and marsh crocodiles. The PA authorities will also be challenged in monitoring the health of a species that went extinct in the country more than seven decades ago. Last year, the Supreme Court had admonished the government after a string of fatalities in Kuno. Gandhi Sagar's authorities would do well to learn from Project Cheetah's experiences — and setbacks — in the past two years.

Project Cheetah's Steering Committee is reportedly considering a proposal for introducing a larger cat in the Kuno mix to reduce leopard activities. This could, on paper, reduce the pressure on the national park. However, this could also push leopards out of the park, increasing chances of human-animal conflict. Project Cheetah has spurred conversations on long-standing problems of Indian conservation. It's up to policymakers to seize the moment.

A WORLD IN HIS WORDS

Ismail Kadare's writing offered resistance by bearing witness to the many shades of oppression of a totalitarian regime

ISMAIL KADARE'S DISENCHANTMENT with communism happened not when Enver Hoxha took over Albania in 1944 when Kadare was eight. It came later, when he went to Moscow to the Gorky Institute for World Literature to become, as he put it in an interview with *The Paris Review*, "an official writer of the regime". The indoctrination failed to move him: It reminded him of the Soviet books back home that spoke of "hope", "hard work" and "sunshine" in the same breath, capturing nothing of all that was fast vanishing around them. For nearly four decades, Albania would be under the repressive communist dictatorship of Hoxha. But in Moscow, Kadare would realise that he wasn't a believer. When he began writing, it would be to bear witness to the many shades of oppression that held his people prisoner. One of Albania's finest writers, Kadare, 88, died on July 1.

Beginning with *The General of the Dead Army* (1970) that he wrote at the age of 26 about an Italian general who returns to Albania after World War II to reiterate bodies of dead Italian soldiers, to *The Palace of Dreams* (1981) about a shadowy state department in a totalitarian Ottoman empire that maps the dreams of subjects to get an inkling about the regime's future, Kadare's fiction and poetry relied on myth-making and allusions to lend time distance and its writer immunity from state reprisal. There was also a bit of self-serving manipulation, too — in 1977, he wrote *The Great Winter*, a hagiographic portrait of Hoxha. His defence in later years was practical: Between persecution and flattery, he chose the latter.

Kadare never won the Nobel Prize in Literature, even though he was considered to be in contention for years. But the 2005 Booker International Prize winner did something more powerful. His books gave shelter to a lost Balkan way of life — the only of resistance that transcends regimes and offers a chance to "overcome the impossible".

AS THE TORIES in Britain head for a historic defeat in tomorrow's elections, India is well-placed to advance the bilateral relationship under a new Labour government led by Keir Starmer. The Conservative Party may well deserve much of the criticism for its tumultuous 15-year tenure in office. But when it comes to India, there is no doubt that the Tories have presided over a positive reorientation of ties between London and Delhi. Shedding some of Britain's colonial baggage, the party has unshackled British policy towards India from the Pakistan and Kashmir factors and framed the engagement in the broader Indo-Pacific framework.

They have also negotiated a roadmap for the transformation of bilateral relations across the board, from green transition to defence and from new technologies to maritime security. The Migration and Mobility Agreement helped the two sides grapple with the challenge of illegal immigration and ease the flow of Indian talent into the UK. Nor all problems have been resolved. Delhi remains concerned about the impunity that anti-India activity in Britain seems to enjoy. There has been enduring resistance in Britain's permanent establishment to a fresh relationship. In Delhi, too, the "anti-colonial" posturing on the left and right prevents the establishment from seizing the full range of possibilities with Britain.

Labour's return to power might reignite some of India's anxieties about bilateral ties due to the disastrous turn in India-UK relations in the late 1980s when Labour presided over a visit by Queen Elizabeth II to India in 1997. Meant to signal post-colonial reconciliation on the 50th anniversary of India's Independence, the visit became a lesson in how not to organise major diplomatic events.

In a stopover in Pakistan during the mission's visit to India, the newly-minted British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, talked about helping mediate on the Kashmir question. Inder Kumar Gujral, the Indian Prime Minister travelling in Egypt at that time, dismissed the offer and called Britain a "third-rate power" following in delusion about its post-imperial weight in the world. The Queen's visit to Jallianwala Bagh to express regret at the 1919

massacre was to be the sombre centrepiece of the visit. But Prince Philip, the Queen's Royal Consort, remarked that the Jallianwala Bagh death count may be exaggerated and triggered a massive uproar in India. Although British PM Tony Blair sought to limit the damage, the squabbling over Pakistan and Kashmir continued to cast a shadow over bilateral relations under Labour's tenure. Cook's articulation of an "ethical foreign policy" that had support in the Labour Party, coupled with the promotion of identity politics and pandering to anti-India groups, put the ties between Delhi and London on shaky ground.

David Cameron, who led the Conservatives to victory in 2010, made an early visit to India and signalled the desire to put the past behind. Delhi was not ready for the transformation and it took another decade for the two sides to lay out an ambitious vision for an India-British partnership.

Could the return of Labour open up old wounds? Unlikely. Starmer has put down the anti-India fires lit in the Labour Party by Jeremy Corbyn. The Labour Manifesto's references to Kashmir in the 2019 elections triggered a storm in Delhi and mobilised the Hindu community to support the Tories. But Starmer has sought to shed the radical ideologies. There is no longer a free run to anti-India groups. Starmer has signalled the intent to build on the foundations laid by the Tories.

At home, Labour is reaching out to the Hindu vote (as are the Tories). Starmer was at the Swaminarayan Temple in Kingsbury with the promise to protect the interests of British Hindus. But the new Labour can't ignore other minorities, including the Pakistani diaspora which stands at 1.2 million (the Indian diaspora is at 1.5m). The UK-based Khalistani groups will continue to lobby the new government to push an anti-India agenda.

For Delhi, there is no escaping the fact that India's domestic politics and the fractures of the Subcontinent will continue to resonate within the large South Asian diaspora. Like in most democracies, retail politics in the UK involves cultivating vote banks. Delhi, too, has a two-fold task. One is to maintain the pressure to curb anti-India activity in the UK. Delhi

must also intensify its engagement with the "deep state" in Britain to lay out sensible protocols to manage the problems arising from the UK's large and growing South Asian diaspora.

The other is to build on the positive potential that limits the salience of the negative factors. Shedding misperceptions about Britain is equally important. Gujarat was wrong when he called Britain a "third-rate power". In the mid-1990s, Britain's GDP was higher than China and India put together. Today India certainly has a slightly bigger economy than Britain (nearly \$4 trillion to \$3.5 trillion). But India, with a per capita income of less than \$3,000 (Britain is at \$50,000), has much to gain from a deeper partnership with London. Delhi should stop underestimating the relative importance of Britain for India. India's exports to Britain today, at nearly \$30 billion, are nearly six times the exports to Russia. Although far behind the US and China, Britain is among the front-ranking middle powers. Its financial clout, technological edge, and global reach make Britain a force multiplier for a rising India. As he nudges Labour towards political moderation, Starmer gives India the opportunity to strengthen ties with Britain.

David Lammy, expected to take over as the next foreign secretary, in a major speech last week laid out an ambitious vision for the relationship with India. Criticising the Tories for over-promising and under-delivering on the India relationship, Lammy says Labour is ready to step on the political accelerator to wrap up the free trade deal and push forward on the technological and defence fronts.

Even more important is the Labour worldview that Lammy is dubbing as "progressive realism". The emphasis is on "realism". If Cook and Corbyn elevated the rhetoric of a "values-based foreign policy" that was out of touch with reality, Starmer and Lammy are saying Britain must deal with the world as it is and not how it wishes it to be.

The writer is visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



TANUJ SOLANKI

TO THOSE GIVEN to dreaming big, sleeping big might be a necessity. The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) seems to have understood this well. At the July 26 to August 11 Paris Olympics, the Indian contingent will be accompanied by Monika Sharma, a physician who is an expert in optimising sleep for performance and recovery in sportspeople.

The connection between sound sleep and improved cellular repair, and therefore recovery and athletic performance, is well-established. Sport at the highest level is all about thin margins, and if 30 to 40 extra minutes of deep sleep can give an athlete a headline advantage. It is worth looking at seriously.

While reading about Sharma's appointment in *The Indian Express*, my attention was drawn to an observation by her: She said, "ignorance about sleep is quite profound." On consideration, this wasn't particularly surprising. The non-cricket-fervent Indian athlete works without much help in their formative years. Most of our Olympians have become what they have after overcoming various scarities. And they have overcome them only by dint of effort and stubbornness. This can be such a constant enterprise, with hard work, only currency and everything else set in a trade-off against it, that rest and recovery struggle to arrive at the centre. This may happen despite an innate understanding of the two as essential to high performance. And till the sportsperson reaches the limit where the

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT

Why people need to sleep — and how there is profit in that

truth of "what got you here won't take you there" presents itself as a challenge.

This isn't much different from how we behave in any area of achievement. Students studying for competitive exams like NEET are coached into extending their study hours at the cost of sleep. College students (the MBAs are the same) gleefully spend all-nighters. Corporate workers festish long hours, it being no secret where the extra hour or two comes from. Even novelists like myself steal hours from the night when a book nears its meatier parts. None of the activities mentioned gain any sleep deprivation, yet we are all doing what we are doing. The stresses and anxieties of contemporary life are, no doubt, to blame. But popular culture, with its injunctions of chasing one's goals, its imperatives of burning the midnight oil while doing so, and its narratives of linking success with sacrifice, has its role to play here. The environment ensures we all see ourselves as frantic pursuers.

Sleep deprivation has no benefits. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention described sleep deprivation as a "public health epidemic" way back in 2014, linking it to hypertension, diabetes, depression, obesity and cancer. There is no reason to suspect that this is only an American phenomenon. What led the world to this point?

Sometimes, the conspiracy theorist in me wonders if sleep has been imperilled globally for business reasons — so that good sleep can

be sold as a premium product. Admittedly, this may not find its feet in evidence, but the fact of sleep becoming a product cannot be denied. There is a well-defined category called "sleep products" in existence; these include melatonin strips, gummies, face masks, eye oils, covers, pills, foot patches, and so on.

Sleep might even be up for some tech-based disruption. Online furniture seller The Sleep Company, for example, talks of SmartGRID mattresses and recliners. Like company raised Rs 184 crore in Series C funding in December 2023, and mentions "changing the way people sleep" as part of its vision. The Sleep Company's competitor, Wakefit, talks of XpertGRID™ mattresses. It talks of "offering highly innovative sleep solutions at affordable prices, thus democratising sleep in India". If one didn't understand company vision statements as vulnerable to dashes of hyperbole, one would imagine a lot of change and democracy in the future of Indian sleep.

Perhaps, in time, we will see more businesses grounded in the simple insight that people are willing to pay more to sleep better. It's a case of economics, really. The lesser the supply of a thing, the pricier it becomes. One place, however, where one wishes the supply of sleep to be adequate is the Indian contingent in Paris. Here's hoping that Sharma's efforts aid our athletes to put in their best.

The writer's last novel is Manjhi's Mayhem



JULY 3, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

J&K GOVT DISMISSED

THE 13-MONTH-OLD FAROOQ Abdullah Ministry was dismissed by the governor Jagmohan Malhotra followed by the installation of a new government headed by G M Shah. Farooq's ministry was dismissed on its being reduced to a minority after 12 party MLAs and an independent announced their withdrawal of support. Fourteen new ministers were also sworn in in the new ministry.

OPPOSITION CONDEMNS

OWING TO the pre-dawn defection and installation of a minority government in Jammu

and Kashmir, the Opposition called for a united condemnation of this "undemocratic act". While L K Advani, the BJP general secretary, opined that the governor should have allowed the Abdullah government to test its majority, CPM leader E M S Namboodiripad felt this was another step by the Congress regime against non-Congress governments.

TAMIL ISSUE AND INDIA

J R JAYEWARDENE, the Sri Lanka President said that he had recapitulated his views to Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, that the political resolution to the Tamil problem was Sri Lanka's "internal matter".

Jayewardene said that he also conveyed his determination to oppose separatism and the resort to violence in pursuit of political objectives to the Indian Prime Minister.

LANDSLIDES KILL 30

ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL reports, 30 people were killed in two major landslides — one in Wayanad in Kerala and the other in Chikmagalur in Karnataka. Among the 16 people who were killed at Rani Hill in Wayanad, 12 were Adivasis. Fourteen plantation workers were killed in the landslides at Madhugudi village, about 80 km from Chikmagalur.

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND



Telecom tariff hikes are good for market rivalry

The latest tariff increases by Reliance Jio gave Airtel and VI space to follow suit. Enlarged revenues for all three private players should spell healthy competition that'll serve users well

The latest round of tariff hikes by telecom companies in India was much needed for a sector that has had some of the lowest data charges in the world. It is notable that these upward revisions were led by Reliance Jio, the telecom services provider which began the price war that sent tariffs on a downward spiral about seven years ago. Jio did not call for other tariffs to rise, but by hiking its own steeply (up by 25% on some subscriber plans), it made market space for its two private-sector rivals to follow. Hikes by Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea (VI) range from 10% to 21%, although their advocacy of an all-round rise has rung out loud and clear since November 2021, when they last raised charges. The fact that these two had to wait for Jio's move is a sign of the leadership Jio acquired through its price aggression. And Reliance's deep pockets played a role in that.

Offering telecom services is a highly capital-intensive operation in India, with money guzzled not just by equipment and other set-up infrastructure, but also expensive airwave spectrum. Upgrading networks to keep pace with evolving technology is costly too. To roll out 5G services, for example, telecom firms spent about ₹1.5 trillion on spectrum, equipment and user outreach. Yet, most telecom consumers are very price-sensitive—and charges have long been accordingly low. The average revenue per user for operators in this market is still under ₹200, a level that makes profitability quite a challenge even on huge volumes. As of April 2024, Jio's active user base was reported at 433 million, Airtel's at 363 million and VI's 193 million. But their returns-on-investment remain weighed down by weak pricing power. For them to keep investing and improving services,

tariffs need to stiffen as we go along. According to brokerages, the latest hikes will boost their topline by about 15%. While Jio and Airtel have been making quarterly profits, VI was in the most acute need of a revenue bump-up, given its heavy debt burden and trail of losses. VI's financial woes are partly on account of a judicial setback that saddled it with massive dues to the government, a blow that was so hard, it had put its survival in doubt. With various measures adopted in recent years against such an outcome, including a dues-for-equity deal that left the government as VI's single largest shareholder, that worry is now thankfully in the past. After the latest tariff hikes, brokerages have turned positive again on its prospects.

Telecom service users may feel a slight pinch when they look at their bills, but even they have good reason for relief. All three private players in better financial shape would insure this vital market against the risk of duopoly dominance. The government's stake in VI, the result of a broader relief package for telecom in 2021, means that the Centre's interests as a direct investor are aligned with the whole market's: It takes at least three well-resourced rivals for a market to benefit from rivalry and serve as a win-win arena for customers and companies alike. So, while low-income users may fret about bill inflation, the sector's overall customer base must recognize it as a price worth paying for the quality and innovation that healthy competition assures. These tariff hikes came back-to-back, sure, but since Airtel and VI openly acted in relieved response to Jio's move, they betray no sign of cartel-esque collusion. Notably, the hiked rates are not extractive. After all, they remain a fraction of what telecom users pay in most other countries.

So long as the music is playing, investors must get up and dance

What Citigroup's Chuck Prince said is worth recalling as our stock market boom continues apace



VIVEK KAUL
is the author of 'Bad Money'.

investors are busy "rolling in the lucre". So, is this an escalation of commitment on KIE's part in order to defend what it said in September? Or is it just unhappy about how stock prices have continued to rise fast after its bearish call that month? Or is the stock market really "irrationally exuberant"?

Any stock brokerage that makes a bold call against the prevailing trend needs to keep defending what it has said. Now, given that the BSE 500 index, a very broad representation of the overall stock market, has risen by more than 27% from 11 September, when KIE made its call, till last Friday, its recent writings might seem like an escalation of commitment.

Nonetheless, the stock market is clearly overvalued. The prices of many stocks are significantly higher than what their current earnings and prospects of future earnings justify. As this writer has mentioned in the past, in 2024-25, the price-to-book ratio (a valuation measure) of BSE 500 stocks has so far been the highest since 2007-08. Further, a recent news report in *Mint* quoting data from Prime Database points out that in the first six months of 2024, promoters or owners of businesses have sold stocks worth ₹62,000 crore. This is the highest in the last six years, for which the report shared data, and only half the year has gone by.

Promoters are the ultimate insiders. The kind of information access they have about their own companies, no one else does. And when so many of them sell at the same time, what it basically tells us is that they feel their share prices are overvalued, and that they don't expect the future earnings of their companies to rise at a pace that justifies the rise in share prices, and so there is money to be taken off the table, and this is why they are selling. They may have reckoned they could buy back their holdings later, at a lower price.

In fact, this is a point that economic historian Charles Kindleberger made in his all-time classic *Manias, Panics and*

Crashes: A History of Financial Crises, which was first published in 1978: "As the boom continues... the purchases of securities... by 'outsiders' [read retail investors] mean that the 'insiders' [read promoters]—those who own these assets—sell them and realize profits; if the outsiders are buyers, then the sellers must be insiders."

If we look at a specific example, a loss-making and over-leveraged company, Vodafone Idea, recently decided to raise ₹2,458 crore via a preferential issue of shares to its vendors in order to clear a portion of what the company owes them. Analysts feel that the company could use this modus operandi in the future as well.

It is able to do this simply because its stock prices have rallied by 140% in the last one year—despite a lack of earnings. This is again a great example of insiders using outsiders to take some money off the table.

So, where does that leave KIE or everyone else who believes that the stock market is overvalued? It's worth remembering a line often attributed to economist John Maynard Keynes, but actually said by another economist Gary Shilling: "Markets can remain irrational a lot longer than you and I can remain solvent."

Indeed, it's also worth remembering something that Chuck Prince, the then chief executive of Citigroup, told the *Financial Times* in July 2007: "When the music stops, in terms of liquidity, things will be complicated. But as long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance. We're still dancing. Which is why when it comes to institutional investors—be it stock brokerages, mutual funds, private equity firms or insurance companies—those who run them are always bullish. In public, they always believe that markets can only go up. They just can't stop dancing."

KIE has stopped dancing. This brokerage might eventually turn out to be right. But right now, it is looking wrong. Indeed, terribly wrong.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

An important key to investing is to remember that stocks are not lottery tickets.

PETER LYNCH

MY VIEW | ECO SQUARE

Needed: A societal awakening to take on climate change

LEENA SRIVASTAVA



is an independent expert on climate change and clean energy.

A Supreme Court ruling connected with the survival of the endangered Great Indian Bustard species on 6 April 2024 stated: "... the people have a right against the adverse effects of climate change ... this right and the right to a clean environment are two sides of the same coin... The inability of underserved communities to adapt to climate change or cope with its effects violates the right to life as well as the right to equality... If climate change and environmental degradation lead to acute food and water shortages in a particular area, poorer communities will suffer more than richer ones." This game-changing jurisprudence, recognizing protection against the adverse impacts of climate change as worthy of being considered a fundamental human right, came days after a similar ruling by Europe's top human rights court that the Swiss government had violated the human rights of its citizens by failing to do enough to combat climate change. In various countries where governments are struggling to

meet their climate commitments and raise their ambitions, leading to perceptions that their climate responses lack urgency, legal systems are empowering citizens to hold administrations to account.

It has been 30 years since The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came into force (in March 1994). 30 years since India as a member of its governing body has been participating in—and often also leading—international negotiations on various defining principles (such as common but differentiated responsibilities) and mechanisms (for financing action and technology transfers in particular) that continue to evolve as the science of this complex global phenomenon unravels, and 30 years since we had the opportunity to prepare ourselves for climate change and its impacts.

In this time, the window for climate mitigation actions kept getting smaller as greenhouse gases continue being emitted with impunity. Recognizing this, UNFCCC negotiations got more complex with the inclusion of adaptation actions, and ultimately, in view of exponentially increasing risks from climate change, also of the loss and damage caused by climate-change impacts. India and the rest of the world are witness-

ing extreme weather events with higher frequency and intensity than ever before. We find ourselves woefully under-prepared to be able to anticipate such events, leave alone manage their impact somewhat effectively.

To make matters worse, the clustering of such extreme events is increasing the misery of people in general, and vulnerable populations in particular, manifold. The massive heat wave that India experienced this year exposed over 600 million people to health dangers, leading to many lives being lost and the establishment of the country's first heat clinics. As we looked for rain relief, different parts of the country were blessed with abundant rainfall, but the largely poor quality of our power infrastructure had a role in making the heat misery worse for just about everyone, and disproportionately so for the poor.

Extreme heat, rain variability, cyclones in coastal areas and melting glaciers are all going to be part of the course now. However, it is important to remember that when the

Supreme Court of India speaks of the right to be protected against the adverse impacts of climate change, it cannot be interpreted as merely addressing the loss and damage from climate events. Governments in India, through their policies and regulations, as well as all other institutional actors have to

People should exercise the power given by the Supreme Court to hold authorities accountable

take responsibility for their mitigation, adaptation and resilience building (in)actions, and be held accountable. Beyond the enabling environments provided by governments, all decisions and actions by informed and resourceful actors—from regulators, financial institutions and corporations to local municipalities—should also be challengeable.

The Supreme Court took an enlightened approach in recognizing the indivisible nature of what we know as sustainable development goals (SDGs). It also highlighted how climate change is connected with various human rights, including the right to health, indigenous rights, gender equality and the right to development. As such, the entire machinery

of the country dealing with the above and related issues becomes potentially culpable for enhancing the vulnerability of people to climate impacts.

While India is on track to become one of the world's four largest economies, it ranks a poor 134th out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index (of the UNDP) and scores an even worse rank of 176 out of 180 countries on the Environmental Performance Index (of Yale University).

We are clearly in a wobbly situation with respect to sustainable development. Note that even on economic performance, we have a very uneven picture emerging, with the top 10% and top 1% in India accounting for 57% and 22% of our total national income, respectively, according to *World Inequality Report, 2022*, while the bottom half's share has gone down to 13%.

Urgent action and course corrections are needed to better prepare India for the oncoming onslaught of extreme weather events. For the empowerment provided by the Supreme Court's 6 April ruling to result in meaningful outcomes, the country will require a much more informed and engaged society and the genuine implementation of people's participation in economic decision-making.



MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

MINT CURATOR

A digital public platform could boost labour market efficiency

India's employment challenges call for the setting up of a smooth online mechanism for labour demand and supply to meet



NIRANJAN RAJADHYAKSHA
is executive director at Artha India Research Advisors.

The Indian labour market can often seem bewildering. One recent example is the chairman of a leading engineering company saying earlier last month that his firm is facing a shortage of workers and engineers in several of its business divisions. The total gap estimated by S.N. Subrahmanyam of Larsen & Toubro is 45,000. His statement comes against the backdrop of a growing national debate about the lack of quality jobs for a young population. Surveys conducted before the recent national elections showed that inadequate employment opportunities were one of the major concerns as voters prepared to elect a new Parliament.

It is not uncommon to hear employers say that they are unable to find labour for their projects. Neither is it uncommon to hear stories of young people desperately seeking jobs. One answer to this paradox is well known—the skills gap. Too many youngsters coming out of colleges and universities across the country do not have the skills that companies seek. A lot of attention has been focused on this problem, even though not much has changed on the ground as yet.

However, the curious coexistence of labour shortages in a labour surplus economy is not just a matter of skills. This is especially true in the case of an unorganized labour market such as ours. Economists have in recent decades studied situations in which buyers and sellers do not automatically find each other because of a variety of “search frictions.” Search is imperfect. It involves costs. There are risks involved as well.

The standard model that we learn in any basic economics course tells us that buyers and sellers seamlessly meet in a market. Transactions are finalized at an equilibrium price. This works very well in most situations, especially when undifferentiated products are involved. The situation is more tricky when the same product comes in many different variants. Labour markets are a classic case of a setting in which searching for the right supplier or buyer is costly. So are housing markets.

Three economists—Peter A. Diamond, Dale T. Mortensen and Christopher A. Pissarides—were awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 2010 “for their analysis of markets with search frictions.” In its press release announcing the award, the Nobel Foundation said something that should resonate in contemporary India as well: “On many markets, buyers and sellers do not always make contact with one another immediately. This concerns, for example, employers who are looking for employees and workers who are trying to find jobs. Since the search process requires time and resources, it creates friction in the market. On such search markets, the demands of some buyers will not be met, while some sellers cannot sell as much as they would



wish. Simultaneously, there are both job vacancies and unemployment on the labour market.”

There are several ways in which search costs are brought down. One interesting response in India, especially when informal jobs are being sought, is the use of social networks. For example, one person moves to the city in search of a job, gradually builds credibility with his employer, and then brings in others from his village or caste group to work with him. In effect, the cost of searching for a new employee to work in a restaurant or at a construction site is reduced.

However, the rapid spread of digital public infrastructure (DPI) in India offers a different opportunity. A whole range of such platforms has reduced transaction costs for citizens in several areas. The United Payments Interface, for example, has been a huge success. There have also been other examples such as the Open Network for Digital Commerce, which is trying to connect small businesses in the country with consumers.

The hope is that even a small neighbourhood business can sell to consumers in different parts of India. There is a strong case for building a similar digital platform that will connect employers with potential workers—a DPI provision for the Indian labour market. I had earlier written about a vari-

ant of this idea in May 2020, when the big question was how India should get its economy back on track after the first lockdown of the pandemic ([bit.ly/4Gp0dL](#)).

Contemporary labour economists such as David Autor at Harvard University have shown that low-wage workers often take the first job that comes their way, either because of a lack of information or an inability to take risks, which implicitly means a loss of bargaining power. The question then is whether a public digital platform that helps match workers with employers—and perhaps to key welfare schemes as well—will boost wages and productivity. Autor recently wrote a paper with Arindrajit Dube and Annie McGrew on how the pandemic first led to job losses, followed by a churn as workers found better-paying jobs during the recovery. They argue that relief cheques given to families by the US government also helped. The result is that the wage gap in the US has narrowed in the past three years.

India has a massive task of job creation in the coming years. It also has a more immediate problem of weakening consumer spending because of weak wage growth. A DPI set-up that makes the Indian labour market more efficient would help in these circumstances.

Newsom looks well positioned to replace US candidate Biden

Democrats could ask California's governor to run for president



ERIKA D. SMITH
is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.



Gavin Newsom has hinted of presidential ambitions

When cameras captured California Governor Gavin Newsom walking into CNN's spin room last Thursday, flashing his Hollywood smile before the presidential debate in Atlanta, a few political observers in his home state rushed to social media with some version of the same annoyed question: “Why is he there?” He was there to cheer on President Joe Biden before his debate with former President Donald Trump. “Biden is confident,” Newsom told reporters. “He’s got a record and he’s got a vision for the future.”

A couple of painful hours later, after a debate in which Biden, his voice raspy and halting, looked every bit of his 81 years, that vision for the future seemed cloudy. Biden's frail appearance led to immediate and widespread speculation that he would be pushed to decline the Democratic nomination. And that kind of talk, in turn, leads quickly to Newsom.

Of the many prominent Democrats with aspirations for higher office, Newsom is arguably best equipped—in fund-raising, messaging and campaign infrastructure, to step up in an emergency. And this is, by all indications, one for the party. The 90 minutes that Biden spent on stage with Trump, live before millions of viewers, served to reinforce what polls have indicated since Biden decided to run for re-election: Most voters believe he is too old to be president.

The panic among Democratic Party insiders could ease in coming days if post-debate polling doesn't turn out to be as dire as many suspect. But if the party is looking for a replacement, Newsom is an obvious choice. Fellow Californian Vice President Kamala Harris could do the job, of course. But polling typically shows Harris with high unfavourable numbers and, if Biden's candidacy goes south, her ties to the president may be more trouble than help.

Meanwhile, Newsom, governor of the most populous US state, has long appeared to be running a sort of shadow campaign as Biden's backup. He has emerged as one of the president's most effective and telegenic surrogates, a frequent presence on cable news and aggressive on social media.

Newsom hasn't shied away from the culture wars, winning fans in some Democratic circles. For example, in a splashy debate last fall on Fox News against his favourite Republican opponent, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Newsom called out DeSantis for his policies banning books, whitewashing African-American history and targeting transgender student athletes. “You attack vulnerable communities,” Newsom told DeSantis. “You're not

ing but a bully. I understand that intimidating and humiliating people, that's your calling card.”

Now in his second and last term as governor, Newsom also has campaign cash and access to more. He has used his fund-raising prowess to support Democratic candidates running in “red” Republican states and to push solidly liberal causes, such as abortion rights.

Newsom also has been raising his profile overseas, much to the aggravation of many who want his attention in California. Last month, he was at the Vatican to talk with Pope Francis about climate change. Last year, he met Chinese leader Xi Jinping and also visited Israel. Closer home, he has been back and forth to the White House. He's doing that thing that all presidential hopefuls do: He is working on a memoir.

Newsom has dismissed speculation that he is running for president. At the debate, he didn't change his tune.

Covered by a scrum of reporters, he was asked if he was “ready to replace Joe Biden.” Newsom called the idea “a non sequitur.” Asked whether he would urge Biden to reconsider running, “Absolutely not,” Newsom told them. “I have his back 100 percent.”

It's a measure of the press frenzy caused by a debate that, a year and 10 months after that, Newsom was asked yet again, this time on MSNBC, whether the debate had shaken the presidential race. Newsom shook his head angrily. “We've got to go in and get to keep our heads high,” he said. “We've got to have the back of this President. You don't turn your back because of one performance. And what kind of party does that?” A better question—and one that Newsom should consider—is what kind of party nominates a candidate who most Americans are convinced is too old to handle the presidency—and a candidate who could very well lose to a would-be autocrat who traffics in lies?

The stakes are too high.

Newsom on Thursday told reporters that it's unhelpful to our democracy to “go down these rabbit holes” about replacing Biden. But then he added: “This country, the world, they need us right now to step up and that's exactly what I intend to do.” Many Democrats would no doubt be relieved if he did. **EBLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Written submissions to courts could accelerate justice

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and the author of “The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance.” His X (formerly Twitter) handle is @matthan.

In their book, *The Court on Trial*, Aparna Chandra, Sital Kalantry and William Hubbard have taken a data-driven approach to assessing the performance of the Indian Supreme Court. Using data-sets created from over a million Supreme Court cases, they try to find answers to whether our apex court is in fact a “people's court”; whether certain individuals (senior counsels with high name recognition) have inordinate influence on outcomes; whether the Chief Justice (as Master of the Roster) has outsized influence through the ability to strategically assign cases to benches of his or her choice; and whether the promise of post-retirement postings could influence judicial decisions towards the end of a judge's term.

There are some elements of the book that I do not fully agree with, such as the methodology adopted to assess whether in fact the Supreme Court is a “people's court.” To do this, the authors looked at case-admission data and argued that it is in fact a “people's court” because the evidence suggests that the

Court admits more cases that are unlikely to win than not. This, to me, is a roundabout way of arriving at this conclusion. Surely, it would have been more straightforward to simply count the number of cases filed by laypersons or those without any privilege, and calculate what proportion of them were admitted. Rather than that evaluating access as a function of whether a case is weak or strong, we should examine whether those of a particular class or status have as much of a chance as anyone else to get justice from the Indian judiciary.

That said, there were a number of other insights that were useful. For instance, their data on the backlog of cases in the Supreme Court were quite revealing: close to 40% of all cases in the Supreme Court have been pending for more than five years, with an additional 7.7% pending for more than 10. While we all have anecdotal information about the delays in the Indian legal system, it may come as a shock to many that even the highest court in the land takes, in some cases, as long as the high court does, or the average trial length, to dispose of a matter.

Having identified the scale of the backlog problem, the authors also suggest solutions. They start by questioning the undue emphasis we place on oral advocacy, suggesting

that this is a significant cause for delay. This is something I have also pointed out in previous articles in this column, suggesting that we eschew oral arguments for written submissions, particularly in commercial disputes where the decision is often just a finding of fact. In support of their argument, they

point to the review jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, under which, except in extreme circumstances, cases are decided on written submissions alone. If this can work for review petitions, surely it can be extended to other cases as well.

They then point to the fact that there are no constraints on the amount of time lawyers get to argue their cases. As a direct consequence of this, cases stretch on indefinitely, not only making it impossible to assess how long a given case will take to conclude, but also creating a wholly unprofessional situation in courts where every other lawyer has to hang around waiting for lawyers in cases listed before theirs to stop speaking before they

can stand up and argue their matters.

These are inefficiencies that we have all gotten so accustomed to that we believe it is an inescapable feature of the judicial system. My proposal of moving to a system where decisions are made solely on the basis of written arguments has been met by many of the system with the sort of horror reserved for a particularly sacrilegious offence. There seems a deep-seated belief that unless lawyers have made oral arguments—that too with no limits on the amount of time for which they can speak—justice will not be done.

Last month, I had an opportunity to spend a weekend with an appellate judge in the Ninth Judicial Circuit of the US. During that time we discussed various aspects of the Indian judicial system and how it differs from the way things are done in the US. I was surprised to learn that in many instances, judges in the US are happy to decide cases primarily on the basis of written submissions. Oral arguments, where they take place, have

to be concluded within a strict time limit—typically no more than 10 minutes per side for minor matters, with the most important (death penalty) cases being allowed oral arguments of up to 30 minutes a side. When I asked her how she feels she has all the information she needs to decide on a case after just 20 minutes of oral arguments, she said that in almost every instance her decision is largely based on the written submissions she has read in advance. When lawyers make oral arguments, she uses that time to get clarifications from them on issues that may not have been fully covered in the written submissions.

Accustomed, as I am, to the way things are done here, 30 minutes feels hopelessly short. But if this can work in the US, I see no reason why we cannot, in the interest of improving efficiency, at least try to impose some sort of time limits on oral arguments in Indian courts. Even if we start with generous time limits, the resulting certainty will significantly improve the efficiency of the courts. What's more, it will reduce the premium currently placed on oral advocacy—something that primarily benefits highly recognizable senior counsels to the detriment of young up-and-coming lawyers.

It would let us impose time limits on oral arguments and speed up trials to ease India's case backlog

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Brace for a deluge

As India transitions from the scorching summer heat to the monsoon season, a dramatic shift in weather is on the horizon

As the rumbling in clouds becomes louder and the humidity rises, it is time for monsoon. It is welcome as it brings much relief from the scorching heat and a lot of discomfort that comes with it but as the monsoon progresses it also becomes a challenge, exposing our inadequacies and unpreparedness to meet this annual phenomenon. The monsoon season, while a welcome relief from the summer heat, brings with it significant challenges. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued a red alert for heavy rainfall in seven states: Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kerala, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Goa, and Madhya Pradesh. Residents of these areas are advised to brace for severe weather conditions, including the potential for flash floods, particularly in Uttarakhand, Goa, and Karnataka. This year's monsoon is expected to be more severe than usual. The IMD has warned of extremely heavy rainfall over the next few days, which could lead to significant disruptions and pose serious risks to life and property. It is just a matter of days before Delhi will wear a Venice look as water logging is a norm that repeats every year. The people living on the banks of Yamuna would be rendered homeless as if it were their destiny. And after the waters recede it would be life as usual for the people and the Government alike. But a lot of misery is in store for Uttarakhand where flash floods are predicted. Uttarakhand faces an elevated risk of flash floods. The steep slopes and narrow valleys can quickly channel rainwater, leading to sudden and severe flooding. Goa is also vulnerable to heavy rains and flash floods during the monsoon. The state's infrastructure can become quickly overwhelmed, leading to waterlogging and disruption of services. Karnataka is expected to experience torrential downpours. The Western Ghats, which run along the western edge of the state, can intensify the rainfall, increasing the risk of floods and landslides.

It is not just the monsoon, but its aftermath is equally challenging. The waterborne diseases and spectre of epidemics loom large while authorities watch it happening as mute spectators. Indeed it is high time authorities in the affected states take proactive measures to mitigate the impact of the heavy rains and prepare for the possible evacuation of vulnerable populations to safer areas. Issuing regular updates and warnings to keep the public informed and safe. Ensuring that critical infrastructure, such as dams and drainage systems, are prepared to handle the increased water levels. Many bridges in Bihar have collapsed even before the monsoon, airport Terminal T1 in Delhi collapsed and several highways have caved in, if these are not warning signals then what is? Blaming the monsoon is certainly lame. It is not sudden or unexpected. It happens every year yet we are ill-prepared for it. Besides, we so much depend upon it for irrigating our fields and providing drinking water. One can find so many pains when the rain is falling but then Without the rain, there would be no rainbow!

Pictalk: Villagers use a boat to travel across a flood affected area after heavy rainfall, in Morigan district

Pictalk: Villagers use a boat to travel across a flood affected area after heavy rainfall, in Morigan district

PICTALK



Villagers use a boat to travel across a flood affected area after heavy rainfall, in Morigan district

Reclaiming Dehradun: Battling tourism woes

Once an idyllic retreat and educational hub, Dehradun is now grappling with unchecked tourism, threatening its serene character



SIDHARTH MISHRA

In the pantheon of the leaders belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the name of the late Manohar Parrikar would always be taken with a lot of respect. A Goan and an ITian, Parrikar was never happy with the stereotypical image of his state being a tourist destination for cheap alcohol, drugs and also sex. While Goa attracted tourists for its natural beauty and cultural magnetism, since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in visitors drawn to the state for its permissive environment regarding alcohol, drugs, and sex tourism. Manohar Parrikar was vocal about his reservations concerning this shift in the tourist profile. He believed that such trends would tarnish Goa's image and disrupt the social fabric of the state once and for all. A leaf could be taken out from the books of Parrikar by the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, Pushkar Singh Dhami regarding a similar crisis being faced by the Himalayan state.

Take a drive from Clock Tower in Dehradun on the legendary Rajpur Road to Mussoorie, you will realise that all the cars parked on the roadside are doubling up as bars. This 'car-o-bar' would often be a vehicle with a Haryana, UP and Punjab number plate. The two days that one was in the Doon Valley, one would realise that these cars parked on the roadside in the costly model cars, one could not find a single soul in the police uniform to check them. Somewhere it seemed that the absence of the cops on this road was deliberate to let these bars prosper. Dehradun was once known as the bakery capital of India. The bakery shops lining Rajpur Road have been overtaken by wine shops with glitzy lights announcing prominently what they sell. Well, one cannot protest about the shops but buying bottles and drinking outside on the roads have to be surely protested. Author Ratna Manucha, whose family has stayed in the valley for ages, calls these 'car-o-bars' the 'Aliens from the other states'. "Each year the crowds coming into my



town swell. These aliens from outer states come in obscenely big cars, they drive nasty, trying to edge us locals in our sensible little cars off the road, showing the finger on occasions and mouthing expletives, throwing rubbish out of their windows, drinking on unlit highways, and then crashing their cars into unsuspecting locals," says Manucha. Things get worse during the weekends as the Rajpur road gets clogged. The 'tourists' really don't mind spending hours in the serpentine queues.

However, the residents of Dehradun, moving either on the aerial road or the smaller roads prefer staying at home lest their plan to visit somebody gets wasted in the jam. Dehradun till about 10 years back was not like this. It was still an idyllic town preferred by people to live a retired life. In broadening the roads to accommodate ever-increasing traffic flow, trees have been cut. Given the winter pollution in Delhi-NCR, a large number of people have bought apartments in Doon Valley to spend the winter months. This demand has given rise to the building of multi-storied apartments. In turn, these apartments have been built clearing the lychee orchards, which once kept the valley

green. Dehradun till some years back did not need the use of air-conditioners. The hotels with the ACs largely used them during the winter months for room heating purposes. But you can now see the topography of the valley with houses having air-conditioners jutting out of their windows. This 'horoscope' is not just limited to the summer tourist season. Dehradun in the past two decades has evolved into a major centre for higher education. The large number of the colleges, both professional and general, has resulted in the rise of the ridges and the plains. They are not exactly home to centres for great knowledge earning but certainly give a graduate degree for a handsome fee. Given the high fee structure, there is always a dearth of students and vacant seats. The marketing teams of these institutions scout far and wide specially looking for a young wanting some fun with the degree as a bonus. These 'students' prefer staying in the apartments outside the campus, as it can accommodate their costly cars, as there are no restrictions on their timing to return home and none really bothered if their vehicle fell into a gorge as they drove in a drunken state. Uttarakhand

too has liberal liquor laws like Goa. Excise duty earned from liquor sales is the mainstay of the state revenue. But should-n't Dhami be concerned about the image of Uttarakhand like Parrikar was for Goa? The late leader streamlined things in Goa without really tinkering with the existing laws. Parrikar emphasized the need for a robust law enforcement framework to tackle alcohol and drug tourism. He increased police patrolling in tourist hotspots and enhanced coordination with central agencies. Second Parrikar pushed for regulations to control the sale and consumption of liquor in tourist areas. This included measures such as restricting liquor outlets and promoting responsible drinking through awareness campaigns. Dhami's government in Uttarakhand too needs to make the presence of the cops more effective and control the misery that the residents of the city are being made to face. It's also a bonus. These 'students' regularly visit Doon to spend some time in peace who are now ending up being shooed by the blaring horns of speeding vehicles.

(The writer is the author and president of the Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice; views are personal)

DEHRADUN TILL ABOUT 10 YEARS BACK WAS NOT LIKE THIS. IT WAS STILL AN IDYLIC TOWN PREFERRED BY PEOPLE TO LIVE A RETIRED LIFE. IN BROADENING THE ROADS TO ACCOMMODATE EVER-INCREASING TRAFFIC FLOW, TREES HAVE BEEN CUT

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA'S PHOENIX MOMENT:

Madam — India's Phoenix Moment: A T20 World Cup Triumph! India's cricket team exhibited remarkable determination and resilience, clinching the T20 World Cup 2024 title with a breathtaking comeback in the final five overs.

Rising like a phoenix from the ashes, India soared to victory, proving their mettle on the grandest stage. In the thrilling conclusion, Hardik Pandya's final over was nothing short of brilliant, and a spectacular catch by Suryakumar Yadav (SKY)—who went beyond the boundary and almost fell perfectly to secure the catch on his second attempt—played a crucial role in sealing India's victory. Earlier in the match, King Virat Kohli's solid 76 runs and Akshar Patel's crucial 47 provided stability to the Indian innings, setting a record-high T20 Cup final of 176. Despite this, the South African team, the Proteas, responded with a strong performance, reaching a respectable score and losing just four wickets. However, with only 30 runs needed from the last 30 balls and six wickets in hand, the Proteas faltered under immense pressure. Boundaries that were expected to seal the win for them turned into catches or mere singles, proving that "luck did not favor them" in those decisive final overs. Yes, indeed, a blend of luck and daring spirit won the game for India. Team India deserves all the praise for its fantastic performance.

PVM Nivriti | Secunderabad

SELECTIVE OUTRAGE

Madam — Apropos the report titled 'Flogging of couple: BJP seeks resignation of Did' (July 2); if the TMC leader Tajmool Islam has indeed beaten up a youth and a woman with sticks, he must be awarded exemplary punishment according to law. But by which tenacity can the leaders of BJP dare to act as 'moral guardians' of the country and atrociously demand the resignation of Mamata Banerjee? When Dalit youths

Unjustified opposition to new criminal laws



The recent introduction of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita (BSS), and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) has sparked mixed reactions from experts. Some members of the legal community suggest continuing with the old laws for another 20 years, a recommendation that is both impractical and counterproductive. It's unreasonable to speculate on future circumstances even one or two years ahead, let alone 20 years. This suggestion essentially advocates for delay-

ing the implementation of the new laws indefinitely. As is often the case, opposition parties have untidily opposed these new laws, not on their merits or demerits, but because they were discussed during the previous Lok Sabha in their absence. This argument holds no water. Their absence during the discussions and debates in the previous session was not justified, and they missed an opportunity to contribute meaningfully. No one prevented them from participating; they chose not to, and that cannot be a valid reason to stall the implementation of these new laws.

The custodians of the law, who are highly educated and capable individuals, can certainly understand and implement these new legal frameworks. Union Home Minister Amit Shah aptly stated that these laws are created by Indians, for Indians, and by the Indian Parliament, marking the end of colonial criminal justice laws.

KV Setharamiah | Bengaluru

were publicly flogged in Una Gujarat in 2016, the BJP leaders asked Anandiben Patel to resign! When spine-chilling gangrape/murder/forced cremation took place in Hathras Unnao Badaun; did the BJP leaders demand the resignation of Yogi Adityanath? When Kuki women got paraded naked in Manipur before gang rape, why didn't the BJP leaders demand the resignation of N Biren Singh immediately? Why didn't the resignation of Pushkar Singh Dhami get demanded after a lady receptionist was murdered in Uttarakhand? When Bengali migrant labourer Afruzzul Khan was burnt alive to death in Rajasamund in 2017, did the BJP leaders ask Vasundhara Rajé to resign?

Hardly two weeks ago, street vendor Aurangzeb had been brutally lynched to death in full view of the Aligarh public! Did the "conscientious" leaders of the BJP act honestly enough to demand the resignation of Yogi Adityanath? Indeed, two wrongs do not make a right, but the greater truth remains that the

leaders of the hypocrite BJP simply hold no moral right to deliver unsolicited sermons about human rights.

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

MONSOON IS A CHALLENGE

Madam — In the past few days, the number of rain-related deaths in the nation's capital has reached 11, with six deaths reported on Saturday alone. The heavy rainfall on Friday caused widespread waterlogging in Delhi. In response, the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) has expanded its staff to address waterlogging issues. To effectively tackle urban waterlogging, a holistic approach is needed, incorporating infrastructure improvements, sustainable urban design, and active community engagement. By implementing these strategies, cities can mitigate the impacts of heavy rains and enhance their resilience for the future.

Neha Tomar | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The need for music and life skills in modern education

To ensure holistic development and equal opportunities for all children, music must become an integral part of the school curriculum



RAVI SONAD

Driven on one side by development and technology and on the other by changes to the global social order, we face tectonic shifts in the future of the workforce and challenges such as climate change and conflict. With this as a backdrop in mind, there is an urgent need to ensure that we can equip today's youth with the skills and mindsets to thrive in this dynamic environment. Education for the last 200 years has largely been based on imparting knowledge.

With increasing levels of specialization through the Industrial Revolution, knowledge became more valuable; however, today, soft skills, also known as Life Skills, have become much more needed. Without these skills, it is difficult to survive and succeed. More importantly, character building becomes imperative if we are to be prepared to tackle the global challenges facing us. We must define leadership not by position but as 'Strength of Character' and 'Sense of Community.' There is plenty



ty of research and evidence showing that skills such as collaboration and communication, critical and creative thinking, and character traits such as self-confidence, grit, and resilience, as well as having a growth mindset, can be effectively developed through experiential learning that uses mediums such as team sports, the arts, and free play. Music is one of the most powerful art forms that supports the development of these skills in multiple, effective ways. Learning music requires practice and self-discipline to improve. It requires the student to set goals, like mastering a piece of music or preparing for a performance, and then implement a plan to achieve these goals. Performing in a group teaches students the importance of working together, listening to each other, and supporting one another. Students who learn different types and forms of music develop empathy and a deeper understanding of different perspectives. Most music programs encourage composition and improvisation, allowing students to develop their creative thinking skills. Performing

in front of an audience helps build self-confidence while learning from mistakes during a performance helps build resilience and a growth mindset. Today, a well-rounded music curriculum is available in high-end private schools, but all children must get the same opportunity. We need to ensure that music education becomes a core part of the school curriculum and is not treated as an extracurricular activity. Only then can we ensure equal access, regardless of background or skill level. If we can make teaching music in schools the norm, it will ensure the holistic development of all children. Building character and life skills will mean that we will not only support children in their journey towards personal and professional success, but we will also help develop a generation of leaders capable of taking care of themselves and the world around them.

(The writer is CEO and founder, Enabling Leadership; views are personal)

The Statesman

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Taliban Diplomacy

The recent UN-led meeting in Doha marked a significant moment for international diplomacy as the Taliban participated for the first time. This event has sparked varied reactions globally, highlighting the complexities and challenges surrounding Afghanistan's current political and economic landscape. The Taliban's participation underscores a critical shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Despite global criticism, particularly from women's rights activists, the inclusion of the Taliban in such a forum signals a pragmatic approach by the international community. Engaging with the Taliban, rather than isolating them, may be seen as a necessary step towards addressing the multifaceted crises in Afghanistan. India's involvement in the meeting, marked by the attendance of senior diplomat J.P. Singh, indicates a nuanced strategy. India's engagement with the Taliban, including discussions on bilateral relations and expressions of mutual gratitude, reflect recognition of the geopolitical realities. For India, maintaining a diplomatic channel with the Taliban is crucial for regional stability and for safeguarding its strategic interests, particularly in light of its historical ties with Afghanistan. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Doha further underscores India's commitment to playing an active role in regional diplomacy. By engaging with Qatar, a key player in West Asian politics, India aims to bolster its influence and ensure that its perspectives are considered in any regional developments involving Afghanistan. The Taliban's focus on "economic orientation" in their foreign policy highlights a shift from purely ideological pursuits to pragmatic considerations. The regime's call for the removal of sanctions and the emphasis on infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan railway and the TAPI Pipeline reveal a desire to integrate Afghanistan into regional economic frameworks. These projects, if realised, could significantly enhance connectivity and economic cooperation between Central and South Asia. However, the success of these initiatives is contingent on a stable and secure environment, which remains a significant challenge given the on-going security issues in the region. The Taliban's efforts to position themselves as a viable economic partner are complicated by their controversial governance practices and the international community's apprehensions about their commitment to human rights and inclusive governance. The Taliban's engagement with other regional powers, including Uzbekistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, indicates a broader strategy to secure economic and political support. Saudi Arabia's intention to reopen its embassy in Kabul and Kazakhstan's removal of the Taliban from its list of prohibited groups suggest a gradual normalisation of relations. China's recognition of a Taliban-appointed ambassador earlier this year further underscores this trend. Nevertheless, the international community remains divided on how to approach the Taliban. While some countries advocate conditional engagement to incentivise reforms, others remain staunchly opposed to legitimising a regime with a contentious human rights record. The path forward for Afghanistan is fraught with challenges, but constructive dialogue and pragmatic diplomacy may offer the best hope for a stable and prosperous future.

Catalan Ruling

The decision by Spain's Supreme Court to uphold arrest warrants for former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont and his associates marks a significant moment in the saga of conflict between Madrid and Catalan separatists. The court's ruling, which asserts that the amnesty law passed in May 2019 does not apply to these individuals, could have far-reaching political implications, both for Spain's fragile coalition government and the broader issue of Catalan independence. The court's decision hinges on two key exceptions within the amnesty law: embezzlement for personal gain and actions affecting the European Union's financial interests. The court contends that Mr Puigdemont and his party deputies Antonio Comin and Lluís Puig fit these criteria based on allegations used regional treasury funds to finance the 2017 independence referendum, which Spain deemed illegal. This interpretation effectively nullifies the amnesty for these individuals, who have been living in self-imposed exile. This ruling is a setback for Mr Puigdemont, who had hoped that the amnesty would allow him to return to Spain without fear of arrest. It underscores the on-going tensions between the Spanish judiciary and Catalan separatists highlighting the complex legal and political landscape that has defined this conflict for years. The court's insistence on pursuing these charges despite the amnesty law signals a firm stance against what it views as financial misconduct and the undermining of Spain's territorial integrity. Politically, this decision places significant pressure on Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's Socialist-led coalition government. The coalition relies heavily on the support of separatist parties, including Mr Puigdemont's Junts party, for stability. The withdrawal of this support could lead to legislative gridlock, particularly concerning crucial bills such as the 2025 budget, and might even trigger new elections. This precarious balance of power illustrates the intricate web of alliances and conflicts within Spanish politics, where regional issues often play a decisive role in national governance. The broader implications of this ruling extend beyond the immediate political manoeuvring in Madrid. It sends a clear message to separatist movements within Spain and potentially across Europe: attempts to secede and actions perceived as financially harmful to the state or the EU will not be easily forgiven or forgotten. This could deter future unilateral secession attempts but also risks further entrenching separatist sentiments among those who feel their aspirations for independence are being systematically thwarted. Moreover, this ruling could reignite debates about the effectiveness and fairness of Spain's legal and political framework in addressing regional autonomy and independence movements. Critics might argue that the court's decision reflects a punitive approach that prioritises national unity over dialogue and reconciliation. Proponents could view it as a necessary enforcement of legal and fiscal responsibility, ensuring that regional leaders are held accountable for actions that have wide-ranging consequences. As Spain navigates this contentious terrain, the need for a balanced approach that respects legal integrity while fostering political dialogue remains more critical than ever.

Answer to Cancer

A major area of concern is the shoddy manner in which various insurance authorities, both private and public, treat the hapless patients. I have often heard patients complain that hospital authorities refuse to entertain government health schemes, the portal not being accessible is the common refrain. As a single person depending on mostly illiterate hired help, and at a time when a grueling treatment schedule consisting of surgery, followed by radiation and chemotherapy, ravaged my physical and mental strength, I faced a humongous challenge doing the paperwork needed for submitting reimbursement claims



'You are having malignancy' or 'it is cancer' - these words uttered by a medical practitioner when we visit them for some anomalies in our body and undergo tests to unravel the nature of the disease are enough to send shivers down the spine of even those of us who are otherwise known to be mentally strong, have undergone many challenges in life and are usually hard nuts to crack.

It happened to me last year. While delivering a class lecture, I started experiencing moments of dissociation or blackouts lasting for a few seconds. After two months of medication, since the occurrences did not disappear, the doctor advised an MRI. The report showed a well-formed tumor in the right part of my brain which showed all signs of malignancy. The doctor advised immediate surgery.

It was a blow to the blue. Strangely, I did not experience any fear of death, perhaps because of the fact that I had to undergo many tests, seek a second opinion, and do myriad other preparations for the impending surgery.

However, what distressed me most was the fear of being incapacitated: being in a vegetative state if the surgery went wrong, which is a possibility despite spectacular advancements in medical technology.

By God's grace, the surgery went well and the doctor advised radiation and chemotherapy to contain the possibility of metastasis. I started visiting a well-known medical facility in Kolkata for further treatment.

On the very first day, the huge crowd at the registration desk, the chaos, the anxiety writ large on the faces of patients and their family members struck me hard. On subsequent days, as I waited for my turn to meet the oncologist and then to receive my doses of radiation and later chemotherapy, I often picked up conversations with other patients to get an insight into the nature of their ordeal.

Empathy with fellow sufferers does help to assuage slightly one's own distress. I came to

know that many of them were coming from distant suburban areas.

Despite considerable expense in treatment procedure, the impact of the procedure for most patients can be physically very exhausting as side effects are often quite severe.

In such conditions, travelling long hours takes a tremendous toll on the health and energy of patients. They said they had no other option since most districts don't have hospitals that offer proper treatment for the affliction.

The huge rush of patients not only from parts of West Bengal but from other parts of the country as well as neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and so on is predictably putting a tremendous pressure on the infrastructure of the reputed facility.

Patients have to wait longer for their turn, toilets are unclean, canteens run out of food and the suffering of patients and their family members knows no bounds.

Various researches indicate that there has been a significant increase in the number of cancer patients world wide as well as in India in recent years.

While lifestyle issues like smoking, alcohol consumption, consumption of processed food, aerated drinks, exposure to hazardous materials as the food we consume has higher levels of insecticides and pesticides, have been identified as contributing factors.

An inescapable genetic mutation, which has happened in my case, also is responsible for increasing incidents of malignancy. Environmental factors are also making the scenario bleak. Escalating greenhouse gas emissions and consequent depletion of the ozone layer, as per various studies, is playing a

major role in the development of malignant melanoma. People of all ages, little children, young and old, are getting hit by this fatal disease.

Government facilities are extremely overcrowded and even private facilities which are quite costly and beyond the reach of common people are having a huge rush of patients, indicating how the affliction is affecting people from all walks of life. A massive

boost in infrastructure, new hospitals with state-of-the-art equipment, preferably on a public-private partnership model, is the need of the hour. Most high-tech machines like the MRI machine and those used in radiation therapy are still not manufactured in India.

Parts are imported and the maintenance of the machines in India, thereby causing inordinate delay in getting various crucial procedures done which can prove fatal for many patients. There goes the story of Vikshit Bharat and Atmanirbhar Bharat. In the 2022-23 financial year, India spent only a meagre 2.6 per cent of the country's GDP on healthcare, compared to Canada, France, Japan and many other developed countries that spend more than 10 per cent of their GDP on healthcare.

One can't help being intrigued by the fact that India's leaders keep bragging incessantly about India being the fifth largest economy of the world and the fastest growing one and yet the public healthcare system presents a sorry picture. Many oncologists of repute are leaving for greener pastures abroad as the working conditions and their perks are unsatisfactory here.

Another major area of concern is the shoddy manner in which various insurance authorities, both private and public, treat the hapless patients. I have often heard patients complain-

ing that hospital authorities refuse to entertain government health schemes, the portal not being accessible is the common refrain.

As a single person depending on mostly illiterate hired help, and at a time when a grueling treatment schedule consisting of surgery, followed by radiation and chemotherapy, ravaged my physical and mental strength, I faced a humongous challenge doing the paperwork needed for submitting reimbursement claims.

Needless to say, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority needs to be more proactive in making insurance companies more patient-friendly.

As the treatment of cancer saps the energy of the patients and makes them non-functional for a long period of time, the spread of this non-communicable disease can severely damage the country's manpower.

While I am fortunate to work in an organized sector where I have received necessary support from my authorities, those working in non-organized sectors often lose their jobs as they become incapable of work, making themselves and their families totally helpless.

The government also needs to focus more on spreading awareness about cancer and extend the net of welfare measures for those in desperate need of it. Some NGOs however are doing commendable work in helping those afflicted by the disease.

Finally, the psychological impact of this fatal disease is catastrophic. The pain, an emaciated body, the jaded look and fear of death, are enough to throw one in the deep pit of depression, as the patient tends to lose the emul to look ahead.

Support from friends, family and co-workers can be of great help as it was in my case. But ultimately, the struggle is our own. I tried to tell myself that only a warrior gets scars. Remembering the words of Seneca might help. "Sometimes, just living is an act of great courage."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Visit to Russia

SIR, As PM Narendra Modi prepares to visit Moscow, the world watches with bated breath. With the Ukraine war unlikely to end anytime soon, India's neutral stance on the conflict remains a beacon of hope.

The war may have affected local residents, but Russia's determination to assert itself as a big power is evident.

India must continue to straddle the Middle Path, listening to all, be it Biden, Trump or Putin. By doing so, it can leverage the strength of its ties with other nations.

New Delhi must not be swayed by the whims of other global powers but instead forge its own path, keeping our national interests in mind.

Modi's visit to Moscow should be embraced as an opportunity to strengthen India-Russia

ties and foster peace in a world torn apart by conflict.

Yours, etc.,
Shovanlal Chakraborty,
Kolkata, 1 July.

PRICE HIKES

SIR, Three major telecom companies - Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel, and Vodafone Idea - have decided to increase call and data tariffs by up to 10-25 per cent across prepaid and postpaid plans.

This move comes as a jolt to masses, who are increasingly becoming dependent on cheaper internet for everything from payments to entertainment. India boasts of having one of the world's cheapest data costs - 1GB data costs less than \$0.2.

But a 10-25 per cent surge in tariffs at one go might change this scenario. India has taken big strides in becoming a powerhouse

in the digital economy, and this has been possible because of cheaper data. The power of internet users can be gauged from the way the UPI payment system has become commonplace.

The success of UPI has prompted the Indian government to expand its footprint in more digital public goods. Whether it is financial services, online shopping or even delivery of medical and educational services, India is setting new benchmarks for the world. All this has been possible due to cheaper data. The digital India dream could receive a setback if telecom services get costlier.

Therefore, the government must recognise internet and data services as essential goods and ensure they remain affordable.

For that, it has to also ensure that the telecom sector remains competitive with three-four major players. Amidst all this, revival of the state-owned BSNL makes immense sense.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru, 1 July.



WORLD CHAMPIONS

OUT OF PROPORTION

SIR, The BCCI has announced a prize money of Rs.125 crore to Team India for having won the ICC Men's T-20 World Cup. While the team deserves all praise for having turned the game from a possible defeat, the prize money offered is so huge that it is beyond comprehension. Since the team is paid handsomely for the 'job', the huge bonanza is too easy to relish. Even considering that the BCCI is flush with money, there is no justifiable reason to shower the team with such a huge prize money.

When the team gets pampered with prize money for winning matches, naturally, they need to be tasked to task in the form of pay cuts, when they face defeat. This however, does not happen. Victory or defeat should face even-handed treatment.

Yours, etc., V S Jayaraman, Chennai, 1 July.