



## CONTRAPUNTO

Youth is wasted on the young

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

## Soren Song

Jharkhand's swift CM change shows how crucial polls there &amp; in Maha &amp; Haryana are

**H**emanth Soren is back as Jharkhand CM. His swift taking back of the post from Champai Soren, who held the fort for 5 months, is as good an announcement as any of the Sep-Oct assembly elections in Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Haryana. Opposition BJP has been quick to accuse Hemanth of shortchanging Champai—a well-regarded JMM veteran and Soren family loyalist. Campaign narratives are forming, with twists and much rattle in the tale.

**Plenty fight** | Each of the three states in the first round of assembly elections after LS polls is a unique battlefield. On test will be INDIA's unity and perseverance against BJP, which has everything to prove, its third term a coalition govt. One sampled the acrimony in Parliament. On test will be the support party in Haryana especially, its LS tally halved to 5 MPs. On test will be the mettle of two Senas and two NCPs in Maharashtra.



**Maha muddle** | Shiv Sena's haul of 36 MLAs in 2019 assembly polls is now a fractured war chest between UBT and Shinde. If, in 2019, NCP had 54 MLAs, in 2024 Sharad Pawar is toying with estranged nephew Ajit Pawar, who must find his feet after an LS knockout—his wife losing to Supriya Sule was almost a referendum on who voters believe "owns" NCP. Add to that the jarring Jange beat which makes frenemies of deputy CM and CM—Ajit Pawar's politics compels him to fight Shinde's "make Marathas OBC" plank.

The Sena-BJP split after 2019 assembly elections triggered a constitutional storm that cracked open political shifts. In LS elections, MVA won 30 seats (Congress 13, UBT 7, Sharad Pawar 8) of the state's 48. Congress, as state's single largest party, helms MVA and is seemingly on a strong wicket. But Shinde has proved to be no walkover, and BJP is 105 MLAs strong.

**Haryana hustle** | The only straight battle between BJP and Congress is anything but 2019's assembly elections, BJP won 40, Congress 31, and state party JJP 10—in alliance with BJP, JJP's no longer a BJP ally. BJP's switching CMS hasn't worked to its advantage here—Saini heads a govt just short of majority.

**Local or hyperlocal?** | LS polls were fought on local issues—as much strategy as compulsion for the state constituents in INDIA. It's to be seen how party campaigns will differentiate from their LS campaign. BJP's defending in two states, and in Jharkhand, it is battle-ready to take on JMM-Congress. It's elections again.

## It's The Mind

Biden's age isn't the issue, his mental acuity is. Even older heads of govt have done fine

**B**iden's recent presidential debate debacle has sharpened the focus on his age. At 81, Biden is not only the oldest American president, he is also the 9th oldest national head in the world. Many in his own party are calling for him to drop out of the race. But is age really the barometer of a politician's abilities? Or is age administrative acumen driven by other qualities?

**Let's not get physical** | Putin has been photographed hunting and hiking. Macron, earlier this year, was photographed boxing. While Chinese leaders are known to give extraordinarily long speeches. All to supposedly project their physical prowess and vitality. But despite the youngest current heads of state or govt being in their 30s, their median age is actually around 62. In fact, in most countries PMs or presidents are significantly older than their population's median age. Only countries to beat that trend are Montenegro, Ireland and Italy.

**Old but sharp** | It's hardly surprising, therefore, that septuagenarian and octogenarian netas hang around. And with strides in healthcare and nutrition increasing both global life expectancy and healthy life expectancy—the latter is slated to grow from 64.8 years in 2022 to 67.4 years in 2050—older politicians shouldn't be raising eyebrows as long as they are on the ball. What ultimately matters is mental acuity to successfully navigate the complexities of state affairs. Malaysia's Mahatir Mohamad is still active and the last time he was PM, between 2018 and 2020, he was 94 and sharp as a tack.

**Ageism much** | Besides, democracies naturally punish netas for not performing. It's voters who elect older politicians. And if they fail, age becomes a convenient target. That's barely concealed ageism. Look at governance outcomes, not how many push-ups a country's head can do.



## The spoon test

Leaked question papers and other forms of cheating prove our education system is a total failure

Jug Suraiya



We addressed him as Sir or Mr Peterson, but among us schoolboys he was always Gup. In a gap-shup, because he could talk not only the hind legs of a donkey but the front ones as well. And we, the Class 10 schoolboys of La Martiniere, Calcutta, were the two-legged donkeys Gup was trying to teach the intricacies of not just English, but the very process of thinking itself.

Write a description of a spoon, and what it's used for, for a person who's never seen or used one. And I don't want you to use the word 'thing' even once. 'Thing' is the sound of a tin plate hitting the floor, and I don't want to hear it, he'd say in his voice of soft authority. So, trying not to sound like tin plates, we put our thoughts to spoons. What did you call a spoon? An instrument? An implement?

I recalled Gup and his spoon, and his aversion to the word 'thing', which compelled us to think more clearly and precisely, when I read about a recent case of NIEET question papers being leaked in Bihar for between ₹30L and ₹32L, each.

Even as the matter is being investigated, what needs to be examined is the entire edifice of today's educational system that prioritises the getting of higher and higher marks through a regurgitation of crammed or copied notes without regard to the application of mind and thought to the subject in question.

Our classrooms and examination halls, from primary to university level, promote copycatism, the replication of mugged-up rote matter, at the expense of that long and difficult, but immensely rewarding, journey of exploration and discovery that is called learning.

This might, at least partly, explain the high unemployment rate among so many multiple graduates and postgraduates. Perhaps they were never wiser to face their equivalent of the spoon test.

And had they failed it, it would have been a failure not on their part but on the part of today's method of teaching. Or the lack of it.



## jugular vein

## Why Bhole Babas Flourish

Hathras puts godmen back in focus. You can dismiss them as charlatans. But recognise that they connect with those who feel most vulnerable in society. You can't regulate this

Devdutt Pattanaik



Bhole Baba is ascending, after over a hundred people died in a stampede at his Hathras congregation. One response to this tragedy is to ask if this Baba is 'real' or 'fake'. But this is a false binary. All gurus or babas work on our emotions, not logic. Only some abuse their power and collapse, some get institutionalised over generations as gods and prophets.

And they do not flourish in India alone. In America, they are called the Charismatics who tell you how the Holy Spirit works miracles in human lives. Blind will see. Lame will walk. Poor will be prosperous. They are so powerful that they can convince Americans that Jesus wants them to carry guns, hate homosexuals, and deny women reproductive rights.

In the Islamic world, holy preachers have convinced young Muslims that the whole world is against them, and they have to 'self-ghetto' themselves, with costumes that make them look like desert bedouins in the middle of London, Paris, New York. They must not think for themselves. They must simply surrender to the faith. Then, they will not have to catch up with the world. The world will stop, turn around, and follow them.

All religions begin as cults. All saints and prophets were considered charlatans by their contemporaries. Institutions come later, with whitewashed biographies, legitimised by state power. It all begins with the insistence that there is more to life than what is explained by science and rationality. There is a world that eludes the sharpest of minds—a world of vibrations, energies, and a mystical dimension of spirits and ghosts. An occult space of angels and demons.

When the world around you is collapsing, when all efforts fail, when nothing works out, when nothing makes rational sense, you desperately seek that special someone who can navigate the mysterious field of irrationality. That is the space occupied by holy men and women. For followers, they are the real saints (as, as politicians call them). For outsiders, they are all charlatans.

Intellectuals who write on holy men expect them to be intellectually and rationally sound. But that appeals only to a tiny English-speaking demographic. What people seek from gurus is emotional comfort. Holy men make you feel you are special, that you are part of a sacred community, a divine tribe. They tell you life has a secret that only they can reveal. So what if you are not rich, so what if you are not smart, so what if you belong to the wrong side of tracks, so what if you are a Hindu, so you have a chance to have it all, provided you attach yourself to the correct transmitter. The guru.



Image is for representational purposes

In a world that makes you constantly feel like a loser, the holy man makes you feel like a winner. He makes you feel confident, in control and safe. He gives you a spiritual high that is highly addictive. You go back again and again—to sing and dance in that spiritual playground. That space demands nothing of you—you just have to be there, observe, listen, engage, and somehow life seems better.

You feel so happy that you are willing to do whatever the guru tells you to do—clean his toilet, make his bed, wash his clothes. You feel privileged when he looks at

you, beckons you to sit next to him. It is so different from school, from home, from office where no one sees you, understands you, or cares for you. The holy man makes you feel you matter. He carries the burden of your misery—and you are eternally grateful to him. Willing to do anything he asks you to. Anything. That is when stories of exploitation and abuse emerge, but you are too invested so you resist all attempts to shake up your comfort zone.

Holy men are the 'living gods' of their times—not ideas, not icons, not memories. It's people who you can engage with, talk to, your life coach with a mystical connection, far superior to parents, teachers, mentors.

Your most rational of friends will insist that life become better after the guru came into a dream—problems were solved, children got married, court cases resolved, jobs materialised. All by the grace of the living holy man.

The holy man does not speak to your rational mind. He speaks to your insecurity. He connects with your most vulnerable self. He does it intuitively. He is able to instill confidence effortlessly. We can explain this phenomenon using psychology, but it is impossible to regulate it.

Holy men need festivals, events and ceremonies to amplify their reach. They organise gatherings and concerts, filled with music, dance, chanting, breath control exercises, sound and light shows, which may have religious packaging like a Shiva-ratri festival or an English speaking mystic, or the Bhagwat-saptah of a Hindi speaking Vaishnava.

Those who attend these events are swept away into a trance by the excited congregation. If you are vulnerable, you succumb. You cannot leave without it.

Unlike a drug high that brings you crashing down, this high sustains a feeling of security and warmth. You feel connected, part of a wider secret society.

In most cases, the holy man is himself bewildered by the power he wields over people's minds and hearts. Willingly, he is a shepherd with a flock. The flock contributes wealth. The flock brings devotion and attention and power, which brings more followers, a virtue cycle. This attracts politicians who come hoping he will contribute to their vote bank. And bless them with his mysterious brand of magic. In a moment of vulnerability, even the most cynical succumb. For it is not about the head. It is about the heart.

## Extra Cash Can't Help Andhra Or Bihar

Naidu's in Delhi asking for more funds. Nitish wants special status for Bihar, meaning more funds. But both states lack the institutional capacity to utilise even money that's available

Govind Bhattacharjee



TDP supreme Chandrababu Naidu met Modi in Delhi yesterday, seeking enhanced assistance for Andhra Pradesh. Last week, Nitish Kumar's JD(U) passed a resolution demanding special category status for Bihar.

With the two NDA allies vital to Modi govt's continuance, special status/assistance is being spoken of as the only way forward for Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. But is it? Fact is the states lack the institutional capacity to even spend the money they have. In Bihar's case, there is the additional problem of mismanagement, as well as the corruption in the last two weeks, lack of funds certainly can't be blamed for the state's bottom ranking in India's development charts.

The 'special category' debate has had a past. In 2015, with demanding states growing a hank, then PM Arun Jaitley said, "After the 14th finance commission recommendations, the area of special category status to states has ended." In keeping with that, govt has been loath to even use the term 'special category'. It simply refers to the 'eight Northeast and three Himalayan states' (d&K, now a UT, besides Himachal and Uttarakhand) that receive such funds.

These states, located along India's international borders, had inherited a legacy of neglect and economic backwardness, lack of infra and shortage of capital and resources. Special status gave them access to liberal financing by Centre through Plan assistance. Of total Plan funds, 30% was earmarked for these states under the Gadgil formula.

**No questions asked** | Some of these states could use the resources to their advantage and prospered. Others lacked the capacity to use up funds productively. They additionally suffered from protracted insurgency that impeded development.

But funding continued, unconditionally. There were no expectations of accountability or performance from

these states. What did change gradually was the scale of funding, owing to proliferation of centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) and direct off-budget transfers.

**Post-2014 changes** | Post-2014, CSS were restructured and off-budget transfers slashed. Planning Commission's role was dismantled in 2014. The Planning era ended in 2017 and Gadgil formula became history.

Restricted to CSS only, these states now get 90% as spoken of, as loans from Centre. Income tax holidays and excise duty concessions were granted to companies that set up new industrial units there, besides certain subsidies. However, in absence of market and infra, these incentives proved inadequate to attract industry or generate employment.

**Funds not the answer** | If the states now given to Bihar and Andhra, they will receive some additional central grants and loans. But these won't solve their problems.

The two states have different problems. Andhra was made to sacrifice two of its most prosperous districts and major revenue centres, Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy to Telangana in 2014. With revenue of only about ₹26 cr and expenditure over ₹60 cr, it inherited a huge liability of ₹60 cr.

To placate it, Congress govt promised it a special category status. But it was ejected from office. Many other promises were made to it, and most remain unfulfilled. Andhra today faces serious resource crunch and a huge debt burden. As for Bihar, its problems arise from governance

issues and lack of industry and infra.

**Missing capacity** | Both states also suffer from serious lack of institutional capacity to spend funds. As CAG's appropriation accounts show, Bihar is unable to spend a significant part of its budgetary allocations. In FY2023, as much as ₹51,722 cr of revenue expenditure (22% of revenue budget) and ₹4,786 cr of capex (24% of capital budget) remained unspent and had to be surrendered. Unspent funds during fiscals 2020, 2021 and 2022 were ₹75,122 cr, ₹5,938 cr and ₹10,038 cr, respectively.

Total unspent fund of ₹66,508 cr (FY2023) is much more than total benefits Bihar would get from special category status. When departments are unable to utilise resources at their disposal, it also means a heavier tax or debt burden on people than actually required.

Bihar's problems stem from lack of institutional capacity, infra, market, entrepreneurial skills, and human and industrial climate. These issues are not addressable in the short term.

**Unused moneys** | Andhra's story is not much different—in FY2023, it failed to spend as much as ₹52,567 cr, or 21% of its budget allocations, covering sectors like medical and health (₹6,576 cr unspent in revenue and capex), urban development (₹4,655 cr), social welfare (₹5,254 cr), and agriculture (₹1,300 cr) and backward classes (₹16,300 cr), and irrigation (₹9,034 cr).

If these states focused on strengthening their capacity for utilisation of funds already available, they wouldn't need special category status. And till that happens, even additional funds would simply remain unutilised.

The writer is former DG, CAG & author of 'Special Category States of India'

Money talks, but only if you know how to spend it

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



Satish K Kapoor

**M**auna, silence is the dialectic of true worship. It is the language of infinity of Ashvabha Brahma, the soundless word that is audible to those who can transcend ordinary consciousness. Krishna says in the Bhagwad Gita: 'maunam chaiva ma' ghyamanam'. Of secrets, I am also silence.

Mauna sadhana or spiritual practice of silence is to celebrate the Divine in the solitude of the self. Silence deepens self-understanding by shutting the sensory gates steering it from outside. The silent Buddha or Mahavir contributed more to ushering peace in the world than the speaking Socrates or Sophocles.

The first step in mauna sadhana is vāk-mauna, silence of speech. When energy is often wasted in useless talk. The tongue sometimes does more harm than the bullet. Conscious self-restraint

saves one from speaking unpleasant truths. Sensible people speak when absolutely necessary, measuring every word in the process. However, the silence of 'sewn-up lips', whether forced or voluntary, cannot be called silence.

The next step is chitta mauna or silence of the mind. It has threefold ramifications—buddhi mauna, silence of intellect, ahankara mauna, silence of the ego, and manas mauna, silence of the senses, made possible by withdrawing attention from its distracting object.

Silence is stabilised by observing the flow of thoughts, as they arise, swell, and subside, and by not allowing a quantum jump into the pure void of higher consciousness. Whispers from the divine are heard when the mind is

genuinely quiet and composed. To achieve inner peace, mauna sadhana should be made a daily habit. It can be practised any time, for at least half an hour or more. During vacations or at weekends, the time of mauna can be increased so that the 'energy of speech' is transmuted into spiritual energy. The purpose of observing

Mauni Amavasya, occurring every month on the last day of the month, is to do self-introspection by remaining silent.

Those who undertake mauna vrat or vow of silence, for months or years, adhere strictly to their spiritual tradition. Although it is not possible for an ordinary human being to observe kashya vrat, to remain silent like a log of wood, one can at least train one's mind in samyaka vāk—right speech, as advocated by the Buddha. It implies

## Sacredspace

We can make our minds so like still water that things gather about us that they see...their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of quiet.

WB Yeats

## Celebrate The Divine In The Solitude Of The Self

'avoidance of lying words, idle words, abusive words and double tongues'. During mauna sadhana, one should not eat or drink, brood over the past or the future, communicate by gestures or writing, watch television, use electronic gadgets, or do some such thing which distracts attention from the Divine.

Those who have no time for practising mauna should restrain speech while taking a morning or evening walk with friends, waiting for a bus or train, during a flight, or when at home or in office. Instead of always looking for company, one should occasionally stay alone, and feel the ecstasy of inner silence.

Silence, an aspect of spiritual austerity, sustains one in difficult situations by connecting one with one's core self. By putting the mind in silent mode, one can strengthen relationship with God, the source of ultimate silence. Laghu Yogi Vishnu, a 10th century work of Kashmiri origin, equates it with living liberation.

THE SPEAKING TREE



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## LAC imbroglio

India-China talks making no headway

**E**XTERNAL Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi have agreed to 'redouble efforts' through diplomatic and military channels for an early resolution of the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It is tempting to regard this declaration as a breakthrough, but the problem is that many such averments have been made in recent years amid the prolonged standoff in eastern Ladakh. The two leaders, who met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in Kazakhstan, are also apparently in agreement on the need to stabilise and rebuild bilateral relations. Yet again, peace and tranquillity are the buzzwords, but there is little inclination to go beyond the platitudes and make tangible progress on the ground.

The trust deficit is exemplified by the competitive development of border villages. India has reportedly decided to set up villages or habitations in Arunachal Pradesh 'closer to the LAC in a bid to match China's efforts. The Chinese have established over 600 'prosperous villages' (Xiaokang) along the LAC to bolster their territorial claims and enhance their military readiness. India's counter is the Vibrant Villages Programme, which was launched last year. The ambitious project aims to cover around 3,000 villages in Arunachal, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Ladakh and Sikkim. The focus on improving road and telecom connectivity, housing and tourism facilities has a larger objective—to encourage more and more villages to become the eyes and ears of the soldiers in border areas.

Amid this all-out infrastructural push and troop buildup, the periodic talks at the diplomatic and military levels have often been inconclusive. A summit-level interaction between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping has remained elusive. As Asia's largest powers, it is in the interests of both countries to engage in dialogue and address the thorny issues, including China's unwillingness to exchange maps of the LAC.

## Koo's shutdown

A lesson in startup realities

**K**OO, once celebrated as India's alternative to Twitter, is closing down after enduring a protracted 'funding winter'. Founded by Aprameya Radhakrishna and Mayank Bidawatka, it was envisaged as a platform for Indians to communicate in native languages, challenging Twitter's dominance in the Indian market. Despite a promising start, with 2.1 million daily active users at its peak, Koo's journey has been riddled with challenges.

Launched in 2020, Koo quickly became a symbol of India's push for digital self-reliance. It gained traction during the government's dash with Twitter over content regulation, attracting high-profile users, including government officials and celebrities. The platform's vision of a hyper-local, multilingual social media space resonated with many. However, Koo's close ties with the ruling BJP and subsequent political controversies limited its appeal. The platform faced criticism for becoming a haven for right-wing discourse, which alienated potential users. Additionally, Koo's heavy reliance on external funding proved problematic. The prolonged funding drought and failed partnership discussions with major Internet companies severely hampered its ability to sustain operations. Despite raising \$30 million in a funding round led by Tiger Global, Koo struggled to maintain its growth trajectory. The platform's technical advantages and user-centric approach were insufficient to draw users in numbers enough to cover the costs of running a social media platform. This, coupled with harsh market conditions, ultimately led to its downfall.

Koo's shutdown serves as a cautionary tale for startups. Its failure highlights the importance of sustainable funding, market adaptability and the difficulty of challenging established players. As Radhakrishna and Bidawatka bid farewell, Koo's story will be remembered as a bold yet sobering chapter in India's digital evolution.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JULY 5, 1924

## Mahatma's statement

APART from their wonderful lucidity and force, the great distinction of Mahatma Gandhi's public utterances have always appeared to us to consist in this, that there is no pose in them, no make-believe, no straining after effect, that every word he speaks or writes comes direct from the heart. We venture to think that on no previous occasion in his eventful life did the Mahatma exhibit this supreme quality to greater perfection than he does in the two articles he has contributed to this paper. If ever a great man could be said to have poured out his great heart in the form of printed matter for the whole world to witness it in all its strength and grandeur and beauty, the Mahatma has done so in this case. He is himself doubtful he has done justice to his subject. We are absolutely certain that no one among the hundred thousand men who must by this time have read and re-read those masterpieces will share this doubt. We now know that what the Mahatma meant when he said to the Associated Press interviewer that the meeting of the All India Congress Committee had been an eye-opener to him. He was not thinking of the warning of his general hold on the country. He was not even thinking of what he described as his defeat over both the *khaddar* and the boycott resolutions. Nor was he thinking of his failure to secure the homogeneity of the Congress Executive. These things did matter to him, but for the moment they were all secondary. The most important thing to him was the fact that Mr CR Das had succeeded in obtaining as many as 70 votes in favour of his amendment to the Gopinath Saha resolution.

## A team that took everyone along

The emphasis on utilising strengths of each player worked wonders for India in T20 World Cup

TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

**T**HE entire nation was united and overjoyed when Team India won the T20 World Cup. Our cricketers not only snatched victory from the jaws of defeat in the final against South Africa in Barbados but also remained undefeated throughout the tournament.

Every player contributed to the team's success, unlike many previous tournaments in various formats where victory or defeat was greatly dependent on a single player or two. The Proteas were cruising to victory with only 30 runs required from the last five overs. South African batsman Heinrich Klaasen was at his destructive best, hitting one six after another. And just when we had lost all hope, he was dismissed by Hardik Pandya. This was the turning point. Later, in the last over, the amazing catch taken by Suryakumar Yadav at the boundary line off Hardik's bowling to dismiss David Miller sealed the fate of the South Africans. Suryakumar had to keep all his wits about him to not lose his balance and then jump back and catch the ball before it hit the ground.

Hardik, whose captaincy of Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League (IPL) had drawn criticism because of the franchise's poor performance this year, regained his composure and form to shine in the final and most of the preceding games. He had replaced Rohit Sharma, a popular captain of Nita Ambani's franchise for years. The wonderful pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah was as economical and effective with the white ball as he always is. He was well supported by another speedster, Arshdeep Singh, who peaked at just the right time.

Virat Kohli came good just when the team needed him the most. His performance in the final contributed massively to our victory. This was his last appearance in T20 Internationals. He will not forget the moment. Fellow Indians will certainly not forget the debt the nation owes to this big-hearted cricketer. I am honoured that he has chosen my city of Mumbai as his permanent residence in deference to his wife's wishes.

Another stalwart who has decided to hang up his boots in T20 cricket is the captain himself. Rohit has provided immense joy and much entertainment with the willow over the years. He has assumed the role of the wicketkeeper-in-chief for India as well as Mumbai Indians. His sixes and fours, which he hits with gay abandon, have delighted his fans in international and league cricket. He was not that successful in this World Cup except in the Super Eight match against Australia, in which he narrowly fell short of a century. He was also part of the Indian team which won the inaugural T20 World Cup back in 2007 in South Africa. I welcome the Nagpur-born Rohit back to Mumbai, where he settled down as a wicketkeeper.

There is something much greater than money that players strive for—the admiration, the love and, above all, the respect of the people of India.

Opponents were treated with respect. There was no room for complacency even when play-

CONSISTENT: Team India avoided complacency despite its winning streak. *Arvin*

ing against minnows like the USA and Ireland.

Our political leaders can learn a few lessons from this World Cup-winning team. The most important lessons are in the domain of leadership. Take everyone along, utilise the strengths of each player and never treat your opponents as dirt to be trampled on. Even the RSS *sarsanghchalak* gave that advice after the BJP's below-par show in the Lok Sabha elections, in which the saffron party lost substantial ground in its stronghold of Uttar Pradesh.

A jarring note was struck when the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced a Rs 125-crore reward for the team. There can be no greater reward for those who represent the country than success on the biggest platform, whether it is in Tests, ODIs or T20s. The love, the respect, the recognition of their efforts by their compatriots are the very pinnacle of the reward pyramid. Monetary rewards need not have been flaunted amid our collective euphoria.

The announcement of cash rewards should not have been flashed in such a crude manner. It smacks of commercialism of a low order. It goes against the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Doing your duty without any expectation of a return is at the very core of the Gita's teachings. Why did the BCCI presume that the players were thinking of money while chasing success?

Of course, a commensurate reward in monetary terms is always announced and would be expected. It could have been distributed without the fanfare that makes people feel that players play only for money. There is something much greater which they strive for—the admiration, the love and, above all, the respect of the people of India.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships. — Michael Jordan

## Biden, Trump go golfing with gusto

RAJNISH WATIAS

**T**HE recent Biden-Trump presidential debate has blown into a baloney of golf bragging. When asked about his fitness levels, Trump, 78, boastfully claimed that he had just won two big golf championships and hit the ball longer than any Democrat. Turning towards Biden, he said: 'This guy Joe can't even hit 50 yards.' But Biden, 81, countered: 'I got my handicap, when I was Vice-President, down to a six... This man weighing 225-235 lbs (pounds) is incapable of moving around carrying his own bag and plays only if he has a cart... Think you can do it? Happy to have a driving contest.'

The off-course golf duel would have gone on for a rap on the knuckles by moderator Dana Bash for behaving like children.

Golf is a much-cherished ritual for American presidents. Sixteen of the last 19 have been golfers, the exceptions being Jimmy Carter, Harry Truman and Herbert Hoover. Many of them were known to have customised golf balls with their signatures. According to a presidential golf tracker, Obama would play with Titleist golf balls, personalised with 'POTUS' on one side and '44' on the other—the number denoted the fact that he was the 44th US President. Reportedly, he paid for the balls.

Some of them bent rules at will and chose celebrity partners, closing tricky deals on the way. Trump has often played with champion golfers like Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods. Obama has played with celebrity journalist and commentator Thomas Friedman, who defended his public criticism of too much golf.

Since the dust on the Biden-Trump golfing slugfest has not yet settled down, despite their popularity ratings plummeting into golf course bunkers, a bipartisan hush deal by Nancy Pelosi is being worked out.

A special match at a neutral venue is being planned. Considering the Modi-Trump and Modi-Biden bonhomie, with the rant of 'Ab ke bar Trump Sarkar' substituted currently by the 'Yeh dasti hum nahin todenge' jingle, what could be a better neutral place than India? According to a Capitol Hill leak, Chandigarh has been chosen for the match. A nearby golf course along the Ghaggar river—to make up for the Pebble Beach waterfront—is being spruced up for the landmark event.

Vice-President Kamala Harris is more than happy to be Biden's cheerleader and her aunts and uncles from Chennai are expected to descend down in droves soon. Trump, too, is bringing his red brigades and the special QAnon devotees to gleam the course in case he loses.

The most likely scenario on match day: Trump, the first to tee off, lands the ball in the Ghaggar. The one swung by Biden hits a *kskar* tree that he mistakes for the flag pole through his dark Aviator glasses. Suddenly, dark clouds arrive and burst into a monsoon deluge. Play is called off till November 5 or till the lost balls are found—whichever is later.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Bhole Baba can't escape blame

Refer to the editorial 'Hathras stampede'; there are many questions that remain unanswered. Instead of helping the devotees stuck in the melee or rushing the injured to the hospital, the organisers were reportedly busy cleaning up the site before the arrival of a forensic team. Why did they try to hide the evidence? Why were 25 lakh devotees allowed to gather at a venue that could host just 80,000? Why did the organisers not enlist the help of the police or an agency for crowd management instead of roping in 10,000 devotees for the job? Bhole Baba and his servants are all complicit in the tragedy.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

## Hold organisers accountable

Refer to the editorial 'Hathras stampede'; it appears that the organisers of the 'satsang' and the local administration failed to draw any lessons from past incidents of stampede and ruckus at large gatherings. It is just unconscionable that 25 lakh people were allowed to stream into a tented area that could only accommodate 80,000. The tragedy points to a systemic failure on the part of the authorities concerned and the organisers of the religious gathering to strictly regulate the entry and exit of devotees. Godmen and others involved in hosting such congregations must be held accountable if any untoward incident occurs as a result of poor crowd management or security arrangements. Those injured and the kin of the deceased must receive relief soon.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

## Take steps to avoid overcrowding

The stampede in Hathras was an avoidable tragedy. Such 'satsangs' should be conducted in a staggered manner to avoid a commotion. Besides, devotees must have the option to join a session virtually so that there is no overcrowding. The entry and exit points of the venue must be strictly monitored by professionals. The attendees should be made to move in a queue to avoid a stampede. And most importantly, more than two lakh devotees must not be packed in a venue that is meant to accommodate just 80,000 people.

PV MADHU NIRVITI, SECUNDERABAD

## Lessons from Hathras tragedy

Refer to 'Hathras stampede'; with around 2.5 lakh devotees stuffed in a venue in

which only 80,000 were permitted by the authorities, it was a disaster waiting to happen. The problem lies in poor crowd management, which has resulted in several stampedes over the years, claiming hundreds of lives. The incident brings to the fore many glaring lapses, from the negligence of the administration to the unchecked influence of godmen over the masses. The cause of the stampede must be investigated. Those responsible should not be spared. Further, the authorities should work out modalities and guidelines to ensure that such tragedies don't recur.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

## Need to change farmers' mindset

Apropos of the article 'Roll out a roadmap to rebuild agriculture', the writer has failed to suggest any concrete, workable ideas to alleviate the farmers' plight. Various factors, such as unforeseen weather conditions and diseases, can hamper the growth of crops. The author's view that a technological intervention will not help does not hold water, especially since he is advocating an increase in the budgetary allocation for agriculture, though he has not specified how it should be utilised. The need of the hour is to focus on changing the farmers' mindset. Just blaming the industry for cornering the market in agribusiness will not help.

DEVINDER K BHANDARI, CHANDIGARH

## Revisit S+4 floor decision

With reference to the news report 'S+4 floors: Govt ignored expert panel's critical recommendations', much to the detriment of state residents, the Haryana Government seems to have succumbed to pressure from the builders' lobby. It is unfortunate that the authorities are putting the interests of the builders above the concerns of the residents. The move will deprive residents of fresh air and natural light. Once again, the common man is bearing the brunt of the undue influence that the rich and powerful have over decision-makers and policy framers. The state government must revisit its decision in view of concerns about the four-storey buildings putting a strain on water and sewage systems and causing other problems.

HMS NAGRA, FARIDABAD



## Data dynamics

The advisory committee has its task cut out

The Union government recently reconstituted the Advisory Committee on National Accounts Statistics to revise the base year for national accounts statistics and incorporate new data sources to enhance statistical accuracy. According to the gazette notification, the committee, chaired by former professor at the Institute of Economic Growth Bishwanath Goldar, has detailed the terms of reference (ToR). These include providing advice on the methodology of national accounts statistics, macro-indicators, and promoting research in this field. This process has been delayed for many years owing to various factors such as poor data quality, demoralisation, the implementation of goods and services tax, and pandemic-led disruption. Although the committee will have to advise on several critical issues, the initiation of the process to address shortcomings in the statistical system must be welcomed.

In terms of data, the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 was recently released after an 11-year hiatus, with another round for 2023-24 expected soon. However, the results aren't exactly comparable with past surveys due to methodology differences. The HCES provides vital data on consumption patterns of the household sector. A decision regarding the revision of the base year is likely to be made after the completion of another round. This decision will be critical because it will have implications for various other indicators — the consumer price index (CPI), wholesale price index (WPI), and index of industrial production — which currently rely on data that is over a decade old. Given that the Indian economy is changing rapidly, without periodic updates, these indicators may not be reflecting the actual position, potentially affecting policy decisions.

Further, India needs a producer price index (PPI). It will not only gauge price movements at the production level but also help in constructing a more robust deflator for gross domestic product (GDP). The government is reported to have finalised the methodology for the PPI. The WPI, which is used predominantly to deflate nominal GDP, has inherent limitations. Aside from price and output indicators, India also needs high-frequency employment data covering both rural and urban areas. This detailed and timely data is essential to accurately assess employment trends, identify areas of concern, and implement policies that address the specific needs of different regions and demographics. However, challenges for the committee extend beyond introducing new indices or merely revising existing ones. The Census, originally scheduled for 2021, has been postponed, and there is no definitive timeline for its future conduct. Without the latest Census data, the accuracy and reliability of survey results may be compromised. Besides, as outlined in the ToR, adopting and implementing United Nations standards present significant challenges. Accounting for well-being and sustainability is particularly difficult. The increasing digitisation and globalisation of the economy would necessitate developing new methodologies to accurately capture economic activities.

Additionally, the informal sector, which constitutes a substantial portion of the Indian economy, presents a complex challenge for accurate measurement and analysis. It is often argued that the present system does not accurately reflect the position of the informal sector and tends to overstate economic growth. Given the problems and doubts in the present system, the government has taken the first step towards rebuilding the statistical structure. The committee would also need to explore comprehensive strategies to overhaul and strengthen the Indian statistical system. Consistent and credible official data for various economic indicators is essential for informed decision-making in both the government and the private sector.

## Bridging the skill gap

Quality training remains an elusive goal

One of the paradoxes of India's employment paradigm is that joblessness remains a challenge even as the country's large potential employers complain of a labour shortage. Last week, Larsen & Toubro Chairman S N Subrahmanyam said the engineering giant was facing a manpower shortage of over 45,000 workers and engineers across its businesses. L&T is not an outlier in this respect. Across India, from steel manufacturers in the east to the textile hub of Tiruppur, companies are struggling to find skilled labour for such basic functions as machine operations, welders, fitters, drivers, technicians, carpenters, and plumbers. The shortage is not just on account of expanding order books, the elections, or hotter summers, which have sent labourers back to their villages. It is the result of a chronic weakness of the Indian labour market, pushing up wages and costs at a time when private-sector investment is still relatively sluggish. The shortage becomes more acute higher up the value chain, forcing companies to hire technicians and engineers from overseas, especially China, to bridge the gap.

At the base of this skew is the poor quality of education and training. This imposes an additional cost on companies of upskilling engineers or technical workers they hire. According to the latest India Skills Report, about 64 per cent of engineering graduates are employable, and 40 per cent of those coming out of Industrial Training Institutes. Overall, about half the youth are found to have the necessary skills to be employable. Interestingly, even this discouraging picture is an improvement over 2014, when only 33.9 per cent of the youth were considered employable. This improvement has been, in part, on account of the government's focus on training programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and schemes for apprentices and craftsmen. Despite this progress, the report suggests that the challenge of delivering skilled labour to the marketplace is daunting. It points out that only 2 per cent of the workforce has formal vocational training and 9 per cent have informal vocational training. This apart, even the government's skill programmes lack quality trainers or certification. As a result, less than 20 per cent of those trained under the PMKVY were reported as placed in companies.

The core of the problem is that training programmes are out of sync with the needs of industry, underlining yet again the need for closer industry participation. Engineering courses are a good example of the problem. Of the 1.5 million engineers that India produces every year, less than 5 per cent come from top reputed institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), National Institutes of Technology (NITs), or Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIIT). The bulk of the graduates come from private and state institutes of widely varying quality, despite certification by the All India Council for Technical Education. The National Skills Development Corporation, which the government set up in 2008 as a not-for-profit company to work with industry, has not been able to make a dent in the problem. The result is net negative for Indian labour. Large employers move to address the problem by deploying artificial intelligence to automate the shop floor, squeezing the job market even further for those entering it. That is why adequately skilling India's labour force needs to be a bigger priority for the government.

## Lessons from Kargil: 25 years on

The war demonstrated India's ability to effectively conduct tri-service operations, even in the absence of a formal tri-service doctrine

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



A quarter of a century has elapsed since May-July 1999, when India and Pakistan fought a 74-day mini-war in the Kargil sector of the Line of Control (LoC) — the de facto border between the two countries. The so-called Kargil conflict took the lives of more than 500 soldiers from each side and marked the culmination of a geopolitically-charged period in South Asia. It is worth revisiting the tactical, strategic and diplomatic lessons that emerged from that conflict.

New Delhi went into the Kargil War at a particularly turbulent juncture in its history. India's earlier command structure — led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and advised by his hawkish principal secretary Brajesh Mishra, and Cabinet members George Fernandes, Jaswant Singh and Yashwant Sinha — was inclined to project power and favoured expeditionary (outward-looking) solutions to regional problems, such as the long-running Tamil Tigers insurgency in Sri Lanka.

In the circumstances, India's military was already bloodied by confrontations. By 1992, the decade-old Pakistan-backed Sikh insurgency in Punjab was winding down, with even the most fanatical Sikhs realising they had run out of popular support in Punjab — the only Sikh-majority province in India. Earlier, the Indian military's intervention in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990 had been wound down, with the Tamil Tigers giving the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) a sharp lesson in the limits of power. Assam was in turmoil due to the United Liberation Front of Assam. Even as the IPKF was withdrawing from Sri Lanka, Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) went up in flames in 1989-90, with thousands of Kashmiri youths crossing the LoC into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) for weapons training in Pakistan-run camps. The Union defence budget was at an all-time high of almost 4 per cent of gross domestic product.

With India's first Bharatiya Janata Party Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, under pressure, New Delhi tested five nuclear explosive devices on May 11 and 13, 1998. Despite intense international pressure on Pakistan not to retaliate in the same coin, Islamabad exploded six nuclear devices that same month — symbolically, one more than India's. Disregarding international criticism at adding two new "states with nuclear weapons" to the existing list of five "nuclear weapons states", Vajpayee began preparing for his historic bus journey to Lahore. Meanwhile, far from the limelight, a tiny group of Pakistan Army planners began pushing infiltrators across the LoC into Kargil, with all the weapons, ammunition, fuel and food needed to sustain themselves through the coming winter, and the spring and summer fighting that would inevitably follow.

Pakistan had a simple tactical plan. The infiltrators would position artillery guns, ammunition, fuel, food and fire controllers to bring down artillery fire to interdiction the Srinagar — Kargil — Leh road, blocking Indian supply lines to Kargil and the Siachen Glacier. The strategic plan was to demonstrate the deterrent power of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, establishing that despite the gravest provocation, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal would deter India from retaliating. In the diplomatic realm, Pakistani planners felt confident that Indian diplomats would be unable to generate unacceptable pressure on Pakistan in global forums. Eventually, pegged back militarily, stymied strategically and outwitted diplomatically, India would accept the new status quo in Kargil. However, it played out quite differently. Despite the multitude of challenges, a stubborn New Delhi refused to step back.

New Delhi's first challenge was to demonstrate Pakistan's violation of an international treaty — the Shimla agreement of 1972 — in which both sides had pledged to maintain the status quo along the LoC. Now, however, regular Pakistani troops had

crossed the LoC, not just Kashmiri "freedom fighters" as Islamabad claimed. The proof of official Pakistani involvement came through an intelligence coup, in which Indian telephone monitoring agencies intercepted two phone calls between Lieutenant General Mohammed Aziz Khan, the Pakistan Army's powerful Chief of General Staff, and his boss Pakistan's army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, who was visiting Beijing to solicit Chinese support. In discussions recorded by Indian intelligence, the generals boasted that they were in full control of the infiltrators in Kargil. The Indian government presented this as irrefutable evidence of Pakistani irresponsibility, which — were it not for New Delhi's restraint — could have triggered nuclear war between the two nuclear-armed adversaries.

To avoid this, New Delhi's innovative tactics included the calibrated application of military force, notwithstanding the nuclearised backdrop. India's "graduated response", employed artillery first to inflict attrition; and then to "shoot in" the infantry, along with attack helicopters and glide bombs. India's tactical and operational response demonstrated its ability to prosecute tri-service operations, even without a formal tri-service doctrine or the higher command structure needed to coordinate it. The Indian Air Force signalled Indian resolve early with bombing attacks on Pakistani positions, and on the forward Pakistani logistic node of Muntho Dalo, rendering the infiltrators short of ammunition for the duration of the fighting.

With India's military mobilising with alarming alacrity, US President Bill Clinton summoned Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to the US on July 4, 1999 for a personal dressing down. Sharif had run out of American goodwill. When Sharif reasoned that India had violated the Shimla Agreement first by occupying the Siachen Glacier, Clinton sharply reminded him that the days of redrawing maps were over and that Pakistani troops should withdraw to the north of the LoC. By the end of July, the status quo ante was restored.

The Kargil War resulted in a high-level commission — the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) — which was independent of India's first serious attempt at assessing the quantum of damage to its borders. The KRC Report brought to light many grave deficiencies in India's security management system, including the fact that the original framework for management of the country's security, formulated by Lord Ismay and recommended by Lord Mountbatten, had been accepted by a national leadership that was not fully conversant with the complexities of national security management.

The KRC, its findings and recommendations reinforced by a Group of Ministers in 2000, also noted that all three divisions of the vast and contested territory of J&K were defended by two Indian Army corps — 15 Corps in charge of Kashmir and Ladakh; and 16 Corps in charge of Jammu. It was decided to carve out a separate corps zone from the current 15 Corps, which would be designated 14 Corps and given charge of Ladakh. This has since been implemented, but there is a question mark in the fact that 14 Corps is responsible for Kargil and Siachen Glacier (both claimed by Pakistan); as well as for Eastern Ladakh (claimed by China). This duality does not make for smooth command.

## Big ideas for Budget D-Day

With the Union Budget less than three weeks away, every sign counts, especially as the seat of Budget-making, North Block, is almost sealed. So when the government on Wednesday renamed the Cabinet Committee on Employment and Skill Development to the Cabinet Committee on Skills, Employment, and Livelihood, the announcement conveyed a message for the Budget. By putting skill before employment, is the government suggesting that skill is its main focus area now in the backdrop of a labour shortage that's posing a huge problem in factories and in rural areas factoring hubs? And by bringing livelihood under the committee's fold, is it broadening the canvas of jobs and employment in the current context? Perhaps.

Besides the reconstituted Cabinet committees, Budget signals have come from the President's address in Parliament, the Prime Minister's reply, and the first Cabinet meeting of the 18th Lok Sabha as well. President Droupadi Murmu has said the Budget would roll out historic steps that would cover economic and social issues, and that the focus will be on reforms. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken about propelling India to the next level of development and reaching the Viksit Bharat (developed India) goal by 2047. He has been emphatic that his government would work at triple speed this time. The first Cabinet meeting of Modi 3.0 also gave some broad hints on the road map that the Budget may outline related to welfare schemes. The Cabinet decided that the Centre would provide assistance to

30 million additional rural and urban households for the construction of houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). All these steps may lead to the creation of employment, but of course we cannot be certain about the quality and the longevity of these jobs yet.

The Budget, likely to be scheduled for the fourth week of July, FY25 will be left with only eight months to go. In that scenario, this Budget has a chance to be big on ideas that can set the tone for Modi 3.0, without tweaking the numbers much. It's possible that the Budget has been pushed to late July to work on ideas more imaginatively after the election results changed the narrative significantly. Before the elections, bureaucrats were targeting late June or early July for the Budget. At that point, neither a coalition government nor a strong Opposition was anywhere in the picture.

If it is actually a Budget with big ideas, the generation of quality jobs and skill development should be the most wished-for. Clean up the direct tax regime across various asset classes to encourage financial savings and further broaden the capital markets; reduce customs tariffs and encourage industry to be part of global supply chains; actively sign free-trade agreements with the larger objective of promoting exports of goods; and set up a "productivity commission" for agriculture and allied sectors to boost farm incomes. Now that the FM and her team are done with all the input sessions with stakeholders, it's time to thrash out the big ideas for the D-Day, keeping in mind the need of the hour and the signs all around.



AJAI SHUKLA

## BROADSWORD

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## The art of a reformer



## BOOK REVIEW

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

V R Devika's biography *Rukmini Devi Arundale: Arts, Revivalist and Institution Builder* is the latest in a series of books called "Pioneers of Modern India" published by Niyoogi Books. Rukmini Devi (1904-1986), the founder of Kalakshetra, a performing arts academy in Chennai, is often described as a pioneer because of her work with Bharatanatyam that has been widely appreciated across the globe. However, as Ms Devika notes, she is also criticised for "learning an art form (Sadir) that was exclusively practised by

a community of Melakkars [a marginalised community] and [making it] available to others". This book comes across as a defence of Rukmini Devi. Ms Devika wants to tell "a completely different story" based on her research.

The author is a storyteller, educationist, Gandhi scholar and cultural activist, who is trained in Bharatanatyam and believes that Rukmini Devi's legacy has been misunderstood and misrepresented. She writes, "In the late 1970s and early '80s, a narrative began to emerge from research done by complete outsiders to the milieu... They called Rukmini Devi an appropriator... They said she had used her upper class and caste privilege to do it."

The author does not let us make up our own mind. She hopes to persuade us to agree with her. After all, she had an opportunity to meet Rukmini Devi in Chennai in the late 1970s. This personal encounter with the woman

who was "beauty personified" left a deep impression.

While the author does not offer an overview of the research methodology used, the endnotes indicate that she conducted interviews with teachers, alumni and performers from Kalakshetra, and also went through archival documents and video footage. She cites two earlier biographies — one by Avanthi Meduri, another by Leela Samson — and uses a range of books and journal articles to build out the socio-political context in which Rukmini Devi grew up, flourished, experimented with ideas, and established herself as an authority.

Rukmini Devi's ability to get things done tactfully is evident from an anecdote mentioned in the book. In 1918, for instance, she wanted to participate in a production of Rabindranath Tagore's play *Malini* staged by members of the Theosophical Society. Her father, Neelakanta Shastri, who was a civil engineer, was not enthusiastic about this idea because "girls going on stage to perform an art was frowned upon." Ms Devika

notes, "Rukmini knew how she could get what she wanted. She told him the performance was for a national cause."

She knew that her father, formerly employed by the British, and a great supporter of the Home Rule Movement would be unable to refuse. When Rukmini Devi did go up on stage, he was enthralled by his daughter's musical talent and encouraged her to pursue music seriously.

Ms Devika's book also helps us appreciate how coming into the orbit of influential cultural figures like Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Colonel H S O'cott, Annie Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater, Anna Pavlova, and Maria Montessori enriched Rukmini Devi's life. It was in this atmosphere that Rukmini Devi met George Arundale, who was invited to the Theosophical Society in Chennai by Ms Besant. He and Rukmini Devi grew fond of each

other. Shortly after Neelakanta Shastri died, he proposed. Rukmini Devi's mother — Seshamma — and Ms Besant gave their blessing. Despite the fact that "the marriage of a 16-year-old Brahmin girl with an English Christian man 26 years older than her" was grist for the city's gossip mills.

The author does not spend too many

pages on her private life. She focuses on aspects of Rukmini Devi's work that would be of value to readers interested in the evolution of arts education in India. Ms Devika writes about Rukmini Devi's role in

"formatting Bharatanatyam for the modern age by offering training with curriculum-based institutional learning", and creating an environment where dance was presented "as part of the revival of textile and weaving traditions, in the form of a beauty of nature and greenery, love for

animals... most importantly, education... also counting and photography and printing."

The book ventures briefly into discussing administrative issues at Kalakshetra during Rukmini Devi's time but does not comment on the recent sexual harassment allegations that have led to the suspension of accused teachers. On the positive side, it exposes us to Rukmini Devi's contributions beyond the world of dance. Her passionate advocacy as a member of the Rajya Sabha was instrumental in passing the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960. She also served on the Animal Welfare Board of India, which was set up as a statutory body in 1962.

When Rukmini Devi was seriously ill, she refused to take medicines tested on animals and opted for Chinese and Tibetan medicines, acupressure and acupuncture. While many may scoff at her choice, it is a moving example of the compassion that she felt towards animals.

The reviewer is a journalist and educator who is @chintanwriting on Instagram and X









# Opinion

FRIDAY, JULY 5, 2024



## WORD OF CAUTION

Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud

The more you see the surge in the stock market, the greater the role, I believe, for Sebi and SAT, as institutions which will exercise caution, celebrate the successes but at the same time, ensure that the backbone is stable

## Irrational exuberance

The celebrations over the raging bull market shouldn't ignore that it's hard to justify the current valuations

**IT'S A RAGING** bull market. The record rally in stock markets, with the Sensex crossing 80,000, has taken the market capitalisation to nearly ₹450 trillion. Fuelled largely by local liquidity and, of late, by foreign fund buying, the spectacular surge in share prices, takes the ratio of the market capitalisation to GDP to about 1.3X, which some experts say is not in the over-valued zone. India's economy is undoubtedly doing well, relative to the rest of the world, even if there are pockets of weakness, namely consumption. A nominal GDP growth of 11-12% should result in corporate earnings growing at least at the same pace; some may do better. No other economy is likely to see corporate profits growing so fast. At the same time, there is little to suggest, just yet, that the economy will gain significant momentum in the coming years. In fact there are signs of a slowdown in key sectors such as real estate and automobiles. Going by the poor sales of tractors, and the continuing negative growth in real rural wages, it is hard to believe a rural recovery is on the way. Also, given how rapidly technology is advancing, it doesn't take too much time for a sector to get disrupted.

Given these concerns, it is hard to justify the current valuations. One could argue the Nifty is reasonably valued when viewed against historical valuations and bond yields — it now trades at 22 times on FY25 estimated earnings and close to 20 times estimated FY26 earnings. But a very large number of stocks now trade at multiples of 50x and 60x forward earnings that are building in unreal expectations; the multiples price in sustained earnings growth of 15-16% annually for the next 15 years. This doesn't seem to be worrying small investors. Going by the continuing strong flows into systematic investment plans, now at about ₹20,000 crore a month, retail investors are clearly convinced that the equity market is the best place to park their savings. They would be well advised to be prepared for a correction and wait for the returns.

The attraction for equities has pushed up the ratio of equities as a share of net household financial assets, to 14.7% in FY23 from just 4.5% in FY21; it could trend up further in the coming years, possibly at the cost of bank deposits. This is good news for companies that are mopping up funds from the market. 2024 could be a record year for equity fund raising. In a capital-scarce economy like India's, the availability of equity capital can help businesses and reduce their dependence on debt. At the same time, investors should also note that promoters and private equity players are paring stakes.

By one analysis, a clutch of 37 promoters — from the universe of the top 500 companies — had sold shares worth ₹87,000 crore in the six months to June. To be sure, not all of these may be tactical exits driven by promoters believing their businesses are over-valued. Some may be using the funds to repay loans or simply to raise cash for their operations. Nonetheless, it is a red flag. The rally could go on, driven by sentiment and liquidity. It's time, though, to pay close attention to corporate profits and not to shrug off signs of a slowing down.

## Trying to kill Chinese tech makes it stronger

**IN TRYING** to block China's climb up the ladder of technological sophistication, the US may inadvertently be giving its rival a hand up.

Consider a speech made by Premier Li Qiang at last week's World Economic Forum in the port city of Dalian east of Beijing.

"We need to confront the growth predicament of the world economy," he said, citing the International Monetary Fund's forecast that global output is heading toward its slowest growth pace in decades. China's economy may be one of the biggest contributing factors to this shift. The IMF's predictions show almost all of the slowdown happening in emerging markets rather than rich countries.

What's significant is the solution Li pitched. The current malaise appears to come from the waning of the third industrial revolution in information technology, he argued, making it all the more urgent that the world lean into clean energy, artificial intelligence, and biotech to spark a fourth one.

That prescription is on a collision course with the technological trade war over semiconductors, solar panels, electric vehicles, and lithium-ion batteries that's brewing between the US and China. The more that Washington tries to slow down China's technological advances, the harder China is likely to push to move forward.

We're already seeing real-world policy implications. Asked afterward what measures the government was taking to address the slowdown, he pointed to "cash-for-chunks" plans to upgrade old equipment and machinery, as well as China's lavish incentives for research and development spending.

This investment is genuine and significant. The 500 billion yuan (\$69 billion) facility that the People's Bank of China established in April to encourage lenders to make more loans to upgrade equipment, on top of an identical 200 billion yuan facility in 2022, leaves that programme not much smaller than what the PBOC has dedicated to bailing out the housing market, which currently amounts to 500 billion yuan.

Since last year, companies that invest in R&D can also deduct twice the sum they spent from their tax bills, a potent incentive. R&D spending rose 8.1% in 2023, accounting for about 2.6% of GDP, according to government statistics.

Despite all this backing, China is still in second place. Its 3.3 trillion yuan (\$455 billion) of R&D last year was just more than half the \$885 billion that came out of the US in 2022, the latest year for which data is available. That ratio has held pretty constant for several years. Given the support for R&D in the Inflation Reduction Act, it's possible that the US lead over China is, if anything, widening.

What's clear, however, is that the US is now able to get a phenomenal bang for its buck. At the Dalian conference, since last year, companies that invest in R&D can also deduct twice the sum they spent from their tax bills, a potent incentive. R&D spending rose 8.1% in 2023, accounting for about 2.6% of GDP, according to government statistics.

Visiting China and the US recently for the first time in five years, I found it hard to miss the advances that have been made. EVs appear to be as common in second-tier cities such as Dalian and Chengdu as they are in first-tier Shanghai. Even gasoline-powered vehicles often seem futuristic in terms of designs and interiors, thanks to a car fleet that has still been growing and so is not as half as old as those in the US and Europe. China may not quite have made it to the World Bank's club of high-income countries yet, but it's clear that it's barely a silver away.

There are fundamental national security reasons behind Washington's determination to prevent China from catching up on semiconductors and artificial intelligence. That's understandable, given the geopolitical tensions between the two. But in raising levies against clean technology it's simply closing the US market to the fruits of the genuine innovation. The economic slowdown and persistent inflation that we are witnessing worldwide is the result of a global economy that's trading less with itself as tariff barriers rise. That's not going to lead Beijing's push for technological advancement. If anything, it's going to accelerate it. If China's exports weren't facing such a difficult environment, the government wouldn't have to push so hard on investment as an alternative lever of growth.

Put an animal in a tough, hard-to-survive environment, and natural selection will turn it into a ruthless predator. Give it easy circumstances, and it evolves into a prey. By trying to hamper China's tech rise, America is only making it more powerful.



**DAVID FICKLING**  
Bloomberg

Contemporary Ampere Technology Co. founder Zeng Yuguang was boasting of upcoming products from the world's biggest maker of lithium-ion batteries. These include a pack that could move a car 600 km (373 miles) and be charged in 10 minutes, made without costly nickel and cobalt; another that holds about twice as much energy into each kilogram as conventional cells, and could potentially be used for small aircraft; and one based on abundant sodium rather than the relatively scarce lithium.

Visiting China and the US recently for the first time in five years, I found it hard to miss the advances that have been made. EVs appear to be as common in second-tier cities such as Dalian and Chengdu as they are in first-tier Shanghai. Even gasoline-powered vehicles often seem futuristic in terms of designs and interiors, thanks to a car fleet that has still been growing and so is not as half as old as those in the US and Europe. China may not quite have made it to the World Bank's club of high-income countries yet, but it's clear that it's barely a silver away.

There are fundamental national security reasons behind Washington's determination to prevent China from catching up on semiconductors and artificial intelligence. That's understandable, given the geopolitical tensions between the two. But in raising levies against clean technology it's simply closing the US market to the fruits of the genuine innovation. The economic slowdown and persistent inflation that we are witnessing worldwide is the result of a global economy that's trading less with itself as tariff barriers rise. That's not going to lead Beijing's push for technological advancement. If anything, it's going to accelerate it. If China's exports weren't facing such a difficult environment, the government wouldn't have to push so hard on investment as an alternative lever of growth.

Put an animal in a tough, hard-to-survive environment, and natural selection will turn it into a ruthless predator. Give it easy circumstances, and it evolves into a prey. By trying to hamper China's tech rise, America is only making it more powerful.

## START-UP SOLUTION

AGGREGATED FAMILY BUSINESS INCUBATORS AND ACCELERATORS CAN BE A BIG CHANGE AGENT

# A family start-up revolution

**FAMILY BUSINESSES** ARE undergoing a quiet revolution with a significant number of new start-ups set up by the younger generation of business families. This is an excellent trend, especially when product life cycles are shortened by multiple forces of disruption. However, with the demise of joint families and the disappearance of joint ownership of everything, entrepreneurial initiatives of family members have raised a new set of challenges for family businesses.

Some of the major areas of dilemma emanate from the societal evolution into predominantly individualism-driven nuclear families from one driven by collectivism, as in joint families. A major question is to decide the ownership of the start-up between the initiator and the family, which is also influenced by the source of funding: whether it is the common family pool or the individual entrepreneur's personal or parental money. Some of the common dilemmas revolve around the management of the venture: who all have a say in it, how the entrepreneur gets rewarded, what happens to the individual if the venture fails, and also what mechanisms should be kept to prevent silos. It is important to recognise and explore options to address them proactively and avoid the effect of 5Ds (dilemmas, deviations, differences, disputes, and destruction).

### Addressing dilemmas

Ideally, all start-ups driven by family members must be owned by the family itself, disregarding their relatedness to the existing business and who the originator of the idea is. However, to encourage entrepreneurship, some families allocate a token "sweet equity" of 3-10%



Professor and senior advisor, Thomas Schmidheiny Centre for Family Enterprise, Indian School of Business

to the family entrepreneur, retaining control with the family that is making the entire investment. Some families maintain a separate venture fund under their family business.

The entire process of venture creation, starting from idea validation to funding decision, terms and conditions, and review must be done like a stand-alone venture capital firm with firmness and fairness. This is easier said than done, especially if there is parental interference to protect their wards from any kind of failure.

This is where a strong decision-making entity such as a family business board or an owners' council with a couple of non-family professionals on board helps. What makes family policies work is the family's respect for the policies and processes and members restraining from the temptation to bend them to personal advantage. It is notable that some of the well-governed families do not hesitate to pull the plug on start-ups that are not making any progress. Such families recognise that ventures may fail, but not the entrepreneurs! Entrepreneurial families value the start-up experience of their members very highly, whether the venture takes off or not. The opportunity to

test out venture creation capabilities and learn from the experience stand in good stead in preparing the individual as a corporate manager.

One of the biggest long-term implications of venturing is the danger of silo formation in the family. Entrepreneurs passionate about their start-ups are likely to be more (or all) worried about their "babies" at the cost of taking care of all "family babies". This requires regular re-dedication to the family's purpose of doing business together with rewards tweaked accordingly. In one instance, there is a specific expectation set for next-generation members to devote their time and mind equally across their "own" ventures and those of the family. Close supervision, reminding entrepreneurs about their goals beyond the start-up, and overall mentoring are important to avoid the creation of what is called a "perforation model".

One of the best ways to avoid silo formation is by limiting the family entrepreneur's role to pre-start-up to early growth stages. Other experienced professionals, from the family or otherwise, will be able to build the venture through the growth stages. The entre-

**Fundamental to any start-up's success is the support and facilitation provided by high-quality mentoring. In most families, this is easily and freely available**

preneurs can either continue as a serial entrepreneur and move on to set up another new venture or take up some other responsibilities, but not operate the start-up further.

### Family business as incubator

Fundamental to any start-up's success is the support and facilitation provided by high-quality mentoring. In most families, this is easily and freely available from senior members and well-wishers. In fact, high-quality mentoring by a close well-wisher can make all the difference in a start-up's journey.

In that sense, the family business is one of the best incubators as well as accelerators for start-ups to sail smoothly. This is not often recognised although family businesses are no longer considered change-resistant and unprofessional. Families need to refine their governance practices and bring start-up venture funding to the core. They need a separate venture capital fund and should consider family-initiated venture investment as part of their wealth management portfolio, as is done by some reputable multi-generational family businesses. This will be the next evolution of family business as entrepreneurial families. However, it is important for them to remember that it is not the same as running an existing business. They must build both attitude and expertise in start-up incubation.

In essence, family businesses can and should be the next best host of start-ups. Aggregated family business incubators and accelerators across families that are managed professionally can be a major change agent. Family wealth may be directed to such venture funds that can tap into the expertise from various sources.

## Reducing inflation the Czech way



**AMOL AGRAWAL**

The author teaches at Ahmedabad University  
Views are personal

**IN THE WORLD** of central banking and monetary policy, attention is usually on the central banks of developed countries. However, sometimes the best stories on the conduct of central banking come from small open economies. Examples include the Reserve Bank of New Zealand pioneering inflation targeting in 1989 and Norway's central bank managing the government's oil fund. One can add the Czech National Bank (CNB) to the list, as it brought down inflation using unconventional policies when most others have struggled with conventional measures.

The CNB is one of the youngest central banks in the world. It was established in 1993 after Czechoslovakia split into two countries: Czech Republic and Slovakia. The policymakers decided to reform the economy from state- to market-driven.

Economist Robert Mundell had said that a monetary system could choose two of the three policy objectives: independent monetary policy, liberal capital flows, and flexible exchange rates. The earlier monetary system of Czechoslovakia chose fixed exchange rates and strict capital controls, rendering monetary policy ineffective. Under the new system, the policymakers decided to liberalise capital inflows, adopt flexible exchange rates, and make monetary policy independent. Accordingly, the CNB adopted inflation targeting in 1998, making it the first inflation targeting central bank in a post-communist country.

The initial inflation target was kept at a range of 5.5-6.5% and was gradually lowered to developed country levels of 2% with a band of +/- 1% in 2010. The average inflation from 1999 to 2007 was 2.5% before rising to touch 6.5% in 2008 due to the global financial crisis. From 2009 to 2019, average inflation was 1.62% lower than the target.

From 2020 onwards, inflation started to rise. In 2021, it was 3.2% and by July 2022 it touched 18%, the highest level among European Union countries.

In May 2022, the government appointed a new governor, Aleš Michl, after the six-year term of then governor Jiří Rusnok ended. Michl specified that his goal was to gradually return inflation to 2%, which I assume will take two years. In March 2024, inflation did touch 2% to achieve the goal. By December 2023, the central bank had started lowering policy rates with current rates at 5.25%.

Last month, Michl gave a speech titled "Taming inflation from 18 to 2%" and paving the way for ESG financing explaining how the CNB achieved its inflation target, a goal which has eluded many a central bank.

First, inflation was caused by the rising cost of imported energy and

goods. The central bank's models projected to increase interest rates from 7% to 10% and beyond. However, the central bank's officials argued that macro models were wrong as higher interest rates could neither lower European energy prices nor solve the problems in global supply chains.

Second, this realisation meant the central bank needed a new strategy. The CNB started to fight inflation by stressing the need for a stronger currency. A stronger currency would make imports cheaper and bring down inflation. The central bank continued to keep interest rates at the existing 7% and guided that interest rates would remain higher for a longer period of time. The CNB was criticised for its approach but it went against the mainstream opinion.

Third, the central bank earned public trust and its currency, koruna, began to appreciate. A strong exchange rate and high interest rates led to the tightest monetary conditions in 20 years. This eventually led to softening of inflation.

Fourth, the central bank earned public trust and its currency, koruna, began to appreciate. A strong exchange rate and high interest rates led to the tightest monetary conditions in 20 years. This eventually led to softening of inflation. Global commodity prices also began to decline, helping in lowering inflation. The governor warned against a wage-price spiral and called for wage restraints. The central bank also froze its own salaries to walk the talk.

Fourth, Governor Michl started giving

The Czech central bank brought down inflation using unconventional policies while most others have struggled with conventional measures

speeches regularly under the titles "The road to the target I, II and III" to guide the public and markets regularly on inflation outcomes. He also explained supply chain bottlenecks using the example of a ketchup bottle. When a new bottle is opened the ketchup gets stuck inside. Then as you push it, the ketchup starts to flow. Similarly after the Covid-19 lockdown was lifted, goods were initially stuck and then began to flow.

Fifth, the central bank brought back monetarism which suggests that higher money supply leads to higher inflation. Both fiscal and monetary policies lead to money supply. Even if the central bank runs a tight monetary policy, the government can negate it by running a loose fiscal policy. The central bank also argued for stabilising government debt levels to keep inflation low in future.

Overall, it is quite interesting to see how the CNB managed to bring inflation from 18% to its target of 2% using unconventional policies.

The CNB also has a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) connection. The Urjit Patel Committee report which shaped India's inflation targeting framework drew from experiences of the CNB (and the Central Bank of Chile). The RBI used the CNB's glide path approach to lower India's inflation to the target in a gradual manner. Maybe the RBI could again reflect on the CNB's recent history as it struggles to keep the inflation elephant in the forest in a durable manner.

formulate alleviation schemes solely on extreme poverty data. The tribal people in remote areas need food, shelter, and healthcare while the urban poor need education and jobs. The most backward areas need connectivity with cities for employment opportunities. The extremely sick and incapacitated need medical treatment besides food. —Vinod John, New Delhi

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Hindenburg-Sebi saga

"The K-factor" (FE, July 4) underscores the dynamics and potential repercussions of the Hindenburg-Sebi controversy. At its core lies the challenge of cross-border regulation, which shows the jurisdictional limits of authorities like the Securities and Exchange Board. Questions are raised about the efficacy of regulatory cooperation in maintaining fairness across financial markets. The alleged

involvement of Kingdon Capital and Kotak Bank in short-selling adds another layer of complexity, requiring Sebi to unravel intricate transactions and assess Kotak's involvement in potentially benefiting from Adani's stock price decline. The case's outcome could cause reputational damage to Hindenburg and Kotak, impacting investor trust and regulatory confidence. Prolonged investigations without any resolution risks hampering research by short-

sellers, potentially undermining market transparency in the long run. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

### Redefining poverty

"The many ways of measuring poverty" (FE, July 4) evaluates the criteria of extreme poverty in data analysis based on research and reports of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the National Sample Survey Office. However, governments cannot





## Dangerous precedent

Shielding Presidents from answering for crimes subverts rule of law

**T**he majority ruling by the United States Supreme Court that the President has either absolute or presumptive immunity from criminal prosecution raises disconcerting questions about the supremacy of the rule of law in the country. In a ruling based mainly on the doctrine of separation of powers and the need to insulate the Presidency from the fear of future prosecutions, and not the text of the U.S. Constitution, the court, dominated by conservative justices, by 6:3 majority has ruled in favour of presidential immunity. The verdict does not decide whether former President Donald J. Trump will enjoy immunity from prosecution for allegedly trying to interfere with or alter the outcome of the November 2020 presidential elections that he lost to Joe Biden. Instead, it lays down a threshold test for any intended prosecution of a President to see whether the act complained of involved the exercise of a core constitutional duty, or was an official or unofficial act. In respect of a President's core constitutional duties, the immunity is absolute; for other official acts, he enjoys presumptive immunity, that is, he is presumed to be immune unless rebutted by facts; and for unofficial or private acts, there is no immunity at all. For official acts, any prosecution is permissible only if it does not intrude into the power and authority of the executive.

The majority has remanded issues that arise in the prosecution of Mr. Trump for his attempts to influence the electoral outcome, culminating in the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, to the trial court for analysis based on this ruling. The dissenting views speak with moral clarity when they question the claim that only immunity from criminal prosecution can enable a President to function in an unhesitant and bold manner. While it is valid to argue that the President should be free from intrusive probes and fear of trivial prosecution, it is inconceivable that such a powerful office should come with little accountability and the freedom to violate criminal law. Critics of the verdict see great peril for democracy in its implications. As the dissent asks, can a President take a bribe in lieu of a pardon, or authorise a rival's assassination? The majority wants to protect the Presidency from any intrusion in the name of criminal prosecution, but what it fails to see is that Mr. Trump's actions may have been destructive of his successor's Presidency. While there is a passing mention of the possibility that he may have been acting in his capacity as a candidate or a party leader in some instances, it is astonishing that the verdict allows the use of the presidency as a shield even in matters that solely concern the election process.

## Grave concern

The risk of international spread of wild type-1 polio cases from Pakistan is great

**T**he ambitious goal of eradicating wild-type poliovirus type-1 (WPV1) by 2026 appears to have become tougher. WPV1, which is endemic only in Pakistan and Afghanistan, is showing signs of a resurgence since 2023. With Afghanistan and Pakistan reporting six WPV1 cases each in 2023 — there were two cases in Afghanistan and 20 cases in Pakistan in 2022 — the total incidence of type-1 cases in both countries in 2023 might appear to have nearly halved. But with six cases in Afghanistan and five cases in Pakistan already this year, there appears to be an uptick. If this continues, the total cases being reported from the two countries might be close to or even surpass the 2022 numbers. The concern about WPV1 is not limited to the number of cases in children. The circulation of the virus in the environment is seen to be rising, and, most importantly, after a gap of two years, positive environmental samples have been increasingly collected in Pakistan, in 2023 and till early June this year, from cities which have been historical reservoirs for the virus. Last year, 125 positive environmental samples were collected from 28 districts in Pakistan. Of these, 119 belonged to a genetic cluster (YB3A), which suggests that these were imported from Afghanistan. By June 1 this year, there have been 153 positive environmental samples from 39 districts. As of April 8, 2024, 34 positive environmental samples were collected from Afghanistan.

According to the World Health Organization, the presence of positive environmental samples in "epidemiologically critical areas and historical reservoirs" such as Karachi, Quetta and the Peshawar-Khyber blocks in Pakistan, and Kandahar in Afghanistan, represents a significant risk to the gains made in the past. Rising positive environmental samples are a reflection of polio campaigns not really achieving their desired coverage; fake finger marking sans vaccination is a persisting problem. Though children in Pakistan's cities are largely immunised, there is a heightened risk of the virus striking any unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated children. In 2023, two of the six cases were from Karachi city. The situation in Pakistan appears worse than it is in Afghanistan with the actual spread of WPV1 seen "predominantly in Afghanistan in 2022 now being detected in Pakistan in 2023 and 2024". There is also the grave risk of international spread from Pakistan, particularly to Afghanistan. With over 0.5 million Afghan refugees forced to leave Pakistan, and an estimated 0.8 million to be evicted soon, there is an increased risk of cross-border spread of the virus. There is a large pool of unvaccinated and under-immunised children in southern Afghanistan, increasing the risk that returning refugees can pose.

**C**omputer literacy is essential in today's world as critical services such as banking, health care and various government services have become digital. Computer literacy implies the knowledge and the ability to use computers and technology efficiently. It ensures that individuals can access and use these services effectively, enhancing their quality of life. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of computer and Internet access, from ordering groceries and online education to managing banking and health-care services. Recognising this, the Indian government launched the Digital India campaign in 2015 to transform the country into a digitally empowered society. Moreover, computer education is increasingly being integrated into the formal education system — in schools from an early age. Additionally, numerous skill development and vocational training programmes are focusing on enhancing computer literacy among youth and adults, mainly targeting underprivileged and marginalised communities to bridge the digital divide.

The recently released NSS 78th round of the Multiple Indicator Survey (conducted in 2020-21) is a household survey that provides individual-level information on computer literacy. Computer literacy, defined as the ability to use a computer, stands at 24.7% among individuals aged 15 years and above.

This marks an increase from 18.4% in 2017-18 to 24.7% in 2020-21 overall. In rural areas, it is an increase from 11.1% to 18.1%, while in urban areas, it was from 34.7% to 39.6%. These figures are cause for concern and cast a shadow over the nation's digital aspirations. Unless there are serious measures to universalise digital literacy, rural India's population, which is nearly 70%, will face significant disadvantages. More importantly, given the government's aim to provide various public services through digital technology, a significant portion of the population will remain excluded.

### Unequal literacy across age groups

Expectedly, the proportion of computer-literate individuals varies across various age groups in India. The survey reveals that computer literacy diminishes with age, with higher rates observed among younger demographics. This trend, common in societal contexts, reflects the disparity in computer education accessibility between recent and older age cohorts, often referred to as a "cohort effect" or "generation effect" in social sciences. Hence, the overall computer literacy rate of 24.7% exhibits significant inequality across age cohorts. It peaks among individuals aged 20-24 years, reaching 45.9%, and declines to its lowest point among the oldest age group of 65-69 years, at 4.4%. Even



**Vachaspati Shukla**  
Assistant Professor at the Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research (SPESIR)



**Santosh Kumar Dash**  
Assistant Professor at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA)

With a clear plan to run various public services with technology, a significant portion of the country's population needs to be able to cross the digital divide

among the youngest age cohorts, computer literacy has not reached 50%. Looking at the increasing spread of computer technology in every aspect of life, a larger chunk of the population will be excluded in the modern development journey.

Given that individuals aged 20-39 years are typically in the midst of their careers or job searching, representing a middle-aged population, it is noteworthy that their computer literacy rate stands at just 34.8%. Further, there is significant variation in computer literacy for this particular age group across the various States of India. Our analysis of computer literacy rates among individuals aged 20-39 years across States shows a striking 55.1 percentage point gap between Kerala (72.7%), and Assam, where only 17.6% possess computer skills in this age group. Economically disadvantaged States such as Assam (17.6%), Bihar (20.4%), Madhya Pradesh (21%), Jharkhand (21.2%), Uttar Pradesh (22.9%), Odisha (25.1%), Chhattisgarh (26%), and Rajasthan (27.6%) lag behind, with less than 30% proficiency in computer operation. Given that computer literacy is pivotal to the social and economic development of States, the lower rates in economically backward States exacerbate their disadvantage in benefiting from modern development. A failure to address this divide will widen the development gap across Indian States. Bridging the digital divide and fostering inclusive growth necessitates sustained efforts by government, private sector, and civil society stakeholders.

### Understanding India's modest progress

One reason could be that many schools and colleges across India lack the necessary infrastructure and qualified teachers to impart adequate computer training. This shortfall contributes to significant deficiencies in computer literacy among young students and new graduates, which could constrain their employment opportunities. Although computer education is a part of the school curriculum, there are significant gaps in access and instructional standards, highlighting the need to prioritise computer literacy within the education system. Among older age groups, computer illiteracy could be attributed to a lack of motivation to learn or due to limited access to learning resources. It is a common observation that older demographics tend to exhibit less enthusiasm in embracing new technologies.

Computer literacy in today's digital society can severely restrict an individual's opportunities and experiences. It leads to limited job prospects, social isolation, financial exclusion from online transactions and services, and restricted access to vast information resources. As Artificial Intelligence advances, employers seek individuals not only familiar with computers but also

equipped with the capability to execute complex tasks. Thus, learning how to use a computer and the Internet can help employees develop skills that employers are looking for. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (2014-15) found that adults without computer experience are more often unemployed, with a 52.5% employment rate, compared to 72.7% for those with basic computer skills. In a 2017 study, "Do Computer Skills Affect Worker Employment? An Empirical Study from CPS Surveys", economist Gang Peng finds that computer skills enhance employability and worker productivity. In a separate investigation, Preston-Lee Govindasamy in South Africa validated a positive correlation between computer literacy, employment probability, and earnings.

Further, computer literacy exacerbates socio-economic inequalities by creating a digital divide and a skill gap, leading to unequal job market opportunities. Those with computer skills can leverage technology for personal and professional development, while those lacking these skills face barriers in accessing essential services, participating in the digital economy, and advancing their careers, thus perpetuating economic disparities.

### Schools, older population as focus areas

While India has made some progress in computer literacy, the outreach and outcomes of this mission remain limited. Further, the data show that there is significant disparity in both the level and distribution of computer literacy across States. The existence of a wide digital divide between economically prosperous and disadvantaged States will hinder inclusive growth and development opportunities for large segments of the population.

Thus, schools should equip students with computer skills that will allow them to fully participate in our rapidly changing economies. School education should ensure that all graduating students possess computer literacy skills, as this is crucial to bridge the digital divide. The government should allocate resources towards the training of computer personnel and ensure sufficient staffing levels. Additionally, for the older population outside the formal education system, targeted programmes are essential. These should involve various institutions, including local governing bodies such as panchayats and non-governmental organisations, to effectively reach and empower older individuals with computer literacy skills. Finally, the government should also conduct a thorough review of such computer literacy and develop strategies to achieve higher literacy and reduce disparities in the coming years.

# The shape of a five-year climate agenda for India



**Vaibhav Chaturvedi**  
A Senior Fellow at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) and leads its low carbon economy and carbon markets research

The new government should aim to take India's global climate leadership to the next level with a 'higher, wider, deeper' plan

go deeper' to align its climate leadership with economic prowess.

### A plan sheet for India

'Go higher' relates to India's global leadership. The country could, sooner or later, host the next international climate summit. If it were to host the United Nations Conference of Parties in 2028, it would need to be as successful as the G-20 Presidency. In global negotiations, four years is not that far. Does India want 'the world agrees to no new investment in oil and gas after 2030' as part of the decision text? Does it want a big commitment on adaptation finance so that developing countries can shield themselves against increasing heatwaves, storms, floods and droughts? It takes at least four to five years to achieve consensus on contentious issues. Deciding on what could potentially be the big wins in 2028 and socialising these across countries to stitch alliances and allay concerns must start right away. Alongside, India should continue doubling down on the narrative of equity in international forums, and create leadership space for itself in global institutions that can deliver climate finance.

'Go wider' means India has to adopt and strongly communicate sectoral emission reduction targets that go beyond the power sector. India has achieved significant progress in the power sector and will continue to do so to keep pace with its international non-fossil share-related and domestic renewable energy capacity targets.

The next step is to broaden the target to other sectors. For instance, it could be related to the private mobility space, giving a clear target for one-carbon two- and four-wheelers. This is not just an urban India project. It will help rural India become mobile, drive jobs in clean energy and sustainability, and promote economic growth. As the last decade has shown, credible policy goals

have been powerful signals and forced relevant industries and stakeholders to act. The NDC for 2035, due to be submitted next year, can be an opportunity for going wider with India's energy transition targets.

### State-level plans are important

Finally, going deeper implies that sub-national climate action and resilience must come to the fore in this term of the government. Some shoots of this are already visible. The Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) is working across many States in India to support their net-zero plans through long-term climate and energy modelling. For instance, we collaborated with Tamil Nadu and Bihar for their recently-released plans for a transition towards a net-zero future. The government should think about creating a Centre-State coordination group, incentivising State-level climate actions through the Sixteenth Finance Commission, promoting a deeper integration of scientific modelling capabilities in policymaking, and facilitating a unified data measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) architecture at the State level. Given India's federal structure, this recommendation does not mean centralising climate actions, but ensuring that State-level actions are better coordinated without compromising their autonomy. This is possible only if the process goes beyond States individually trying to understand and respond to the climate crisis, and the Centre comes in as an active facilitator.

The new government should aim to take India's global climate leadership to the next level in its new term. It should look ahead for at least the next four to five years, and not a year at a time. On most international tables now, India has a seat. It must now demonstrate prowess.

*The views expressed are personal*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Jarring

We cannot bring back the dead, but the least we could have done was to grieve for those who lost their precious lives ("Hathras stampede toll hits 121; organiser pins blame on 'anti-social elements'" (July 4). The large-scale T20 World Cup celebrations at this moment are cause for introspection. Have we lost sensitivity and compassion

towards our own countrymen? Could not the victory celebrations have been low key?

**Balasubramanian Pavan,**  
Secunderabad

### Railways and safety

There have been many train accidents in India in the recent past. The recent one in which a goods train collided with an express train near West Bengal's New

Jalpaiguri is gruesome. When Lalu Prasad Yadav was the Union Minister for Railways, accidents were very rare. Further, he was able to ensure that the Railways became a good and profit-making entity. He never hiked passenger fares except for a small hike in goods train utility. Moving to the issue of safety, the protective system of automatic brakes, known as

the Kavach system, seems to be the most effective solution. It is unfortunate that such a safety system was not available in the recent accident. It is sad that the Railways which

### Corrections & Clarifications

An incorrect solution grid was published for The Hindu Crossword No. 14217 (July 4, 2024, all editions). The correct solution grid can be accessed at <https://newsweb.livemint.com>

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manages one of the largest rail systems in the world no longer has a separate Budget. The allocation for the Railways is measly now.

**M.L. Raghavan,**  
Truppur, Tamil Nadu

**Parliament functioning**  
In Parliament recently, some in the Opposition complained that their microphones were switched off. The Speaker and the Chairman were quick to say that they had no hand in it. Given that this is a brand new building, should there not be an inquiry into how the microphones failed?

**S. Venkataraman,**  
Bangalore



## Should India review its Myanmar policy in view of the humanitarian crisis?



**Rajiv Bhatia**  
is a Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House and a former Ambassador



**Nandita Hakkar**  
is a human rights lawyer

## PARLEY

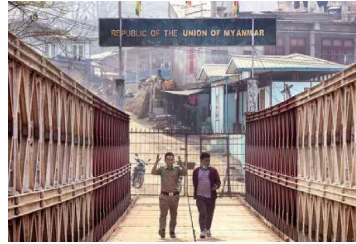
**T**he conflict between ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the military junta in Myanmar has created a serious humanitarian crisis, which the United Nations Security Council took up for discussion on July 3. Some experts on Myanmar have called for India to review its policy and establish channels with the EAOs to help the affected civilians. Should India review its Myanmar policy in view of the humanitarian crisis? Rajiv Bhatia and Nandita Hakkar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Kallol Bhattacharjee. Edited excerpts:

## Why does India's policy towards Myanmar require course correction?

**Nandita Hakkar:** Since October 2023, the ethnic armed groups and the PDF (People's Defence Force) in Myanmar have been coordinated in their effort to resist the military junta. These groups have been fighting the junta for many years, but this is the first time that they have been coordinated and have been able to hold at least 45% of the territory in Myanmar. In this context, many people have called for a rethink (of India's policy) and said that we must have some dialogue with these EAOs because of two reasons. First, the conflict is directly affecting India — there is an influx of refugees here. Second, the EAOs are being supported by China. At the same time, China has a relationship with the military junta. Apart from this, many of these resistance groups have actually taken control of all the trading routes that fall on the India-Myanmar, Myanmar-China, and Thailand-Myanmar border.

## Are the EAOs so powerful that they deserve to be recognised by state actors such as India?

**Rajiv Bhatia:** Essentially, India's traditional policy towards Myanmar has had two main facets: one, to develop good cordial relations with the military junta and second, to keep supporting democratic forces and ensure the strengthening of democracy. But in the last three years, Myanmar has changed beyond recognition. The military has not been able to impose its will. The people have rebelled against the military, but they have also not been able to prevail. In short, there is a strong military, political, diplomatic stalemate in Myanmar. That, I think, is the most forceful argument for some kind of a policy review and course correction. The second is that India's fundamental objective in Myanmar is to develop bilateral relations in all domains and make sure



An Indian police officer and an Indian man walk on a bridge across the Tiau river along the India-Myanmar border in Champhai village in Mizoram. AP

that Myanmar plays a useful role in its own 'Act East' policy. And the third is to have some kind of a balance between Indian and Chinese influences in Myanmar because that is essential for our national interest.

The situation in Myanmar has become difficult. About half of country it is still under military rule and control, but the other half is considerably fragmented. I think the (Indian) government should consult national-level experts and scholars — people who have a clear view on the history and complexity of Myanmar; and neighbours such as Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos, and eventually even China, to ensure some kind of stability. To have stability in Myanmar is in the collective interest of the neighbourhood.

## How compelling is the humanitarian situation in Myanmar to merit a review of the traditional policy?

**NH:** What Ambassador Bhatia said is that the situation is in a flux, so we cannot change course overnight. One way to test the waters is to start providing humanitarian assistance, at least in the border areas between India and Myanmar. India is directly affected, so we have a right to express our concern. The people in Myanmar don't have access to water, sanitary napkins, and anesthesia. Many young people are injured and require surgery to get their legs or arms amputated, but they have no access to medical facilities. Some of them have been able to cross over to Mizoram and go to Delhi from there but they are few in number. So, it would be well worth our while to explore ways in which we could offer real humanitarian assistance to the people and obtain Myanmar's goodwill that way. In the past, we have not done that. It is true that India has been supporting the democracy movement. It is true that in the past, the National League for Democracy was allowed to



One way to test the waters is to start providing humanitarian assistance, at least in the border areas between India and Myanmar.

**NH:** It is, of course, a complicated situation. In my view, there is still a legitimate government there, even though it does not control all the territory. So, if you are going to interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs, in areas which are not under the government's control, they are not going to like it. Therefore, to address that problem, it is very important for our authorities to talk to the government in Naypyidaw and explain that it is in our traditional mutual interest for the people of Myanmar to be assisted if their own government cannot help them. It makes sense for India's humanitarian image.

**RB:** It is, of course, a complicated situation. In my view, there is still a legitimate government there, even though it does not control all the territory. So, if you are going to interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs, in areas which are not under the government's control, they are not going to like it. Therefore, to address that problem, it is very important for our authorities to talk to the government in Naypyidaw and explain that it is in our traditional mutual interest for the people of Myanmar to be assisted if their own government cannot help them. It makes sense for India's humanitarian image.

**Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** had recently said that there is an international plan by some countries to create a Christian state in a part of Myanmar. Do such comments also highlight a requirement for India to closely engage with all sections of the Myanmar chess board?

**RB:** When a major neighbour begins to [become] fragmented, dangers of this kind could assume a clearer shape. She may have her own reasons to say what she said, although here in India we do not particularly see the creation of a Christian state within Myanmar. But what we do see is a kind of a Balkanisation. This is not in the interest of the people of Myanmar or in the interest of neighbours. That is why India has been closely associated with the Track 1.5 dialogue, which was initiated by Thailand, and in the Track 2 dialogue among scholars of the region, which is called the Bangkok process.

**NH:** I have been reading various blog posts and Facebook posts from the Northeast of the idea of a Kuki state which would include parts of Myanmar. That is why Ms. Hasina talked about it, because it was directly linked to her country and parts of India. This idea of a larger Kuki state has a direct impact on the Northeast. There

are already some Kuki underground groups that are trying to control all the routes that border Manipur with this intention.

**Ambassador Bhatia was referring to dialogue between India and Myanmar. But there is also the requirement of starting dialogue between the NUG and the military rulers.**

**NH:** As of now, from the little I know about the NUG, they are thinking not so much about reconciliation with the army or the military junta — I don't think that is possible — but about the kind of federal union they want. Conversations are going on within the NUG about a charter on the kind of alliances they could have, so that they can have a federal structure which keeps the whole of Myanmar as it is today. I think we have an interest in that because if there is Balkanisation, it will have a direct impact on India. That is one area of dialogue. As far as dialogue with the military junta [is concerned], I don't think they are thinking about that. But there are some moves which I have been told have been made by certain Western powers of trying to achieve some reconciliation. That is something which I think the armed groups and the PDF and civil society would resist. But yes, there should at least be dialogue on the kind of federal structure they could have. In that dialogue, India can play a role because that dialogue is also taking place within India's borders.

**What would be that the one piece of advice that you would like to give the newly elected Indian government? What should it do to avoid greater calamity in the bordering areas with Myanmar?**

**RB:** The advice is fairly self-evident. On the one hand, our people are trying to be in close touch with the military government. We have invested in this relationship over two decades, so that has to be. At the same time, we have sufficient leverage with the military to convey to them that their own people are suffering and the instability in Myanmar is having a negative impact across the board and on a major neighbour such as India and therefore the two countries should keep exchanging views on how we can address the humanitarian situation. At the level of people, at the level of communities, and at the level of the governments, we have to convey our deep interest in the good health, stability, and prosperity of Myanmar.



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## NOTEBOOK

## Chronicling parliamentary proceedings over time

There have been many obvious and some imperceptible changes in Parliament

Sandeep Phukan

**T**he first session of the 18th Lok Sabha was also the first session when the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) took over security of the Parliament complex. The agency, which is more used to guarding airports and key installations such as refineries, has replaced the Parliamentary Security Staff after a security breach last December. Dressed in dark trousers and contrasting light shirts, the CISF personnel were courteous and thorough with their airport-style frisking.

The security ring is not the only visible difference. The benches in the new Lok Sabha chamber are now more evenly occupied by members of the ruling National Democratic Alliance and the INDIA bloc. More than half the members (52%) are first-timers. There is an officially designated Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha after a decade. A combative Rahul Gandhi, occupying that chair, has marshalled the Opposition members in directing protests against the government, be it over the Manipur situation or the NEET exam paper leaks. Predictably, the decibel levels have been higher than in the previous two Lok Sabhas.

Many MPs of the ruling alliance have said that the scenes of Opposition MPs sloganeering while Prime Minister Narendra Modi was giving his reply to the Motion of Thanks on the President's address to Parliament were unprecedented.

Not quite. Even with less fire power, this Opposition has done this earlier. So has the Bharatiya Janata Party when it was in the Opposition. I remember Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was barely audible in the Lok Sabha while introducing his Council of Ministers in 2004. There were constant protests from the BJP-led Opposition over the issue of inducing "tainted ministers." They focused especially on Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalu Prasad Yadav for his role in the Bihar fodder scam.

The biggest change, of course, has been the building itself as parliamentary proceedings have shifted from the old circular edifice with round pillars to the newly designed triangle-shaped building last September. The old building is now called the Samvidhan Sadan — the place where the Constituent Assembly drafted, debated, and gave us our Constitution. For many journalists covering parliamentary proceedings, the old building meant easy access to MPs and ministers alike; in the new building, we are still trying to figure out the layout, including the path that leads to the press gallery.

The statue of Mahatma Gandhi that used to be opposite the main entrance to the old Parliament building has now been moved to the newly landscaped Prerna Shal along with the statues of other icons such as B.R. Ambedkar. The original location of the Gandhi statue used to be the place where the Opposition would assemble for any kind of protest.

Another long-standing tradition that is fading is the practice of Parliamentary Affairs Ministers holding informal briefings with reporters to discuss government business and back-channel negotiations with the Opposition. These off-record briefings were often used to convey the government's position on issues that may have led to a stalemate.

Finally, reporting has not been the same post-COVID-19. Many of the curbs seen during the pandemic, such as restricting the number of journalists who could enter Parliament during sessions, continues even now. The annual passes of accredited journalists, allowing them a free entry to Parliament round the year, have become inoperative during sessions. Now, even those who hold annual passes are required to have special passes for the session. Every political party should realise that reporters who report landmark legislation are the nation's first chroniclers of history.

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## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

## Falling like a house of cards



A bridge in Siwan district, Bihar, collapses. Ten incidents of bridge collapse have been reported in Bihar's Siwan, Saran, Madhubani, Araria, East Champaran and Kishanganj districts in over a fortnight. A PIL has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking directions to the Bihar government to undertake a structural audit and set up an expert committee to identify bridges that can be either strengthened or demolished based on the findings. PTI

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 5, 1974

## Imported farm pest destroyed in Delhi

New Delhi, July 4: Millions of threadlike worms from Australia that have never been recorded in India arrived last month at New Delhi airport in 13 huge crates. If these worms had escaped they would have infested the

## The Hindu.

Indian soil, multiplied into billions in each acre of land, stunted crops and in the long run, played havoc with Indian agriculture. The worms, together with the exotic plants that harboured them, were burned and destroyed at the Delhi electric crematorium. Nevertheless, this manner in which the worm-loaded shipment came, and was handled in violation of international and domestic quarantine rules has highlighted how easily Indian agriculture could be affected, or even sabotaged.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 5, 1924

## Heavy rains at Jamshedpur

Jamshedpur, July 1: Heavy rains are being witnessed throughout the week. The weather is threatening and it seems the downpour will continue for a few days. Waters are coming down the hills and the rivers are getting full. Three cases of lightning have since been reported in Tinpate, G Town and L Town.



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[ OUR TAKE ]

## No India-China thaw at SCO meet

New Delhi did well to continue to push for de-escalation at LAC. This will need more than talks at the diplomatic and military levels

With the India-China standoff on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into its fifth year, it would be unrealistic to expect a meeting between the foreign ministers of the two sides to lead to an immediate breakthrough, especially in the absence of any meaningful engagement of the top leadership of both countries in several years. The meeting in Astana (where the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit is on) saw external affairs minister S Jaishankar emphasising to his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, the need for complete disengagement of troops at the remaining 'friction points' in Ladakh and restoring peace at the border to facilitate the restoration of normalcy in bilateral ties. There was also agreement on stepping up the diplomatic and military talks that began in 2020 to resolve the face-off that has heightened tensions between the Asian giants. All of these points are in line with India's stated position that it cannot be business as usual with China as long as tens of thousands remain deployed on LAC, often in close proximity to other, and Beijing continues to flout agreements that had ensured a fragile peace at the disputed border. The meeting of the foreign ministers, however, is significant as this is the first time Jaishankar and Yi sat across a table in almost a year to discuss a situation that is not in the interest of either side.

The fraught nature of the bilateral relationship and China's numerous actions — whether it is forays into the Indian Ocean by its surveillance vessels or meddling in countries in India's backyard — don't augur well for regional stability. There have been subtle shifts by India on issues of importance to China — such as more open support for the Philippines' position in the South China Sea, allowing a US Congressional delegation to visit the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, and the Indian premier's references to Taiwan in public comments — that show New Delhi is less willing to countenance coercion or use of force.

However, it has also become amply clear that the diplomatic and military tracks are no longer adequate to fully resolve the standoff on LAC. Some on the Indian side even believe this is an effort by China to prolong the issue and hold up its resolution, while Beijing continues to insist that the border standoff be put in its 'appropriate place'. Therefore, the diplomatic and military talks should proceed in parallel with some form of supervision by the political leadership of both sides to ensure results, without the process dragging on interminably.

## Macro factors back sharp Sensex rise

**B**SE Sensex, India's benchmark equity market index, crossed yet another psychological threshold of 80,000 on Wednesday. The Sensex has taken only 139 trading sessions to complete its journey from 70,000 to 80,000 points, the quickest ever 10,000-point addition to its value. What is one to make of this achievement? Three points need to be made to answer this question.

The first is a need for a sense of proportion. Each new 10,000 points mean a smaller growth of the value of the Sensex. For example, the journey from 10,000 to 20,000 meant a 100% growth while the one from 70,000 to 80,000 means just a 14.3% growth.

The second is a more substantive question. Is the Indian equity market being driven by exuberance? An international comparison of the PE multiples — it compares share prices with earnings per share — suggests that it is. But a historical comparison shows that the PE multiple of the Sensex is lower than what it has been in the near and distant past. Read together, they suggest that the ongoing bull run could be driven by India's relative advantage vis-à-vis other global economies rather than unhealthy exuberance.

The third and most important is the question of the larger macroeconomy. Much of India's relative advantage has come because of its macroeconomic stability. Fiscal restraint shown by the Centre since the pandemic has played a role here. While this has been music to the ears of investors, it has also contributed to the ongoing growth trajectory not being broad-based. This must change if private capex, and, therefore, profits, have to increase on a sustained basis. This will justify the forward premium driving the equity markets. Rejuvenating broad-based growth without hurting investor sentiment is the most important economic policy challenge at the moment.

## Health alert: Indians need to exercise more

As the scope for adequate physical activity through work diminishes, the focus has to be on making it easy for people to exercise

A study published in *The Lancet* recently concluded that the prevalence of insufficient physical activity (PA) among adults has been increasing globally since 2000. The report says it has increased from an estimated 23.4% in 2000 to 31.3% in 2022. Of concern to readers here is that it has increased from 22.3% to 48.4% in the same period for India. It is important to note that insufficient PA means less than 150 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity in a week. For PA to protect the heart, it must make the heart work more than usual, indicated by an increase in heart rate or breathing harder, and must be done for at least 10 minutes at a stretch. PA has been shown to prevent many cardiometabolic diseases as well as cancers. And no, yoga is not counted as PA.

The key data sources are large population-based studies funded by the ministry of health and family welfare that use standard global tools and protocols. Having been personally

involved in many of these surveys, I can vouch that measuring PA at the population level is incredibly difficult. We ask a series of questions about time spent usually or in the last week in moderate and vigorous activity at work (at home for the non-working), travel, and leisure time, or discretionary (self-driven). Assessing the intensity of the activity as moderate/vigorous and the time spent can be quite challenging. The activity per se is not enough. For example, one could swim or play badminton vigorously (competitive) or moderately (recreational) even with very little activity (float/laze in water). Similarly, walking could be brisk (about 5 km per hour) or slower or faster. People often overestimate both the intensity and the time taken for their daily activities. The use of wearable devices to measure PA is rising for such surveys, though this still has several operational challenges.

Acknowledging the difficulty in measurement does not subtract from the key finding that PA is declining in India. In general, our studies show that the rural population is more active than the urban population. PA men are more active than women, older people have lower PA and most of our PA occurs in the work domain, especially in rural areas, and is much lower during leisure time or in the discretionary domain. In other words, we do not make efforts to do PA but do it only if it becomes necessary. It is brisk walking (or similar PA) for

30 minutes daily difficult for most Indians? Women often do low-intensity housework for long periods and get tired without necessarily doing any cardio-protective PA. They seem unable to fit these 30 minutes into their daily schedule or consider this unnecessary. People do not even walk to the bus or metro station and use two-three-wheelers instead. Inclement weather conditions and pollution further compound the problem. Most of us do desk jobs with little scope for any PA at the workplace. Long commutes leave us with little time and energy to do PA, even if one is interested. Rising screen times at all ages also hinder PA.

India is in transition as far as PA is concerned. As a chunk of the population ages and with rapid urbanisation, we are moving from work-based to discretionary as our predominant domain of PA. We need to create systems to facilitate it. The struggle for women would be the partial automation of many chores; the saved time can be used for discretionary PA. As rural people move away from agriculture to factories and service industries, work-based PA will come down. With an increase in the purchase of motorised vehicles (explosion in the two-wheeler segment and budget cars), commutation-related PA is also coming down. Increased PA in the discretionary domain will have to compensate for these declines. The challenge is to



Given the right nudge, people take up physical activity when an appropriate environment is created

HT ARCHIVE

make this transition smooth by making PA a habit.

People of all ages and genders exercising in parks in the morning and evenings are a common sight in the bigger cities. Public gyms have also made this more attractive. This shows that given the right nudge, people take up PA when an appropriate environment is created. Only education and fitness events will not cut it. Though they serve a certain group, more indoor gyms are also not a solution. We need to make our lives more physically active. For example, to promote cycle use, make it a safer and easier option. Promote stairs over lifts by making stairs easy to find in buildings and hotels. Build these habits at schools and promote PA in the workplace. We need more neighbourhood parks and spaces for children to play safely. While bigger and planned cities make provisions for parks, these are often missing in the unplanned growth of our peri-urban and suburban spaces. Our pavements are so

haphazardly made that it is difficult to walk on them, even for the most agile. Why do our smart cities not promote health and PA as a core focus? Promoting PA has to become a central tenet of urban planning and design. Finally, while it is good to see two large surveys funded by the health ministry contributing data for this estimate, these information sources are old (2017-18), and we need to have the next round of surveys to get a more updated picture and to do this regularly. The Union, state, and local governments need to promote PA at the population level: a goal of achieving a 10% reduction in insufficient PA by 2025 has already been set for the country. However, at the individual level, nothing stops one from taking the first step. It is, after all, for one's own benefit.

Anand Krishnan is professor, Centre for Community Medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

## Courts need to uphold procedural safeguards

**T**he Indian Constitution mandates, under Article 22(2), that a person arrested has to be produced in front of a magistrate within 24 hours of arrest, providing an opportunity for a judicial magistrate to inquire into the life, liberty, safety and dignity of the accused. This first step in the criminal justice system, termed first production, has life and death consequences for the accused. The magistrate also authorises further detention in police custody or judicial custody (jail) and oversees police investigation through remand hearings. Yet first production and remand in the magistrate courts have been understudied, given the inordinate focus on the higher judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court.

A recent report by Project 39A, National Law University, Delhi, authored by us, brings attention to the significant role of the magistrate at this stage, drawing from observations in Delhi courts over a period of three months. In a striking incident before a duty magistrate's court, a young Muslim man accused of theft was brought in for first production with visible injuries. The accompanying case file had the two most important documents, linked to the protection of liberty and safety of the accused that the magistrate examines at this stage — the arrest memo and the medical-legal certificate (MLC). The arrest memo has details of the time and place of the arrest and the process of intimation to the family. The MLC is a document created after a medical exam and is placed before the magistrate at first production and during subsequent productions from police custody. The accused's lawyer raised the issue of the police beating the accused. When the magistrate asked the accused about it, the policeman standing next to the accused intervened and stated that the accused was beaten up by the public. When the magistrate asked the accused directly, he said public *ne hi maarta* (the public also beat me). While clearly, the magistrate examined the documents and even interacted with the accused, it is unclear whether this was adequate probing of the possibility of police violence, which is necessary to ensure the safety and dignity of the accused.

This first of its kind study, titled *Magistrates and Constitutional Protections: An Ethnographic Study of First Production and Remand in Delhi Courts*, was conducted across all six district court complexes of Delhi — Dwarka, Karkardooma, Rohini, Saket, Tis Hazari and Patiala House. Researchers focused on the role of multiple court actors —

magistrate, court staff, lawyers, police, the accused and their families — and observed the manner in which courtroom dynamics and social hierarchies mediated the experience of the accused, during first production and remand. These are aspects that do not necessarily make their way into the written record or case documents. Besides checking the paperwork, these proceedings are an opportunity for the magistrate to publicly verify its contents through interaction with the accused, lawyers, police and even the family of the accused. This oversight is meant to ensure accountability in police functioning during investigation.

We found that magistrates rarely interacted with the accused to ascertain their well-being beyond a brief query. The MLC produced before the magistrate court notes the physical condition of the accused. The examination of the MLC, however, was rarely taken as an opportunity to probe the origin of the visible injuries and confirm whether they were caused by the police or the public, accidentally or intentionally. Magistrates also did not necessarily ensure the continued well-being and treatment of the accused in custody. In fact, while the accused brought for first production always had the MLC, those coming from judicial custody did not seem to have any such requirement of an MLC to ensure their continued safety. The researchers did observe, however, a higher peak of an inspection memo or a record of injuries/condition of the accused on arrest.

Perhaps the most surprising limitation observed in this context, unmentioned in the jurisprudence, statute and remand hearings, is that the accused are produced from police custody by officers from the police station investigating their case. In the case mentioned here, for instance, the magistrate asked him whether he was beaten up by the police while the officer investigating his case was standing right next to him. The accused, at that point, is not sure whether he might be sent back to police custody for further detention. There is thus no separation between the investigating officers and the accused at this stage to create an environment where the accused feels safe to raise their concerns about possible police violence. There appears to be a lack of recognition of the vulnerability of the accused in custody at this stage.

Undoubtedly, there is variation in the behaviour of magistrates across different courts, but a lot currently depends on their discretion, and whether first production and remand are adequately accounted for in the magistrates' work day. The onus is currently on the accused and their lawyers to point to the illegality of arrest and the need to protect the dignity and safety of the accused in custody entitled under Article 21 (on life and liberty).

By drawing attention to the experience of the accused during remand, we hope that institutional barriers to the protection of constitutional rights, addressed through procedural safeguards such as the MLC are used fully to ensure the safety of the accused.

Jinee Lokaneeta is professor in Political Science and International Relations, Drew University, Madison, NJ. Zeba Sikora is senior associate, Project 39A, National Law University, Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

[ XI JINPING ] CHINESE PRESIDENT

In the face of the real risks of small yards with high fences, we must safeguard the right to development

At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meet

## How cities can beat the heat with passive design

**T**he monsoon has brought much-needed relief from a scorching summer, in which the national capital saw temperatures peaking at 46 degrees Celsius. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) had issued red alerts for heatwaves in several states, and cities were panicking for cooling solutions. While the clamour for air conditioning units grows louder, an impactful approach to combating such heat exists, rooted in scientific understanding and sustainable principles — passive design.

Marketed as an easy fix, air conditioning systems mask deeper issues like power cuts and global warming. Rising temperatures and reliance on air conditioners (ACs) strain the grid, leading to brownouts, higher peak loads, and increased fossil fuel demand. This heightens heat exposure risks when passive alternatives aren't used. Additionally, ACs exacerbate the urban heat island effect by transferring indoor heat outdoors, making concrete areas hotter than green spaces and compromising thermal comfort for those without them. Integrating passive design features into buildings decreases reliance on energy-intensive cooling systems, lowers carbon footprints, reduces electricity bills, and addresses climate change by minimising peak loads on air conditioning systems.

Incorporating passive design principles starts right from the beginning of house design, with close attention to factors like massing (the architectural concept that relates to the three-dimensional structure of a building) and orientation (a building's position in relation to the Sun's paths and direction of wind). Creating shading through strategic massing and incorporating courtyards are integral aspects. Professional guidance ensures optimal building orientation to maximise airflow and minimise heat gain. Utilising indigenous materials with natural cooling properties enhances sustainability. Retrofitting existing constructions to incorporate these strategies improves thermal comfort and reduces electricity costs.

The insulation forms the foundation for cooler homes. With options from building air pockets to advanced thermal materials available in the market, insulation offers a versatile tool for protection. Reflective coatings and lighter hues on exterior surfaces deflect heat while traditional mosaic roof-floors minimise heat absorption. Yet, insulation alone isn't sufficient. Walls made of high thermal mass materials like clay bricks or autoclaved aerated concrete (AAC) blocks impede heat transfer, enhancing thermal comfort. Modern catalogues of such materials often feature hollow

configurations, which allow for the addition of air pockets or extra insulation materials to further optimise performance.

Efficient window design is crucial for balancing daylight and minimising harsh sunlight, promoting natural ventilation, and reducing reliance on mechanical cooling. Historically, courtyard-based layouts offered shaded areas and central vents for airflow, with windows positioned to reduce heat gain. Modern residences often overlook these features, but homeowners can still use shading techniques ranging from traditional chajjas to modern louvers to reduce heat penetration. Additionally, dampened bamboo or reed curtains, or *chik blinds*, provide effective shading during dry summers. Modern adaptations like modular clay brick louvers offer both functionality and aesthetic appeal.

Planting local, drought-resistant trees types significantly reduces ambient temperatures, creating resilient canopies and providing essential shade. In urban areas, vertical gardens and green roofs offer compact alternatives to trees. While maintenance is a consideration, automatic watering systems and innovative gardening techniques help address this challenge.

While deceptively simple, these measures are crucial for maintaining thermal comfort and reducing bills. Passive design offers a sustainable way to combat climate change, making it essential to prioritise the right strategies. Engaging architects and sustainability consultants becomes imperative for effective implementation.

Residents can enhance self-reliance and reduce their carbon footprint by transitioning to net-zero housing and leveraging government subsidy schemes for photovoltaic (PV) electricity generation and rainwater harvesting. Programmes like the Indian Housing Technology Mela under the PM Awas Yojana and the ministry of housing and urban affairs provide access to innovative building materials and technologies. Additionally, homeowners can enrol in green rating programs such as SVAGRIHA by Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA) to receive feedback on their sustainability efforts.

Investing in insulation, optimising thermal mass, and fostering natural ventilation may lack the glamour of a brand-new AC unit, yet its enduring benefits for both your finances and the environment are undeniable.

Sanjay Seth is senior director and Sheen Pandita is project associate, Sustainable Buildings Division, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). The views expressed are personal.



A lot currently depends on magistrates' discretion, and on whether first production and remand are adequately accounted for in their work day

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# The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Constitution at the centre

It is an inspiration for political classes, the people and judiciary. It's up to all to ensure there is no over reach



UPENDRA BAXI

## DATA UNINTERRUPTED

Government should publish detailed GST figures on a regular basis, to ensure transparency, more informed policy

ON JULY 1, the Ministry of Finance marked seven years of the shift to the Goods and Services Tax regime. About the same time, the government reportedly decided to discontinue the practice of publishing detailed GST data on a regular basis. This is an unwelcome departure from the past. The monthly GST data, which contains information on gross tax collections, revenue from levy of the compensation cess as well as the state-wise tax collected, serves several purposes. As data on many other economic indicators tends to be released with a considerable lag, the GST data works as a timely barometer to gauge the state of the economy. For instance, the quarterly GDP data comes with a delay of two months — data for the first quarter of the ongoing year (April-June) will only be released at the end of August. Similarly, data on industrial production is also published with a lag — data for April was published on June 12. The GST data also provides an indication of whether the government (it includes both Centre and state collections) is on track to meet its budgeted revenue projections, and as a consequence its fiscal deficit target. This has implications for its market borrowings.

This is not the first time there has been controversy around the release of official data. For instance, the 2017-18 consumption expenditure survey was not released by the government due to "quality issues". There was a sharp debate over the employment and unemployment survey of 2017-18. However, over the years, the government has taken steps to address the concerns raised over the growing gaps in data, and strengthened the statistical system. The employment surveys have been carried out and released at regular intervals. The fact sheet on the latest round of the household consumption expenditure survey was put in the public domain before the general elections. And recently, the government has released a fact sheet on the two rounds of the annual survey of unincorporated sector enterprises that provides information on how the informal sector has fared during 2021-22 and 2022-23.

The government should strive to maintain data transparency, it should resume the practice of releasing granular GST data at regular intervals. Alongside, it must move quickly for conduct of the much delayed census. While in the initial years of the decade, the delay on account of the pandemic was understandable, three years later, it is difficult to justify the continued stalling. This is more so since several official surveys have been carried out and released during this period. Considering that data, whether on household consumption expenditure, employment or tax, provides an understanding of various facets of the economy, the absence of data has critical implications for policy.

## HOME AND WORLD

Limiting itself to literature that is 'made in India' closes some windows. NCERT's textbook review needs more creativity

THERE IS A Robert Frost poem that students of a particular vintage would be familiar with: "I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence:/Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/I took the one less travelled by,/And that has made all the difference." One of the joys of literature is to lead the reader to the unexpected thrills of this unfamiliar road: A writer one has never heard of; a world view that shocks; a piece of writing so achingly beautiful that one does not want it to end. It leads one to a world beyond the familiar and the comfortable, turning readers into seekers. In its newly revamped English textbook for Class VI, Poovi, developed in line with the New Education Policy 2020's call for a curriculum "rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos", the NCERT has sought to locate this universe in India's diversity. The poems, essays and stories it now features are by some of India's best-known writers, including S I Farooqi, Sudha Murty and others. It offers students a glimpse of the heterogeneity that exists in the country. But in leaving out international writers largely, it does young people a disservice — it robs them of a window to a wider world.

Periodic revisions of textbooks are essential. There is pragmatism in introducing children to the multitudes contained in India, cutting across boundaries of region and language, custom and religion. There is, heft, too, in the idea of decolonisation that can serve as an introduction to the wide arc of literature that exists outside of the traditional canon. The study of any discipline requires context and a colonial trajectory is anything but representative. But such revisions must not lose sight of the goal: To expose students to a vibrant curriculum that encourages curiosity, enhances critical thinking and acts as a springboard to the lives and experiences of those both culturally and geographically like and unlike themselves. For that, merely "made in India" literature is not enough.

One of the comforts of literature — unlike social science, for instance — is that it deals not merely with the specificities of events but with the universality of emotions. The world can be a strange unfamiliar place but human nature is the same everywhere, governed by love and hate, greed and goodness, hope and despair. It is this delicate balance between home and the world, between what lies within and what meets the eye that should determine what goes into the curriculum and in what proportion. The NCERT would do well to keep that in mind for future revisions.

## SPEEDY DOES IT

Rubik's Cube is an apt metaphor for much that has been lost and gained since its invention in 1974

THE FIRST TIME Ernő Rubik "solved" what would go on to become his Magic Cube, the world was a very different place. In 1974, Rubik — an architect and teacher — put together 20 smaller cubes to create a larger one, with eight corners and 12 edges. It was months before the inventor could ensure that six sides of it were uniform in colour — the goal of the puzzle. Fifty years later, the world record to solve a Rubik's Cube is 3.3 seconds. And that's not all that's changed.

When Rubik invented his cube, Hungary — his home country — was behind the Iron Curtain. There was no internet then, no "influencers", to make a puzzle go viral. When it was finally picked up for the capitalist world, it was hugely popular. Over the last few decades, millions have tried and failed, and tried again to solve it. The achievement of finally figuring out the colours, though, required time, patience and long attention spans. No wonder, then, that Rubik's Cube has been hacked now, its mystery and romance gone. Just put in "how to solve a Rubik's Cube in under 10 minutes" in the search engine or Large Language Model of your choice, and voila! Almost everyone can do in minutes now what once took most people hours, if not days.

Now competitive and automated, the Rubik's Cube is perhaps an apt metaphor of all that has been lost and gained since 1974. Things are faster, and that sometimes means better. But with speed, people also lose something they need — the ability to sit, think and take something magical, a cube made of different coloured cubes, for example, and find out how it works. Now, a machine with more computing power than the smartest human can do it in seconds. Still, for those who want it, there's always a quiet moment to try to match Rubik's pace in solving his invention. The joy, after all, isn't in only finding the solution.

IT WOULD APPEAR that all political parties and their leaders have developed a new image of, and affinity for, the Constitution of India. This was evident in the recent session of Parliament, which was preceded by a hard-fought and hard-won election for the 18th Lok Sabha. The oath-taking of many-including the additional utterance of "Jai Samvidhan" — the chant also reverberated in many public gatherings — although the oath itself is a pledge to uphold the Constitution and the sovereignty and integrity of India.

Article 99 prescribes that every member of either House of Parliament should take an oath or affirmation according to the Third Schedule that she "shall bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as established by law". That phrase is itself puzzling because the Constitution determines the validity of laws passed by Parliament, not the other way around. And, despite some early hesitations, it has now been accepted by all that a constitutional amendment is also such a law, whose validity is subject to constitutional judicial review.

The cynic and the realist may maintain that the newly found affection and reverence for the Constitution is, at best, a novel way of heightening the democratic legitimacy for competitive political performance. They may argue that it has little bearing on adherence to constitutional duties (Part IV-A) or the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV), or even the rights of liberty and equality of all (Part III).

The extraordinary fact, however, remains that the voters have deftly developed the idea of constitutionalism as a shield and sword for their own larger freedom against the political futures they apprehend. Not being a political scientist or a psephologist is a disability, but I have always viewed election results in terms of the changing relationship between the "oathed" and "un-oathed" citizens. The paradoxes of democracy lie in how, and why, the oathed citizens continue to constitute the constitutional elites and how the "people", in whose name all political power is exercised, remain "masses" of the "weaker sections of society".

The other oath in the Third Schedule provides an important part of the answer. The

Surely, the Prime Minister was right to stress in the Rajya Sabha that the Constitution is not a miscellany of dry provisions and that we should also look at its underlying spirit. That is precisely what 'Kesavananda Bharati' and its normative progeny decided. The defence of the Constitution needs to now be made more specific: No matter how the Constitution may be amended in the future, with an all-party consensus, its Basic Structure and foundational principles should never be allowed to be eclipsed.

oath of office for Justices of the Supreme Court and the High Courts of India includes the following: "I will duly and faithfully and to the best of my ability, knowledge and judgement perform the duties of my office without fear or favour, affection or ill-will and that I will uphold the Constitution and the laws."

The first thing to note is the phrase "perform". The law as performance, a public demonstration, has yet to be fully studied in India. The second provides a succinct working definition of independence of the judiciary, as security from threats emanating from within (incumbent and supernumerary justices, litigants and lawyers), and outside (from the state and the economy).

Does it constitute a "judicial overreach" when justices act in light of their oath? Note also that they are the only class of constitutional *karamcharis* who are not to act on their belief and opinions but on their "knowledge and judgement". Knowledge here refers not to the folklore of law but to the institutional memory of the foundational values of courtcraft and justicing. And "judgement" connotes fidelity to the core principles of traditions of interpretation, in which most precedents function as stepping points of law. However, it allows reasoned justifications to depart from the precedents of manifest injustice.

Knowledge and judgement of the core principles of law provide the wherewithal for constitutional reverence and renaissance, as was memorably propounded on July 4, 2018 by the 45th Chief Justice of India, Dipak Misra (with Justices A K Sikri and A M Khanwilkar): "The constitutional duties of judges are expected to cultivate the understanding of constitutional renaissance by realisation of their constitutional responsibility and sincere acceptance of the summons to be obedient to the constitutional conscience with a sense of reawakening to the vision of the great living document so as to enable true blossoming of the constitutional ideals."

The judicial oath is thus a standing invitation to innovate judicial interpretation of the rule of law and to renovate the practices of good governance in accordance with reasoned judgment about judicial duties and remedial action. The repair, reform, and renaissance — inherent to judicial duties — is

thus placed at the service of judicial oath prescribed by the Constitution itself. The judicial oath is fully at work in and since the *Kesavananda Bharati* decision — the end of whose Golden Jubilee (on April 23, 2024) was proudly celebrated by many law schools and the grateful people of India. Rather than judicial overreach, the problem troubling us is that of constitutional underreach.

The *Kesavananda Bharati* decision and its progeny prescribed that, first, constitutional powers are plenary powers, supreme within their decisional domains, and second, that all powers are simultaneously limited and accountable. There are no sovereign powers, but only supreme constitutional powers provided within constitutional limits — including judicial power and the process of constitutional judicial review. And, contrary to political propaganda, most amendments since *Kesavananda Bharati* have been sustained — only a minuscule number have been held contrary to the Basic Structure doctrine. Further, the Basic Structure comprises two aspects: First, forensic freedoms (free space of argumentation in an open court — the independence of the Bar), and second, the independence of the judiciary. To take these away is to abolish altogether the idea of the Constitution and that of responsible sovereignty; in short, the very idea of legitimate authority.

Surely, the Prime Minister was right to stress in the Rajya Sabha that the Constitution is not a miscellany of dry provisions and that we should also look at its underlying spirit. That is precisely what *Kesavananda Bharati* and its normative progeny decided. The defence of the Constitution needs to now be made more specific: No matter how the Constitution may be amended in the future, with an all-party consensus, its Basic Structure and foundational principles should never be allowed to be eclipsed. Indian people have actively, and affirmatively, responded to this call but the question is whether constitutional elites will do so. Must the answer, as Bob Dylan sang in 1962, forever be "blowin' in the wind"?

The writer is professor of law, University of Warwick, and former vice-chancellor of Universities of South Gujarat and Delhi

## THE HATHRAS QUESTIONS

UP government must find the answers with transparency and urgency



VIKRAM SINGH

THE HORRIFIC STAMPEDE in Hathras on July 2 was avoidable. The failures need to be examined in depth. But even preliminary reports indicated that the district administration has a lot of explaining to do for the tragedy, which claimed 121 lives, mostly of women and children.

It all began with an innocuous application seeking permission from the district authorities. Approximately 80,000 devotees were expected to attend a *samagan* (a congregation of devotees). The officials approved this as a routine procedure. It seems that they did not take into account how crowds in such assemblies are known to swell beyond the sanctioned numbers. More than three times the number of sanctioned devotees of Bhole Baba gathered at the site of the event.

The Baba is a former constable of UP police, Suraj Pal Singh. He was accused of multiple cases of misdeeds in his official position. He was placed under suspension, but on bail, he opted for voluntary retirement and reinvented himself as a godman. He worked on a business model, which is alleged, mobilised people vulnerable to misinformation. The Baba's supporters spread the message that his photographs have curative qualities.

White-clothed volunteers, the *swam* sevals, organise the Baba's *satsangs*. They also take pains to ensure that photography and the use of mobiles are kept to a minimum. At the site of the Hathras incident, too, the

volunteers reportedly bullied people to not use their mobile phones to photograph the event. Bhole Baba is also known not to be keen on social media. But he has a fairly large following in parts of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh.

The police presence at the event was minimal. Normally, for such events, police deployment is chargeable from the party that demands arrangements. After all, they earn from their followers. It remains to be seen if this practice was followed in Hathras.

A crowd of 2,50,000 does not descend from the heavens. It would take about seven to eight hours for such a huge number of people to filter in. More so when the venue is next to a national highway. It's very likely that the news of the influx of devotees would have been relayed to the city and district control room. A contingency plan was imperative but it is obvious there was none. CCTV's should have been in place and the site should have had proper exit and entry points per the district's internal security scheme.

Duty cards should have been issued, and duties assigned. Was there any babar? Of course, the investigation ordered by the government will reveal answers to these questions. We hope that responsibility is fixed and those found wanting will be taken to task. There seems to have been a delay in giving medical aid to the injured. Any such

negligence must also be probed.

The post-mortems indicated that most deaths were caused by broken rib cage, crushing, asphyxia and/or haemorrhage. A First Information Report has been lodged against the sevadar volunteers. However, the Baba has not yet been named in the FIR. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) has been constituted to investigate this sensitive case. Its functioning should be transparent and the investigating team must give utmost urgency to submitting a report.

A godman like Bhole Baba be prosecuted under the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954? That is for the law enforcement agencies to determine. Anyhow, the ill-gotten wealth of these Baba belongs to the nation. Notably, Section 14(1) of the Uttar Pradesh Gangsters and Anti-Social Activities (Prevention) Act, 1986 gives the law the authority to attach all such properties after due scrutiny.

More importantly, there are elaborate instructions on crowd management in gatherings such as the one in Hathras. There are also scholarly studies on earlier tragedies and there is always a best way of doing everything. Unfortunately, the worst possible way of implementing the rule book was obvious in this case.

The writer is former director general of police, Uttar Pradesh

## JULY 5, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### RESIGNATIONS IN J&K

PRO FAROOQ LEGISLATORS of Jammu and Kashmir plan to resign en masse from the state assembly, P L Handoo, former law and revenue minister said that the move would force Governor Jagmohan to order fresh elections in the state. Party sources place the number of MLAs loyal to Farooq Abdullah at 38, including the speaker of the 75-member assembly.

### PM CRITICISED

THE JANATA PARTY president, Chandra Shekhar, said that the Prime Minister, Indira

Gandhi, was trying to "share power with the Army". He remarked that the Prime Minister had not learnt any lesson after returning to power after the Emergency. He stated that Indira Gandhi had deeper designs than her actions revealed. There was no doubt that she was turning into a true fascist.

### MILITANTS' LINKS

SEVERAL MILITANT ORGANISATIONS with foreign links were operating from the Golden Temple complex before the Army action. Their objective was to create an independent "Khalistan" by spreading communal strife through violent means. The White Paper, pro-

posed to be issued by the Government due to the Army action in Punjab, contains a graphic account of the activities of these organisations and their foreign connections.

### MUMBAI DONS HELD

UNDERWORLD DONS AND 14 other anti-social elements were detained by the Mumbai police under the National Security Act for being allegedly involved in inciting communal riots. Haji Mastan Mirza and Karim Khan Sher Khan alias Karim Lala were arrested. Investigations had led to the office of the All India Mill Secretariat at Dongri, a "social service" organisation founded by Haji Mastan.





## OUR VIEW



## Let's step up investment in the wisdom of crowds

*It's a thesis on which democracy and markets rest, but every stampede should make us sit up and wonder, Hathras's being the latest. Can India nudge people towards collective safety?*

Democracy and markets share a belief in the 'wisdom of crowds,' a thesis presented well by James Surowiecki in a book by that title which offers various examples of how numerous minds put together are smarter than a few. The antithesis of it, though, glares out from every news report of a stampede. Can a clash of that crowd thesis with its antithesis yield a synthesis? Say, the 'common sense of crowds'? The question has arisen again as India mourns the 120-plus lives lost to another crowd crush, this time in a slushy field near Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, where an estimated 250,000 devotees had turned up at a religious gathering, although local authorities said approval had been given for just 80,000. As reports say, too many tried to converge too quickly upon the preacher who led that prayer session (for his blessings). High-toll tragedies of this kind have befallen several places of worship in the past. Recall the 2013 Ratangarh temple crush in Madhya Pradesh. Globally, the worst stampede on record took place in Saudi Arabia during Hajj, a pilgrimage of faith, on 24 September 2015. Yet, the danger posed by crowd motion has nothing to do with religion. The same could happen in a packed hall hosting a rock show, which is why the risk of 'fire' being yelled in such a space is often cited to argue why free speech mustn't be an absolute right. Crowd-crush mortality is a universal worry.

In India, over-population is sometimes blamed for worsening our crowd risk. However, our population density is just 473 persons per square kilometre, according to 2021 World Bank data, so the crowds we see around us, especially in urban spaces, only reveal a problem of poor dispersal. We may number over 1.4

billion in all, but also have a vast landmass. It's just that the lure of cities is so strong. But is there more to it? Has the experience of crowds also conditioned us not to get ruffled by overcrowding? The typical queue we form doesn't have a gap of more than a foot. Taking public transport can be a struggle against suffocation. Milling together in close range occurs across the socio-economic pyramid. Even lifts in fancy high-rises get stuffed beyond capacity, with little concern for anybody's personal space. Or take the poshest of streets. Even if we have nothing but cars on them, crossings have them bumper-to-bumper, while the global norm is to leave a gap long enough to see the wheels of the car ahead touching the road. As for covid-time caution, the habit of social distancing seems to have worn off almost entirely.

Crowds can, of course, be calm and orderly. Whatever we are accustomed to, our mortality risk can be lowered. At the administrative level, we have crowd control guides, like the one issued by the National Disaster Management Authority. Authorities know how to decongest spaces and maintain order. But then, well-planned events with well-assigned roles are rarely a problem. What we need is not just to 'manage' crowds, but plug lapses in people's consciousness of crowds turning risky. Perhaps we could revive some of the messaging we used during the pandemic and improve it. Witty posters that grab eyeballs, for example, could work. Safe behaviour takes constant reminders. Ultimately, it's for people at large to assume responsibility for their collective well-being in the same way we expect an electorate to. Crowds needn't always be wise, but do have common sense. Nudged towards their better selves, the toll taken by reckless mobs will drop.

ROHIT KUMAR SINGH



is a former secretary to the Government of India.

Much of north India has witnessed an intense heatwave in recent weeks, with several heatstroke-related deaths being reported. Monsoon rains could not have arrived any sooner.

The effects of air pollution and climate change on human health are profound and increasingly palpable. Environmental epidemiologists have highlighted associations between heat and heatstroke, kidney injury, malnutrition and anaemia. Air quality has been linked to lung disease, cardiovascular disease and neonatal mortality. Extreme rainfall has been associated with mosquito-borne and diarrhoeal illnesses. More than four of every five Indians are exposed to extreme weather events. Other challenges include exposure to unsafe levels of air quality and vulnerability to zoonotic diseases.

Given these challenges, we could be exposed to a silent pandemic, putting our society's health at stake. As health secretary of Rajasthan in 2021, I witnessed the first reported cases of covid among Italian tour-

ists in Jaipur. To tackle this common challenge, we conducted daily meetings across traditionally siloed government verticals. Such a multi-stakeholder commitment is again the need of the hour. As the central government and states form their climate action and One Health committees, the issues involved need to be addressed through inter-sectoral collaboration.

We must begin with a thorough assessment of needs. Insights are crucial on which regions face the most pressing climate-related health burden. This cannot be an annual exercise limited to the district level. Decision-makers need a real-time weather map for climate-related health vulnerability. A vulnerability index should take into account exposure levels, population sensitivity and adaptive capacity. While environmental exposure data has been available in real-time through geospatial sensors and satellites, we need data on sensitivity and adaptive capacity, particularly as it relates to the health of India's rural residents.

During covid, technology played a crucial role in understanding and responding to the pandemic. As health secretary in Rajasthan, I oversaw the launch of a Community Health Integrated Platform (CHIP) in collaboration with Khushi Baby, an NGO. This platform

was initially used for community-based covid symptom surveillance and later expanded to track comprehensive primary care in each village, reaching 45 million people across the state. This is an example of the multi-stakeholder effort required. Similarly, the Centre's CoWin online platform facilitated the world's largest vaccination drive, showcasing our ability to manage complex health challenges through technology.

Building on these technological foundations, with Khushi Baby leveraging CHIP data, Rajasthan developed a Climate-Related Health Vulnerability Index (CHVI) that incorporates multiple data-sets. Tens of thousands of ASHA workers in the state—who played frontline roles during the covid pandemic—are acting as public health researchers in villages and using digital tools to report socio-demographic and health conditions as they change.

The CHVI can be used to empower each block official on the ground

with a close understanding of local risks and their driving factors. Additionally, the CHVI's automated assessment capability allows us to track which interventions are making an impact, providing feedback from those closest to the affected communities. This index could be adopted by the entire country for this purpose.

Beyond putting trackers in place, collaborative efforts must be made by government agencies, NGOs, health professionals and local communities. We must break down silos and foster a culture of shared responsibility. The Bhiwara Model used during covid exemplifies how local on-the-ground collaboration and decentralized decision-making can help contain public health threats. Such models should be adapted and scaled up.

The stakes are high. The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events underscore an urgent need for action. Heatwaves, floods and storms not only dis-

rupt daily life, but also strain our healthcare system. Vulnerable populations bear the brunt. Addressing this requires a proactive and inclusive approach towards public health and resilience.

Investing in climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure is no less crucial. Our health systems must be able to withstand climate shocks so that service levels hold up during a crisis. The effort must include upgrading facilities, training healthcare workers and ensuring adequate supplies of essential medicines and equipment.

Public awareness and education also play a crucial role. Empowering individuals with knowledge about climate-related health risks and preventive measures can lead to community-driven action. Grassroots movements, supported by resources and accurate information, can drive behavioural changes that reduce vulnerability.

As climate change represents the largest emerging public health crisis of our time, it demands immediate attention. To protect communities and safeguard public health, we must leverage technology, foster collaboration and build resilient health systems. This is a collective responsibility and it's time to act. Together, we must confront this challenge to assure India a healthy future.

## MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

## Deepfakes and Indian elections: A case of much ado over nothing

*Generative AI was mostly put to good use, exposing exaggerated fears of GenAI hurting democracy*



**JASPREET BINDRA**  
is a technology expert, author of 'The Tech Whisperer', and a Masters in AI and Ethics from Cambridge University.

ized and scalable manner, level the playing field, and make voting access for the differently-abled voters easier. Most, however, tended to focus on the negatives and the supposed havoc that GenAI could wreak on Indian elections.

Now that Lok Sabha polling is over, it seems to be much ado about nothing. A post facto analysis done by two Harvard Kennedy School scholars Vandini Shukla and Bruce Schneier ([bit.ly/4er8ISi](https://bit.ly/4er8ISi)) concluded that AI was mostly used constructively, rather than the destructive use that most of us expected. They estimated that political parties spent \$50 million on authorized AI-generated content, and used it for targeted communication aimed at their constituency's voters. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, both Karunanidhi, with his trademark dark glasses, and Jayalalitha were resurrected to appeal to voters, and this was openly authorized by their respective political parties—an example of 'deepfakes without deception'. Party workers at the lowest rung of the ladder frequented small tech companies that created personalized 'deepfake' videos of them. These could then be distributed at scale. This created an unprecedented opportunity for young techies, who set up nimble outfits to serve such political parties. India has 25 official languages and thousands of local dialects,

and some politicians leveraged the Bhaskini AI platform to dub their speeches. Voice clones of candidates made millions of calls to voters, explaining their promises. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi got into the act when in Tamil Nadu he asked his audience to put on earphones for his Hindi speech to be translated into Tamil in real time. Political workers used GenAI and other technologies to flood social media with localized and contextualized memes.

It was not all a bed of roses, though. There were many instances of the use of deepfakes to impersonate candidates spewing hatred and discord, saying things they had never said, and making it difficult for voters to understand what was real and what was fake. But, as James Thornhill writes in *Financial Times* ([bit.ly/3RBLg8B](https://bit.ly/3RBLg8B)): "[I]t could well be that the increasing use of AI tools by millions of users is itself deepening public understanding of the technology, inoculating people against deepfakes. The election did not appear to be disfigured by the digital manipulation."

In a sense, the proof was in the pudding. There were more concerns about the heatwave killing poll workers and reducing voter turnouts than of fake videos. The outcome of the election revealed less IT-savvy parties winning in many places. This showed that the wise Indian voter not only saw through the rhetoric of politicians, but also the fake news that some of them generated. In the end, the dire forecasts of doom-sayers did not come true, as AI was used more for good than bad. Harvard researchers Shukla and Steiner point out that "the technology's ability to produce non-consensual deepfakes of anyone can make it harder to tell truth from fiction, but its consensual uses are likely to make democracy more accessible."

James Thornhill wisely noted that "we should worry more about politicians spouting authentic nonsense than fake AI avatars generating inauthentic gibberish." Indian voters this summer seemed to agree.

## QUICK READ

A digitally and social media savvy population has meant AI use has grown in India, but the just-ended elections have arguably shown GenAI to be more of a help than a danger to democracy.

Political parties deployed AI to make memes with local contexts and recreated their ideologies digitally to strike a chord with voters. All this outweighed the damage deepfakes caused.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

A ruined planet cannot sustain human lives in good health. A healthy planet and healthy people are two sides of the same coin.

MARGARET CHAN

## GUEST VIEW

## Let's tackle the emerging climate-induced health crisis

ROHIT KUMAR SINGH



is a former secretary to the Government of India.

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The effects of air pollution and climate change on human health are profound and increasingly palpable. Environmental epidemiologists have highlighted associations between heat and heatstroke, kidney injury, malnutrition and anaemia. Air quality has been linked to lung disease, cardiovascular disease and neonatal mortality. Extreme rainfall has been associated with mosquito-borne and diarrhoeal illnesses. More than four of every five Indians are exposed to extreme weather events. Other challenges include exposure to unsafe levels of air quality and vulnerability to zoonotic diseases.

Given these challenges, we could be exposed to a silent pandemic, putting our society's health at stake. As health secretary of Rajasthan in 2021, I witnessed the first reported cases of covid among Italian tour-

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We must begin with a thorough assessment of needs. Insights are crucial on which regions face the most pressing climate-related health burden. This cannot be an annual exercise limited to the district level. Decision-makers need a real-time weather map for climate-related health vulnerability. A vulnerability index should take into account exposure levels, population sensitivity and adaptive capacity. While environmental exposure data has been available in real-time through geospatial sensors and satellites, we need data on sensitivity and adaptive capacity, particularly as it relates to the health of India's rural residents.

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Beyond putting trackers in place, collaborative efforts must be made by government agencies, NGOs, health professionals and local communities. We must break down silos and foster a culture of shared responsibility. The Bhiwara Model used during covid exemplifies how local on-the-ground collaboration and decentralized decision-making can help contain public health threats. Such models should be adapted and scaled up.

The stakes are high. The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events underscore an urgent need for action. Heatwaves, floods and storms not only dis-

rupt daily life, but also strain our healthcare system. Vulnerable populations bear the brunt. Addressing this requires a proactive and inclusive approach towards public health and resilience.

Investing in climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure is no less crucial. Our health systems must be able to withstand climate shocks so that service levels hold up during a crisis. The effort must include upgrading facilities, training healthcare workers and ensuring adequate supplies of essential medicines and equipment.

Public awareness and education also play a crucial role. Empowering individuals with knowledge about climate-related health risks and preventive measures can lead to community-driven action. Grassroots movements, supported by resources and accurate information, can drive behavioural changes that reduce vulnerability.

As climate change represents the largest emerging public health crisis of our time, it demands immediate attention. To protect communities and safeguard public health, we must leverage technology, foster collaboration and build resilient health systems. This is a collective responsibility and it's time to act. Together, we must confront this challenge to assure India a healthy future.





MY VIEW | THE LAST WORD

MINT CURATOR

# The new government should act to broaden India's fiscal agenda

We urgently need fiscal support to fortify our public examination processes and address the ravages of global warming



INDIRA RAJARAMAN  
is an economist.

The final Union Budget for the ongoing fiscal year 2024-25 will be presented in the monsoon session of Parliament starting 22 July. It is expected to conform to the interim budget presented before the elections by the same finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. But there have been some developments post the election process which call for new initiatives.

Examination paper leaks have roiled India. Public examination processes must have integrity in order to offer equality of opportunity, a key element in the social contract between the individual and the almighty state. The issue found mention in the President's address to Parliament on the government's agenda. Hopefully, it will find further mention in the budget speech, with a focus on prevention.

Fiscal support for a selection and training centre for personnel inducted into examination administration is urgently needed. The idea would be to ensure appointment of people fully trained in standard operating procedures for setting and securing exams in a variety of forms—paper-based or computer-based. The new unit could be added as a wing to the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), which commands widespread trust and respect.

The surprising feature of the current scandals is that they involved national agencies. At the state level, the problem recurs frequently. Most recently, the written examination for the post of police constable in Uttar Pradesh scheduled for February 2024 was cancelled because of paper leaks.

Fiscal provision for public examination processes will not take a big bite out of the exchequer. There is the overriding concern, of course, of whether the fiscal deficit committed to in the interim budget, at 5.1% of GDP, will be achievable. The Cabinet has already taken a decision to hike minimum support prices for 14 crops, mostly in the range 5-8% (with a few outliers), in accordance with the recommendation of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices. Without knowing whether this increase was anticipated in the food subsidy in the interim budget, pegged at ₹2.05 trillion, it is not possible to estimate how much higher the food subsidy will be in the final budget.

Standard macroeconomic prudence gets upended when confronting an economy with the fingerprints of global warming all over it. The present situation is that food (and vegetable) prices are rising in the face of the scorching heat wave that engulfed large tracts during the first quarter of the current fiscal year.

Every move in the budget has to be evaluated against the backdrop of the warming monster that kills people (including staff on duty in the just concluded general election); that can drastically



reduce agricultural productivity; can raise food prices and reduce real wages more than what seems apparent from an overall CPI index. It has caused forest fires in a region where the major river systems of the country originate. It has led, exacerbated by decades of predatory exploitation, to severe water problems in major cities. In short, it has the power to destroy us.

Moody's Ratings has said public failure to address water scarcity could lower the credit rating of India.

Maybe that will prod the finance ministry into placing climate warming front and centre. Short-term indicators like the Purchasing Managers' Index do not matter as much as frequent disruptions to economic activity posed by climate forces, which can become more frequent and disruptive over time. The time to act is now.

There is need for a new Central government initiative with municipalities. Within that umbrella, partnerships can be taken up in sequence with cities which put forward a viable programme for restoring underground aquifers. It can work like the Scheme for Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment, with the difference that cities would be invited to come forward with financial proposals for specific projects.

These city partnerships need not be fully funded by the Centre. There could be special purpose vehicles for each Centre-city partnership, finan-

cially contributed to by private individuals. The Forbes-list billionaires residing in big Indian cities could surely throw a few pennies into that hat, drawing inspiration from the famous 1975 rescue of the New York City municipality from bankruptcy by a financial vehicle formed by high-net-worth residents. But project supervision must be assigned to a board of engineers with professional credibility, unrelated to the financiers.

The flooding during the mon-

soons of several large cities with concomitant mixing of sewage and drinking water is a continuing health-hazard disaster. The annual flooding of the Minto Bridge underpass is so predictable that it has become the signature of the monsoon in Delhi. A major commercial centre like Bhikaji Cama Place is periodically assailed by the stench of sewage overflow even in non-monsoon months.

What about the ambient warming brought about by global forces? Air-conditioners to cool interior spaces pump hot

air into the exterior world, turning urban public spaces into furnaces. Subsidies to incentivize retrofitting of air-conditioners with more efficient motors at lower energy intensity and insulation of roofs and windows have been tried in other countries. We need to study initiatives successfully implemented elsewhere, such as country schemes within the Green Deal of the European Union, and build on them.

## QUICK READ

The full budget is expected to be directionally in line with the interim one, although exam paper leaks and the climate crisis demand fiscal provisions for tackling these challenges.

Every budget move should be evaluated against the backdrop of global warming, given the havoc this raging monster can cause across almost every dimension of our lives.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

# Action on diversity is more powerful than eloquence

NEERA SAGGI



is former president of Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

A six months' grace period was something I learnt to negotiate in assignments as one of the first women working in the infrastructure sector. When I was posted in the ports sub-sector, or in a large infrastructure project, many would question my suitability as a woman officer for a role in a male-dominated field. Inevitably, I would beg for six months before a decision was taken to re-post me to an assignment considered more conducive for a woman officer. Things have somewhat changed today, and many women are contributing at different levels in these 'tough' sectors. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is much propagated. Yet, one senses some impatience with gender diversity.

While organizations claim commitment to DEI, only a few companies, boards and nomination and remuneration committees (NRCs) prioritize what has long been ignored. Who a board includes as member is a strong leadership signal to others in the

company. As the Companies Act mandates that the board must decide its own composition, every board has an opportunity to ensure its own diversity and lead by example. Very often, for inducting members, boards rely on their own networks as this provides comfort and continuity. However, known networks are not socially neutral and exclude diverse groups from legitimate opportunities. As Abraham Maslow observed, boards can either step forward towards growth or step back into safety.

Diversity assumes centre-stage in an organization once it goes beyond the stipulated mandate and has more than one woman as a board member.

Nuances in interactions create perceptions and these weave an organizational culture. Often, women employees state that they are hardly aware of board agendas that include a diversity component. Similar concerns led the Union Budget to include 'gender budgeting' in 2005-06. But corporates rarely study the impact of their plans on differing gender needs and priorities or discuss it. This should be a board room issue, as the board is a symbol of authority and governance. If it does not insist on diverse viewpoints, it unwittingly encourages exclusion.

Board interactions at different levels also set the tone. Is the board given to hearing diverse voices? Does what its members say reflect a quest for equality, or does it convey a condescending attitude?

To increase diversity, most NRCs place the onus on the human resources (HR) team and its leader. Champions of diversity, however, are needed at all levels. Organizations often omit to review specific cultural leanings that prevail within them. It is not just formal processes that lead to targets being met, but also unstructured conversations.

An 'affinity bias' is at the root of an asymmetrical work force, and it impacts recruitment, training, assignments, promotions, halting the career progression of those who lack 'affinity.' It also confines gender diversity to 'soft jobs.' If this bias is not weeded out, any DEI achievement would be temporary at best, as attrition would soon set in.

In a race to meet business targets, there is often pressure on diversity. Yet, we see boards doing little to assess the management's acceptance of diversity. Today, it is politically incorrect for CEOs not to portray themselves as DEI champions. However, whether the talk is walked must be analysed. One effective mechanism is to include DEI as a key responsibility area (KRA) for the performance evaluation of top managers.

NRCs tend to overlook two key factors: the cost of deficient diversity and the perseverance needed for it.

Identifying diverse candidates for various positions can be complex and time-consuming. This is costly, just as provisions like creches, security, maternity leave and childcare support are. Yet, these costs are outweighed eventually by the cost of DEI failure.

Organizations rarely have a formal consultation mechanism that enables women to participate in designing a safe

work environment. A clear understanding of women's needs (safely has a psychological aspect too) is critical to frame robust policies.

As an independent director, my interactions with women employees have been an eye-opener. Achieving diversity is one thing, fostering an inclusive culture, where different voices are heard and valued, is another. Boards forget to assess if their organization absorbs diverse employees well or suffers from a cultural bias that discourages assimilation. Dismissive attitudes to compliance requirements like POSH, maternity leave, etc. can add to discord. Any talk of the alleged futility of such policies and criticism of 'privileges' can create dissonance. Lost in such conversations is how diversity adds value and divergent views form the basis of sound decision-making.

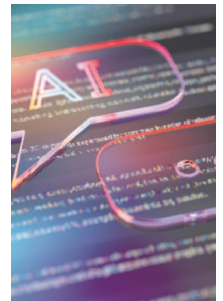
Replication of success is an important part of any strategy, so should addressing what has been neglected. DEI should be prioritized. Women can narrate innumerable instances of patronizing attitudes and indifference to diversity. This needs to end. Boards must demonstrate their commitment to DEI. Action is more powerful than eloquence, as it goes beyond tokenism and testifies to that commitment.

# GenAI's brain fog will not stop a reckoning for creative folks

The tech's accuracy is in doubt but generative skills are being used



PAMY OLSON  
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The advertising industry is among the first to be impacted by GenAI. ISTOCKPHOTO

Ever notice how science fiction gets things wrong about future technology? Instead of flying cars, we got viral tweets that fuelled culture wars. Instead of a fax machine on your wrist, we got memes. We're having a similar reality check with artificial intelligence (AI). Sci-fi painted a future with computers that delivered reliable information in robotic parlance. Yet businesses that tried adopting Generative AI tools have found, with some dismay, that the tools 'hallucinate' and make mistakes. They are hardly reliable. And the tools themselves aren't stiff and mechanistic either. They're almost whimsical.

"We thought AI'd be *The Terminator* but it turned out to be *Picasso*," says Neil Katz, founder of EyeLevel AI, a startup that helps companies get GenAI models to try and work with 95% accuracy when plugged into their data. It will take another three to five years of tinkering before that level of reliability becomes widespread with AI, Katz predicts, meaning that the technology can be substantially useful to the core operations of finance or health-care companies. That doesn't mean GenAI isn't having an industry-transforming impact, though. It's just not happening as once envisioned.

Even as firms rein in spending and investors dampen AI expectations, the technology's creative strengths that are taking hold in industries where hallucinations can be an advantage, and where there's less risk in getting things wrong. Think marketing, gaming and entertainment, or any job that involves non-linear thinking.

The impact is already clear on jobs. Contractors dominate in creative industries and, since the launch of ChatGPT, there has been a 21% drop in demand for digital freelancers, according to a November 2023 study by researchers at Harvard Business School and two other academic institutions. The jobs most affected have been in writing. Yael Biran, an experienced animator who had enjoyed a work flow of about 12 projects annually, recently told me that her activity had dwindled to just three in the past year.

"Marketing is furthest in exploiting AI," according to a recent note by Enders Analysis, an industry research firm specializing in technology, media and telecom, while smaller advertisers can use GenAI tools to write marketing copy or generate posters and images. So far, one of the biggest obstacles has been getting AI to produce accurate depictions of company logos, one machine-learning engineer at a marketing firm tells me, but such technical issues are easy to rectify with tools like Adobe Photoshop.

Last year Coca-Cola Company published an advertisement on YouTube partially created with GenAI tools, while Toys 'R' Us has developed an entire ad with OpenAI's video generation tool Sora, and to arguably bizarre effect. The saccharine video commercial features a young boy whose face makes subtle, alien-like contortions throughout, a reminder of the flaws that image generators are still ironing out. Twitter users piled on the Toys 'R' Us commercial to label it as creepy, which was true, but they also called it highly ineffective, which it wasn't. AI-generated ads are only just getting going and will likely find a willing audience.

Consider that AI-generated images have already been flooding Facebook with bizarre renderings of 'Shrimp Jesus' and other similar detritus, suggesting that large swathes of the public are forgiving (or perhaps not seeing) the mishapen human hands of GenAI, but rather taking a shine to its vivid and slightly unreal aesthetic.

In the meantime, businesses are grudgingly accepting that AI has truth issues, something that should have been obvious from the start: The GenAI boom was underpinned by language models that can predict the next most likely word in a sentence. Companies that are trying to plug these models into their data sets are struggling because the AI systems were trained on text. The models struggle to make sense of numbers, financial tables, charts or handwriting. That is a solvable technical problem, but it will take time, making hallucinations a bummer in the road to GenAI's path to wider adoption. For a while, AI will continue to be better at writing poetry than at solving math problems.

Perhaps that's why OpenAI's chief technology officer, Mira Murati, was so brutal in her assessment of how her company's tools would upend creative skills in humans. "Some creative jobs may be well done, but maybe they shouldn't have been there in the first place," she said in a recent interview.

The hallucination problem of artificial intelligence could take a few years to solve for the likes of banks, telecom service providers and health-care companies.

In the immediate short-term, however, creative industries will be easy to rectify with tools like Adobe Photoshop.

## QUICK READ

An 'affinity bias' could explain why so many organizations that claim commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion fail to walk their talk, as seen in the low priority it's frequently given.

Achieving diversity is one thing and fostering an inclusive culture, where different voices are heard and valued, is another. Sound decisions emerge when diverse views are taken into account.



# The Statesman

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## Farmers' Struggle

The plight of marginal farmers in India is an urgent issue that demands immediate attention. These farmers, who own or lease less than one hectare of land, represent over 65 per cent of the farming community. Their challenges are manifold, compounded by the impacts of climate change and inadequate access to essential resources. One of the most pressing issues highlighted by recent reports is the shrinking income of marginal farmers. As farm incomes decline, many farmers are forced to seek supplementary livelihoods. This trend, exacerbated by erratic weather patterns, poses a significant threat to the sustainability of agriculture in India. Nearly half of the respondents in a recent survey reported crop losses in key crops like paddy, cotton, wheat, and potatoes, severely affecting their economic stability. Despite the critical role that marginal farmers play in the agricultural sector, they face significant barriers in accessing government schemes and services. While over 86 per cent of respondents reported receiving Direct Benefit Transfers, other vital supports like institutional credit, crop insurance and technical inputs remain out of reach for many. This disconnect highlights the need for more inclusive and accessible policies that address the unique challenges faced by these farmers. The current agricultural policies must evolve to recognise the limited nature of land as a production factor while leveraging the potential of capital, labour, and technology. Meaningful interventions in areas such as dairying, livestock, horticulture, and intensive protected cultivation can provide alternative income sources and improve the resilience of marginal farmers. Technical support services for commodity clusters should be strengthened to ensure farmers receive the necessary guidance and resources.

Climate Resistant Agriculture (CRA) is another crucial area that requires attention. While many farmers have heard of CRA, their ability to implement these practices depends largely on the availability of extension services and technical inputs. The reality is that most farmers rely on village-level input suppliers for information on seeds, nutrients, insecticides, and pesticides. This reliance underscores the need for better outreach and education programmes that can provide accurate and timely information to farmers. Linking programmes like MNRGA with CRA initiatives has shown promise in states such as Odisha, Maharashtra, and Bihar. These efforts need to be scaled up and replicated nationwide to build a robust support system for marginal farmers. Furthermore, the convergence of the ministries of rural development and agriculture, under the leadership of experienced policymakers, can drive more grounded and effective farm policies.

The role of civil society and the private sector in supporting marginal farmers cannot be overstated. Farmer collectives, self-help groups, and other community-based organisations can significantly enhance the bargaining power of farmers, providing them with better access to services and markets. Private sector initiatives, such as climate-smart villages and digital weather index-based insurance, also offer innovative solutions that can mitigate the risks associated with farming. It is imperative that all stakeholders work together to create a supportive ecosystem that empowers farmers and enables them to become viable entrepreneurs in India's green economy.

## Strategic Patience

The US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell's current stance on interest rates reflects a prudent approach to economic policy. As inflation shows signs of easing, the Fed is exercising caution before making any hasty decisions on rate cuts. This measured approach is vital for maintaining economic stability and ensuring that the gains made in recent years are not prematurely undone. Mr Powell's remarks at Portugal underscore the complexity of the Fed's mandate to balance inflation and employment. While the Fed's preferred measure of inflation, the PCE, has shown a slight uptick, it remains below the 2 per cent target. This cautious optimism is tempered by the understanding that these figures need to be consistent and indicative of underlying trends before any policy shifts can be confidently made. The strength of the US economy affords the Fed the luxury of time. This is crucial in a period marked by both global and domestic uncertainties. Mr Powell's assertion that the economy's robustness allows for a careful approach to rate cuts highlights a strategic patience. The central bank is well aware of the risks of moving too quickly, which could jeopardise the economic expansion and potentially trigger a recession. One of the more nuanced aspects of Mr Powell's statement is the acknowledgment of the "two-sided risks" in the current economic environment. On one hand, there is the risk of inflation not being fully under control, and on the other, the risk of increasing unemployment if policy remains too tight for too long. This delicate balance is at the heart of the current deliberations. The Fed's cautious stance is also a response to the intricate dynamics of the labour market. While some measures suggest the job market is strong, the potential for trade-offs between further inflation control and rising unemployment cannot be ignored. Mr Powell's comments suggest that the Fed is acutely aware of these dynamics and is striving to avoid the pitfalls of premature policy adjustments that could harm employment levels.

Investors and policymakers alike are keenly watching the upcoming employment and inflation reports. These will play a crucial role in shaping the Fed's decisions in the coming months. The anticipation of a rate cut in September is a reflection of the market's sensitivity to the Fed's signals. However, Mr Powell's emphasis on patience indicates that the Fed is not driven by market expectations but by a thorough analysis of economic indicators. The timing of the first rate cut, whenever it may be, will send a significant signal to the market. It is not merely about easing borrowing costs but about starting a cycle that will bring rates to a level conducive to sustained economic growth. The Fed's aim is to reach a neutral stance where monetary policy neither stimulates nor restricts economic activity excessively.

# The fires of hell

Some people are more vulnerable than others to the effects of climate change on health. In fact, climate-sensitive health risks are disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including women, unborn babies, children, ethnic minorities, poor communities, migrants or displaced persons, older populations, and those with pre-existing medical conditions



We are witnessing impacts of climate changes in a variety of ways. Almost every day, in one or other part of the globe, more frequent and intensifying weather and climate events are observed, including storms, extreme heat, floods, droughts and wildfires. This year, as summer continues in the Northern Hemisphere, we are facing the relentless and devastating power of extreme heat waves.

Our country is literally burning. Delhi touched a record temperature of close to 50°C. There were reports of forest fires, of buildings going up in flames, of electrical equipment burning. Surprisingly, even leaves are being burnt to a crisp. In fact, the heat wave is a national emergency. Above all, it remains a fact that the extraordinary Indian summer could be a warning message to the world. In Saudi Arabia, the extreme heat wave turned the sacred Haj pilgrimage into a perilous journey. In the US over 80 million people are under heat alert. In the Balkans and the Mediterranean areas are also reeling under blistering effects of heat waves. What is a matter of serious concern is that the World Meteorological Organisation has predicted that future years will likely surpass current temperature records. The world is on the boil and all this will only get worse, not just in India but across the world.

Global warming has put humans in a situation which could metaphorically be compared with the boiling frog syndrome. A frog is put in a vessel of water and the vessel is slowly heated. As the temperature of the water rises, the frog is able to adjust its body temperature accordingly. Thus, the frog keeps on adjusting with increase in temperature. But just when the water is about to reach boiling point, the frog is not able to adjust any more. At that point, the frog tries to jump out of the vessel, but in vain because the frog has lost all its strength in adjusting with the rising water temperature. Eventually, the frog is boiled alive. The tale is often told as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react or to be aware of the sinister threats that arise gradually rather than suddenly.

Global temperature has not increased suddenly. It has changed gradually. Our situation is a bit like the proverbial frog. The syndrome teaches us that unlike the frog, had we taken appropriate decisions vis-à-vis timely actions we could have escaped the fate faced by the frog. We are quite aware of the fact of gradual

changes in global temperature, direct and indirect effects of global warming and have also heard prophecies of experts. But we have ignored these, as Cassandra's prophecies were ignored that led to the fall of Troy. In his address at the UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021, then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson aptly said: "Humanity was caught napping by coronavirus. But for climate change, nobody can say we have not been warned. And nobody can say we are not now capable of making the preparations." Notwithstanding our awareness, global warming continues relentlessly. We have to accept that heat is here to stay and will only get worse. Hence we need to understand how much heat humans can tolerate. Scientists believe that this range is 40°C to 50°C. But it depends on how acclimatized our bodies are; on whether the heat is dry or humid, and whether it is accompanied by high levels of moisture (H2O vapour) in the air, which makes it more unbearable, and, of course, on the condition we live in. Weather and climate change has been predicted that future years will likely surpass current temperature records. The world is on the boil and all this will only get worse, not just in India but across the world.

Since the 19th century, human activities have increased greenhouse gases - predominantly carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide - in the Earth's atmosphere and have resulted in global warming (greenhouse effects). Fundamentally, climate shocks and growing stresses such as changing temperature and precipitation patterns, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels degrade the environmental and social determinants of physical and mental health. All aspects of health are affected by climate change: from clean air, water and soil to food systems and livelihood. WHO data shows around 2 billion people lack safe drinking water and 2 billion suffer from food-borne illness annually. Climate stressors heighten water and food-borne disease risks. In 2020, around 700 million face hunger, predominantly in Africa and Asia.

Floods not only have direct effects but also increase the risk of microbiological water pollution. Global warming affects water heating and transmission of water-borne pathogens. The high sea surface temperature and sea level rise may cause waterborne infections and toxin-related illness such as cholera and shellfish poisoning. Higher temperature may also facilitate the introduction of new pathogens, vectors, or hosts (food chain). Without preventive measures, deaths from vector-borne diseases, currently over 7 lakh annually, may rise. The transmission of infectious diseases through vectors is very complex, particularly when humans or livestock are not the only reservoir. But it is abundantly clear that the key elements in the epidemiology of vector-borne diseases include the ecology and the behaviour of the host, the ecology and behaviour of the vector, and the level of immunity of the population. Pathogens transmitted by vectors are particularly sensitive to climate change because they spend a good part of their life cycle in a cold blooded host invertebrate whose temperature is similar to the environment. So, a warmer climate facilitates favourable conditions for the survival and completion of the life cycle of the vector, going as far as to speed it up as in the case of mosquitoes. It has been observed that in warmer areas the percentage of maturation of insects from larval form to adult form increases and the time required for maturation also decreases. Mosquitoes are now found worldwide, except in regions permanently covered by ice. There are about 3,500 species of mosquitoes, almost three quarters of which are present in tropical and sub-tropical wetlands. Mosquitoes typical of temperate regions have had to develop strategies to survive the winter, as well as pathogens that can be transmitted. In tropical regions, similarly, adaptation was needed to survive at the time of prolonged drought.

However, in both cases, these adaptive mechanisms have also affected the reasonability of transmission. Globally, in 2022, about 600,000 deaths were estimated from food-borne illness and 608,000 deaths in 85 countries. The African region carries a disproportionately high share of the global malaria burden. Zika virus is primarily transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito from the Aedes genus, mainly Aedes aegypti, in tropical and subtropical regions. Recently, this virus has emerged as a 'public health emergency of international concern', according to WHO. Ticks are responsible for the transmission of both viruses and bacteria. Rising temperature accelerates the cycle and of the development, production of eggs, and the density and distribution of their population. It has already been established that rise in temperature could lead to change in the population of Ixodes ricinus, a vector of viral infections such as ticks-borne encephalitis and Lyme disease in Europe.

A mysterious chronic kidney disease - CKDu - which is characterised by progressive loss of kidney function is usually reported among those suffering from diabetes, hypertension and kidney inflammation. But scientists have so far not been able to pinpoint what causes CKDu. Now researchers have established that heat stress and dehydration are the major driving forces of this mysterious chronic kidney disease.

Some people are more vulnerable than others to the effects of climate change on health. In fact, climate-sensitive health risks are disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including women, unborn babies, children, ethnic minorities, poor communities, migrants or displaced persons, older populations, and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Climate change has been described by the WHO as the biggest threat to health in the 21st century - it affects our health and wellbeing in many ways. It makes many existing diseases and conditions worse. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) concluded that climate risks are appearing faster and will become more severe sooner than previously expected, and it will be harder to adapt with increased global heating. Research shows that around 3.6 billion people already live in areas highly susceptible to climate change. Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 2.5 lakh additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress alone.

We should remember some hard facts: no one is safe from climate change risks, global heating of even 1.5°C is not considered safe, and every additional tenth of a degree of warming will take a serious toll on people's lives and health. To make the planet livable, it is also imperative that every individual contributes to safeguarding the present as well as the generations to come from the perils of climate change. As Al Gore, the Nobel Peace Laureate, said: "I cannot stand the thought of leaving my children with a degraded earth and a diminished future."

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ASIAN VOICES

## New eldercare hubs needed to better serve rural residents

Three elderly women from rural areas now living in Beijing with their children were chatting in a corner of our community square recently after finishing their routine square dancing one evening. My salary is 600 yuan (\$82.56) per month," I overheard one of the women as saying. "So high!", the other two exclaimed. From their conversation, I came to know that the second woman's salary was 400 yuan a month and the third's a paltry 180 yuan. The "salary" the women were talking about, in fact, is the pension they get from the rural social endowment insurance fund since 2009.

Before 2009, rural residents were not eligible for social insurance and, in old age, they were largely dependent on their children. In the past, couples in rural areas who didn't have any children were shifted to old people's homes near their towns or counties where they were taken care of.

To deal with the population ageing problem in rural areas and to help farmers lead a better life, an endowment insurance was established 15 years ago. The total fund of the program is open to all rural residents and the pension amount it offers is much lower than urban pension funds.

Under the present mechanism, a person should deposit 120 yuan in 6,000 yuan per year for 15 years to be

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eligible to receive a pension of a few hundred yuan a month after retirement at the age of 60. One can choose to pay in bulk. But since the insurance program is operated on a provincial/municipal basis, the pension amount can differ greatly depending on the development level of the province/municipality and the percentage of rural residents in the local population.

The average pension is about 1,400 yuan per month in Shanghai, 887 yuan in Beijing, 190 yuan in Guangdong province, and 128 yuan in Sichuan province. Rural residents, especially those who have retired, are happy with the insurance program. The pension amount, though humble, is enough to pay for food and medicine, especially since elderly people can raise chickens and grow vegetables in their courtyards. They can earn some money also from the fruits that grow on the trees. And if rural residents are too old to till their land and harvest the crops, they can lease out their plots and orchards to other farmers to earn some money.

Despite being beneficial, however, the rural insurance program can't solve all the problems, problems such as how to deal with the rising number of elderly residents in rural areas who need financial support as well as eldercare. Statistics from the seventh national census in 2020 show that people aged above 60 made up 23.81 percent of the total rural population, and 7.99 percentage points more than in urban areas. Many youths migrate from rural to urban areas in search of better-paying jobs and to lead a better life, leaving their elderly parents and/or grandparents in villages. Governments at different levels have been taking measures to ensure such elderly people receive proper care. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, together with 20 other ministries and institutions, published the "Guidelines for Speeding up the Development of Elderly Care for Rural Residents".

According to the guidelines, by the end of next year, all the 1,299 counties in the country are expected to have at least one support/service center for helpless rural residents. There are about 16,000 such centers with a total of 1.68 million beds in China. More such facilities are being built across China to provide proper eldercare to all those who need it.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Exploiting poor

SIR, It is clear from the mass deaths as result of a stampede at a satyagrah in Hathras that lessons have been learnt from previous gatherings at religious events. Lack of crowd management, coupled with overcrowding, led to the deadly stampede at a religious event. It was self-evident that the organizers did not follow



up their schemes for 'drawing crowds' with those for 'managing crowds'. The tragedies of the kind in Hathras and poverty are connected. It is observable that poor people go to spiritual centres and prayers meetings in the hope of getting some relief from suffering and some comfort in the face of the harsh realities of life.

Self-styled godmen often take advantage of their poverty and gullibility and build a large following. Deified as god men with 'supernatural powers', they hold a sway over their followers. In the Hathras incident, the devotees were said to have been trampled in the frenzied rush to get a glimpse of Bhole Baba, greet

## CHANGE STIFLED

SIR, In the aftermath of India winning the T20 World Cup title we have been absolutely delirious with joy. Our woes about our scam-ridden education system, flagged by NEET and NET debacles seem to be receding, as we glow over our victory in sports. This elation percolates down to the students in schools and colleges. This reminds me of a passage that I read in the novella The English Teacher written by the celebrated Indian author RK Narayan. The speaker is a disgruntled teacher who derides the educational system that passes the buck by stating that lack of funds has led to the malfunctioning of schools. "Multiply your expenses, and look to the Government for support, and sell your soul to the Government for the grant. This is the history of our educational movement. And another thing, What a fuss they have learnt to make of sports! As if colleges and schools were gymnasia, the main business of which is to turn out sturdy idiots. When I think of the stupidity of sports and games, I am reminded of the motto of an educational institution is to shape the mind and character and of course games have their value. Why worship sports, and the eleven stalwart idiots who bring in a shield or a cup? It is all a case, copying, copying, copying. We could as well have been born monkeys to justify our powers of imitation." RK Narayan wrote The English Teacher in 1945. In the 21st century, change is being stifled by continuity, it seems.

Yours, etc., Sanjuka Dasgupta, Kolkata, 2 July.

him and collect some soil from around his feet.

The tragedy exposed the woefully inadequate health infrastructure in Uttar Pradesh; the injured people who were taken to

hospitals in mini-lorries instead of ambulances did not receive timely medical aid or treatment for want of (or at least a dearth of) doctors and nurses. Ensuring the safety of people at all places and

at all times is a primary responsibility of the government and it should spare no effort to fulfill it.

Yours, etc., G.David Milton, Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu, 3 July.