



Opinion

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ECONOMIC NATIONALISM
Vice president Jagdeep Dhankhar

Some individuals prioritise limited economic gains over national interests, questioning whether fiscal benefits justify avoidable imports. No fiscal gain, regardless of its size, can outweigh the value of promoting domestic industries and protecting local employment

Empower the mayors

Political appointees and corrupt civic bodies have failed citizens for far too long

THE URBAN NIGHTMARE that Indian cities are fast turning out to be is best manifested by flooding, which is becoming increasingly frequent. Last week, torrential rainfall brought New Delhi to a standstill and exposed, not for the first time, the sheer lack of preparedness of the civic administration to tackle a downpour. A day later, the Centre introduced a Bill in Parliament that seeks to set up urban disaster management authorities for state capitals and big cities with municipal bodies. It aims to improve the functioning of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and create a database at the national and state levels. The NDMA itself treated urban flooding as a separate disaster and laid down guidelines in 2010, having focused on riverine floods until the devastating deluge in Mumbai in 2005 forced a rethink.

Reports of urban flooding are now routine across the country. Indian cities are already behind schedule to combat a problem that is set to intensify. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned of more intense monsoon precipitation in South Asia, including India, as a result of rising temperatures. As global warming triggers extreme weather events worldwide, disasters will bear an enormous cost to livelihoods and infrastructure, apart from being potentially fatal. With above normal monsoon rain predicted this year, cities must brace for sporadic bursts of heavy rainfall until next month. In such a scenario, there is a need for sharper real-time alerts to prepare citizens for adverse weather even as the India Meteorological Department has claimed much progress in this regard as a result of improvements in early warning systems and dissemination of information.

City planning is also a factor that cannot be ignored if disasters have to be minimised. Among the gaps in planning is the neglect of migrant workers, who contribute to building cities but seek refuge in slums and encroached settlements that leave little room for draining out rainwater. A metropolis like Mumbai, which is battered by monsoon rain annually, stares at the prospect of accommodating a populace in 2050 that is twice as much as the current 20 million. Rather than spending heavily on infrastructure, which has also faced question marks over quality of late, the focus should be on more equitable land use and better public transport.

Most critically, however, one thing in common among cities — as evidenced in Delhi where the Supreme Court has questioned the governments and municipality about safety norms after the deaths of civil services aspirants at the flooded basement of a coaching centre — is the tendency to shift the blame and avoid accountability. Forming newer, domain-specific entities may be good on paper. However, cities suffer from fractured governance when multiple authorities tasked with managing different areas such as water, transport, and housing get away with passing the buck. Even if there is a case for increased allocations for municipal bodies, the fact is that they are flush with funds. For the record, Mumbai has the richest municipal corporation in the country. It also gave a good account of itself in a crisis when, under IAS officer Iqbal Singh Chahal, a participative model kept the lid on Covid-19 while politicians took the backseat. Political appointees and corrupt civic bodies have failed citizens for far too long. It is time the people's representatives appoint a mayor, à la a company CEO, who is accountable and empowered to address all challenges under one roof.

THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC Alliance got its third successive mandate in an election with many political narratives. But one economic narrative took centre stage — lack of jobs.

In recent years, there has been much confusion over job data. One view says we have had jobless growth (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, International Labour Organization data). The government says 49 million jobs were created in 2019-23 (Reserve Bank of India, Periodic Labour Force Survey), but these were mainly in agriculture and informal sectors, rife with underemployment and low wages. India is not creating enough well-paying jobs.

In its first post-election Budget, the government implicitly acknowledged this by putting employment as its top theme (others are skilling, MSMEs, middle class), and proposed several initiatives to promote it. But this is not the first Budget to emphasise jobs. Soon, it becomes business as usual. It has taken the electorate to remind us that policies haven't delivered, and we face a crisis.

I am not an economist, and will not attempt to add value to the debate on the right economic paradigm(s) (labour vs capital-intensive, manufacturing vs services) for job creation. However, as a management consultant, I am trained to look beyond the obvious, take a systemic view, and explore if there is a meta-theme that can coalesce the "symptoms" into a focused actionable objective, avoiding costly band-aid solutions with uncertain outcomes.

In business, often, the best way to start is by talking to the "customer." Over the past few years I have had many conversations with leaders on this topic. Let me relate three.

The first was with an Indian business leader enjoying significant exports. I asked him how to increase investment for exports; he responded with a rhetoric

ARINDAM BHATTACHARYA

Senior advisor and emeritus partner, Boston Consulting Group

ical question: "Why has private investment in India slowed down despite good growth and a huge potential? In such an (poor) investment climate, expecting big investments for exports is a big ask."

The second was with the India CEO of a global industrial firm. I asked him two related questions. Why has India not been able to replicate the China model despite all the talk? Specifically, what would it take for his firm to make a bigger investment in India? His answer:

"When our global board evaluates investment proposals, they always have several options. The board asks us how long will it take to set up the plant. My answer is usually in years. Thailand says they will do it in months. The risk-adjusted attractiveness of India is often less than others."

To get a fuller sense of the "system", as consultants, we also understand the "internal" customer's views, which in this case are senior government officials. A conversation with a former secretary of a ministry was quite interesting. "Talking about ease of doing business, how many regulations have been simplified, etc. is not helpful. We can thump our chests, but the key question is to ask if that does an entrepreneur, big or small, find it easy to make investments (new or brownfield)?" His answer was no. He added, "We announce lots of policies covering jobs in every Budget.

A top-notch investment climate involving central ministries and departments, states, and expertise domains working in 'silos', are complex 'systemic' policy outcomes

But the 'instrumentality' to convert the policies into outcome is weak at best."

I drew several insights from the customer discussions.

■ While there are many economic levers, at a fundamental level, jobs are created by investments. We have to make our investment climate far more attractive and the process easy, transparent, and quick. Investors should "want" to invest in India ahead of other nations and not only be

when they have limited choices (such as the China-1 pitch).

■ Investors, especially foreign, evaluate proposals and use comprehensive financial metrics like the cost of goods sold (CoGS), which combines factor, regulatory, and social costs with those of risk and "speed to market". Policy-driven improvement in one could easily

be offset by weaknesses in others. And today, unlike three decades ago when the big shift of manufacturing capacity from west to east started, CoGS comparison is not with the west but among competing developing countries. We have to at least achieve parity on overall "system" competitiveness.

■ Such metrics measure "system performance". But historically, India's industrial policies have individually targeted different parts of the "complex industrial system" with often indifferent outcomes. The performance-linked

incentive scheme implicitly recognises this disadvantage.

This leads me to my most important conclusion. A top-notch investment climate or competitive CoGS, which involve central ministries and departments, states, and expertise domains working in "silos", are complex "systemic" policy outcomes. Our governance structure was designed primarily to deliver sectoral outcomes. We have to rethink the "instrumentality" for executing today's complex multi-sectoral and multi-domain policies.

Here again, the market can give some pointers. As every large company knows, large-scale transformation cutting across business units, countries, and functions is tough. Success has several key ingredients. First, leaders acknowledge the "root cause(s)" and do not react to symptoms.

They build consensus among key stakeholders with different positions. They take risks, often adopting a de-novo approach to break out of legacy thinking. They create structural ownership, even if it means setting up teams outside the "core", with clear targets, accountability, and seniority-cum-decision rights over resources. The implementation plan breaks the "system" objective into smaller time-bound projects, with close coordination among different multi-functional project teams with cross-linked incentives. Finally, they are metric- and real-time data-driven. We have to customise and adopt such a playbook.

One of my former colleagues in BCG used to say that you can't fly over a tall mountain in the flight path by becoming a more efficient turboprop. You have to transform into a jet. India faces a looming artificial intelligence and job creation mountain. No doubt, we have become a more efficient turboprop, but we need to transform into the jet to deliver well-paying jobs.

Views are personal

Reimagining job creation

WE HAVE TO RETHINK THE 'INSTRUMENTALITY' FOR EXECUTING TODAY'S MULTI-SECTORAL POLICIES

● EMPLOYING INDIA

Federal Reserve markets' wild ride has just begun

HAS THE US Federal Reserve gone too far in its fight against inflation, tipping the world's largest economy into a damaging recession?

This troubling question has shaken global markets over a long period of calm. Expect more turbulence before an answer emerges.

Two weeks ago, I switched allegiance from hawk to dove, dropping my support for higher interest rates and arguing for immediate cuts to avert a recession. Not a moment too soon, it turns out. Since then, evidence of a weakening labour market and moderating inflation has accumulated rapidly, strongly suggesting that the Fed is behind the curve.

Most notably, the three-month average unemployment rate reached 4.13%, up 53 basis points from its lowest level of the prior 12 months. This breaches the 50-basis-point threshold that, as recognised by the Sahm rule, has always indicated a US recession and much higher joblessness to come.

Beyond that, payroll growth has slowed along with hiring and quits rates, while initial and continuing jobless claims have risen. On the inflation front, the Fed's preferred measure — the core deflator for personal consumption expenditures — registered its third consecutive monthly reading in June, up just 0.2% from May. Average hourly earnings were up 3.6% in July from a year earlier, compared with 3.8% in June, consistent with the slowing trend in the second quarter Employment Cost Index.

Many economists — including Claudia Sahm herself — argue that the Sahm rule doesn't necessarily apply this time. Strong labour force growth, rather than firing, has driven the rise in the unemployment rate. "A statistical regularity is what I'd call it," said Fed Chair Jerome Powell, when asked about the rule. "It's not like an economic rule where it's telling you something might happen."

They might be right, but I wouldn't base monetary policy on that assumption. The Sahm rule worked just fine in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the labour force was also growing quickly. It reflects a fundamental economic process: A deteriorating labour market tends to be self-reinforcing. Unemployed people and those worried about their job security spend less, which leads businesses to cut back further on hiring. When the Sahm threshold has been breached, unemployment has always gone much higher. The smallest trough-to-peak rise was nearly 2 percentage points.

What, then, should the Fed do? The longer it waits, the greater the potential for damage. Monetary policy is tight and becoming tighter as price and wage inflation moderate. It needs to get to neutral. Federal Open Market Committee members' estimates of the neutral interest rate range between 2.4% and 2.8% (I'd put myself in the top half of that range). This means there's a long way to go from the current effective fed funds rate of 5.3%. And if a recession materialises, the Fed will need to go into accommodative territory — to 3% or less.

An immediate rate cut is in order, but that's very unlikely. It wouldn't be consistent with Chair Powell's deliberative manner, and the Fed rarely makes such moves outside of its regular policy-making meetings — only when a severe shock changes the economic outlook dramatically or threatens financial stability. That brings us to the next policy-making meeting on September 17 and 18. The Fed could cut by either 25 or 50 basis points, depending on what the economic data show between now and then. After that, the path is unclear. It could be a gradual series of 25-basis-point cuts ending below 4%, or a steeper descent into stimulus if the Sahm rule holds.

Uncertainty about the trajectory of monetary policy will probably remain high for many months. So prepare for more volatility in stock and bond markets.



BILL DUDLEY

Bloomberg

BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, EAC-PM

I ASKED A young man if he had heard of witches. Thanks to *Harry Potter*, he had. There were the Salem witch trials in 1692 and 1693 and witches routinely feature in films and fiction. There are the good and wicked witches of *The Wizard of Oz* and we read about witches on broomsticks and their covens. Our films and fiction often feature 'dayans'.

I asked the young man if he had heard of Birubala Rabha (she fought against witch-hunting all her life, was conferred a Padma Shri in 2021, and died this year). He hadn't. That's understandable. Indian society has many slices. In July 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks (HPAWR). Through UN, we have some data on documented HPAWR between 2009 and 2019 in 60 countries. Understandably, many cases go unreported and undocumented. Nevertheless, the total figure is 20,000. We might think this is an African problem. As the UN compilation shows, that perception isn't true. The intensity might be more in Africa. But HPAWR exists in the US and Europe, and even in India. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has been a standard source of data on crime in India. It has a category on "motives for murder" and mentions witchcraft. In 2022, there were 85 such murders, concentrated in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. In addition, there are instances

from Assam, Bihar, and Telangana. The numbers may have declined a bit. But we are still at about 100 a year, and these are just murders with witchcraft as a motive.

The word "witch" is gender-neutral, etymologically, although there is a popular perception that the male of the species is wizard (wicca), while the female is a witch. Ipsita Roy Chakravarti is a familiar name in some Kolkata circles. She declared herself a witch, a good one (she is also an author). In principle, witchcraft can be benevolent. But in perception and in practice, it is dubbed malevolent. The roots are old. However, the dubbing as malevolent is used for crimes against women, not always leading to murder.

As a less diabolical motive, there is lack of education and ignorance, with mental health patients dubbed as witches, especially when there is disease in the neighbourhood. As a more diabolical motive, there are widowed and single women, with their property being a target (there are also examples of childless women and young and educated women who become a threat to vested local interests). Do you remember the film *Kala Sach*, based on a true story?

What do we do about witch-hunting practices? Depend on the spread of education and awareness, or on NGOs and panchayats? Jharkhand has Project Garima, to restore the dignity of women branded as witches. Assam has Project Prahar, a community-policing initiative. Should a country aspiring to be a developed country do more, or should one hope that the problem will simply wither away with time?

Odisha penalises witch-hunting, but penalises the practice of witchcraft too. Assam and Rajasthan also punish alleged witches

One can invoke the Constitution, the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and Protection of Human Rights legislation. But some states have specific legislations — Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act (1993) in Bihar; Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act (2001) in Jharkhand; Tonahil Pratadana Nivaran Act (2005) in Odisha; Prevention of Witch Hunting Act (2013) in Odisha; Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act (2013) in Maharashtra; Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act (2017) in Karnataka; Prevention of Witch Hunting Act (2015) in Rajasthan; and Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act (2015) in Assam. Notice the vintage of legislation. These are all relatively recent, reflecting the belief that a modern country should have specific legislation to address the issue. There is no such legislation, though a private Bill was introduced in 2016. There are the usual problems with criminal laws — low rates of prosecution, low rates of conviction when prosecuted, and penalties that are hardly punitive.

Perhaps more importantly, the intent of the legislation is not always clear. Take Odisha as an example. It penalises witch-hunting, but penalises the practice of witchcraft too. Assam and Rajasthan also punish alleged witches. Rajasthan also penalises communities/groups. Maharashtra's focus is on the practice of black magic. A column is not the place to compare and contrast state-specific laws, except to point out that they are often like holdalls, with everything dumped in. As a start, should one carefully distinguish practice of witchcraft from witch-hunting? And certainly, for a start, should NCRB reporting be refined, with a separate category for both crimes, not simply murders with witchcraft as a motive? Should the IPC (and now its replacement) have specific sections on both crimes? More generally, legislation doesn't work if it gets stuck in a tardy criminal justice system without police reforms. Our young man, with dreams of a developed nation and hailing from metropolitan India, may not be aware of a problem that has plagued parts of our rural society for ages. However, it isn't quite a matter of pride that in UN documentation, India figures in the South Asian region along with Nepal. And, to repeat a point made earlier, this is incomplete compilation and reporting. The numbers are probably higher.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Lessons from Bangladesh

Apropos of "Tightrope walk" (FE, August 7), it is indeed a tightrope walk for India. The developments in Bangladesh cannot be brushed aside, and they could impact India in various aspects. Politically, India is already seen as an island of democracy in the ocean of hostile autocracies. Smooth sailing in economic development is not to be taken lightly. The events in

Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and now in Bangladesh bear a common factor. The economic woes faced by the public are taken advantage of by those forces always waiting to stifle the hopes of humanity. Bangladesh, in spite of registering economic growth, could not ensure inclusive growth and kept a vast majority away from accessing the benefits. Such vulnerable victims can play into the hands of any force. Therefore, instead of seeing the

unfortunate developments in Bangladesh in isolation, the right lesson should be taken for a positive move ahead in the interest of all. —AG Rajmahon, Anantapur

Stock recommendations

It is regrettable that Sheikh Hasina quit her post of Bangladesh Prime Minister facing public fury. She was elected to the chair and the going was good until the job quota protest erupted. She maintained a good relationship

with India and other neighbouring countries. She crafted draconian laws to suppress dissent and maintain firm control. The absence of opposition in the parliament, the control of media, and a tendency to surround herself with cheerleaders insulated her from public criticism. She failed to realise that political achievements were no substitute for civil liberties. —CK Subramanian, Navi Mumbai

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



Under overlords

Court ruling on admlerms shows Delhi's vulnerability to Centre's dominance

The Supreme Court of India's verdict holding that the Lieutenant Governor (L-G) of Delhi exercises independent authority while appointing admlerms to the Delhi Municipal Corporation, underscores the utter vulnerability of the elected government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi to central overlordship. The judgment by a three-judge Bench rightly relies on the letter of the law governing Centre-Delhi government relations, as well as earlier judgments that sought to strike a balance between the elected regime and the appointed administrator. The final outcome of the latest round of litigation is not surprising, given that Delhi is a Union Territory, but it raises questions about the relevance of having an elected Assembly for Delhi. The Court held that the Lt. Governor's power to appoint persons with special knowledge in municipal administration is his statutory duty, and is not one that he should exercise on the basis of advice from Delhi's Council of Ministers. The power is an exception to the constitutional provision that says the L-G is bound by the aid and advice of Delhi's Council of Ministers on all matters in the State and Concurrent Lists, except for the subjects of public order, police and land. The Court has rejected the Delhi government's argument that municipal administration, being a State subject, the L-G could not have acted on his own.

Tracing the nature of the appointing power to the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957, as amended in 1993, a law enacted by Parliament, the Court noted that the Act identifies different authorities, each with distinct roles. While the Administrator was empowered to nominate 10 persons with special knowledge, the Speaker could nominate some legislators to serve on the Corporation by rotation. And that this showed that it was an independent statutory power. A Constitution Bench had sought in 2018 to lay down a framework to avoid escalation of issues arising from differences of opinion between the L-G and the Chief Minister. Such differences, as well as political acrimony between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party at the Centre and the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, have been the principal driving force behind multiple conflicts and legal tussles over governing Delhi. However, in the ultimate analysis, it is the Centre that enjoys the final say. As the latest verdict on admlerms shows, the Constitution allows Parliament power to enact laws in respect of any matter on which the Delhi Assembly has jurisdiction, unlike other States which have an exclusive legislative domain. Parliament can also amend or supersede any law made by the Delhi Assembly. As legislative and executive powers are coextensive, this effectively means that the Delhi government can be undermined in any way the Centre wants.

A case of excesses

Puja Khedkar's entry in civil service calls into question the recruitment process

Even one egregious violation of the rule can cast shade on the entire process. In what has emerged as the outlandish tale of Puja Khedkar, the multiple methods by which she stepped outside the law would be fantastic, if they had not been proven true. However, having pulled wool over the eyes of the entire Union Public Service Commission recruitment infrastructure, by conniving and scheming, it is a scene too chilling for comfort. She claimed mental illness, and visual impairment, faked a community certificate, used a disability certificate to get chosen, having scored a rank that would have otherwise put her out of the reckoning. Meanwhile, the hospital in Pune which issued her a disability certificate said it had certified a 7% locomotor disability and that would have been practically useless in gaining concessions, as a higher degree of disability was required to benefit. Considering how persons with a true disability must jump through hoops to merely get the disability certification, her ease of getting the certificate while faking disability, raises the question: are some more equal than others? She misused the privilege stemming from her father's position in the civil services to commandeer a series of benefits that she might have otherwise had no access to. Contributing to her infamy is her fabricated OBC certificate; using multiple identities to write the tests, claiming falsely that her parents were divorced to overcome the creamy layer exclusion criteria. The scarier fact is that none of this would have come to light had Khedkar not indulged flamboyantly in perks not assigned to her station as a probationer — she installed a bescon on her private luxury sedan and illegally stuck a Maharashtra government sticker on it. She will soon receive an order cancelling her candidature.

It has admittedly not been a good year for qualification examinations in the country, with controversies dogging medical admissions with NEET UG, NEET PG and the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for admission into central universities. There is no merit in arguing that she might be just one aberration, because her excesses and those of her parents' have happened as the UPSC remained completely oblivious and unable to detect fraud. This is not excusable. The government now needs to ensure that the entire competitive examination system receives a thorough overhaul. Administrators and systems must not be gullible or unequipped to meet new challenges thrown up by contestants and emerging technology. Meanwhile, with this incident as the peg, the government must carry the eye on the disability certification process, making sure that genuine applicants are fairly dealt with.

The leader who lost touch with Bangladesh



Subir Bhaumik
a veteran BBC
journalist and author.
He has served as
Senior Editor in the
Dhaka-based
(bdnews24.com)

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's unceremonious exit from power and the country has been too sudden and swift. Many are still trying to comprehend how the "Iron Lady", seemingly in complete control until the student movement intensified, had to be compelled to step down and even leave Bangladesh. Not that her leaving the country has cooled tempers. Far from it. Bangladesh has descended into chaos and mindless bloodletting, driven by a wild urge for vendetta. Ms. Hasina's partymen, religious minorities, policemen and border guards have been targeted, leaving dozens dead and hundreds injured, not to speak of the huge loss of property. The most worrying part is the systematic attacks on police stations and the looting of weapons by elements believed to be religious radicals.

There is a strange repeat of history for Sheikh Hasina. In August 1975, with almost her entire family, including her great father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, dead in a bloody coup, Sheikh Hasina and sister Rehana had to seek shelter in India. That was made possible on the personal intervention then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who shared a great personal bond with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The only difference is that in 1975, Ms. Hasina was a housewife and a daughter of a great leader who had led his people to freedom. But now, Ms. Hasina has been one of the world's longest serving women leaders, having served four full five-year terms as Prime Minister.

Development but also a disconnect

One could easily blame her predicament on stars and dwell on astrological calculations, but Ms. Hasina's fall has happened because of a growing disconnect with the masses — the undoing of many leaders who swing towards authoritarian governance. Ms. Hasina has presided over a decade of exceptional economic turnaround for Bangladesh when the country's per capita income surged past India's and there was a huge boost in infrastructure — ports, roads, railway expansion and power generation. The country's human development indicators also showed marked improvement, specially in areas such as women's education and health. Bangladesh was close to becoming the world's top garment exporter and remittance incomes surged as the diaspora, hopeful of the country's future, sent more money back home.

The iconic 6.15 kilometre bridge on the mighty Padma river, which Ms. Hasina pushed through

with Bangladesh's own funds, was completed in her time, raising hope of greater connectivity with 21 districts and a boost to the country's GDP. At one point, Ms. Hasina came to believe that if she delivered on development, she could get away with the country's growing democracy deficit.

Her detractors blame her for three less than fair elections marred by large-scale rigging that did not reflect the ground realities in Bangladesh. She was also accused of turning Bangladesh into an one-party police state like Hosni Mubarak's Egypt, where extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and the muzzling of the Opposition by large-scale arrests, often on trumped-up charges, became a recurring feature. In a way, this democracy deficit affected the Awami League more than the Opposition. With victory in elections a foregone conclusion, the Awami League had lost the urge to spot and promote popular leaders with a strong mass connect, who were capable of holding the ground in any crisis such as the one presented by the recent anti-quota student protests.

Awami League's transformation, politics

In fact, during the last decade, the Awami League's leadership character underwent a massive transformation. Once the party of the poor and the middle class, the Awami League was led by ideologically driven middle class leaders respected at the grassroots — teachers, professionals and lawyers. But in the last decade, businesspersons had begun to muscle their way into the party leadership, bribing their way to secure nominations for Parliament seats. They had very little connect with the grassroots let alone the party's own organisation. The only way they could win elections after securing nominations through doubtful means was to grease the palms of the police and civil bureaucracy and hire musclemen to help rig the elections.

Many of these businessmen-turned-politicians also sullied the party's image with their nexus to secure nominations for Parliament seats. They had very little connect with the grassroots let alone the party's own organisation. The only way they could win elections after securing nominations through doubtful means was to grease the palms of the police and civil bureaucracy and hire musclemen to help rig the elections.

Sheikh Hasina presided over the country's exceptional economic turnaround but paid a heavy price for losing the mass connect that once propelled her to high office

Bangladesh's economic growth was adversely impacted by this burgeoning corruption and badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unemployment soared dangerously, with 30 million now jobless in a population of 170 million. Foreign exchange reserves have fallen by 44% in three years, raising apprehensions of Bangladesh's capacity to pay back loans taken from multilateral organisations. The value of the Bangladesh Taka has dropped 28% this year. Spiralling inflation and price rise, often attributed to the growth of ruling party-backed extortion syndicates who fleece businesses, turned the country into a boiling cauldron waiting for a trigger to light up.

A mishandling

That happened with the anti-quota protests and its mishandling by Ms. Hasina and her inner coterie. On June 5, the High Court upheld the quotas in government jobs, triggering furious student protests who wanted them abolished to pave the way for a merit-based system. Ms. Hasina's government had agreed to scrap the quotas in government jobs (55% in all, 30% for descendants of 1971 freedom fighters) during the 2018 student agitation but a case was filed challenging the government's decision. All that Ms. Hasina had to do was to bring the student leaders to the table and assure them of challenging the High Court's decision in the Supreme Court, which her government ultimately did.

Instead, she initially ignored the protests. Then, a comment of hers upset the students when she said: "If not for descendants of freedom fighters, would we create quotas for those of Razakars". Razakar is a derogatory word in Bangladesh, denoting those who backed the Pakistan Army's suppression campaign during the 1971 Liberation War. As the movement intensified, Ms. Hasina resorted to a brutal crackdown by the police and her own student wing, the Chhatra League. That proved counterproductive and the situation spun out of control. In the end, Ms. Hasina paid a heavy price for her arrogance of power, for losing the mass connect that had once propelled her to high office. It is no mean feat for a traditional housewife to take on her father's mantle after the assassination of almost her entire family and bring to power a party that had been badly demoralised by a bloody 1975 coup. But, in the end, the loss of that mass connect proved to be her undoing.

A closer look at beefing up Jammu's counter-terror grid

For the last couple of years, the Jammu region has been in the news for all the wrong reasons, and more so over the last few months. Security forces have suffered irreparable losses in their pursuit of terrorists who are active — this includes freshly infiltrated cadres — and, as usual, backed by Pakistan. One of the major factors that emerged as the attribute was the weakened counter-terrorism grid resulting from troops from the Jammu region being re-deployed on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), following the Galwan incident of June 2020. In order to tide over this particular challenge, additional troops, to include Special Forces teams, have been inducted in the region to fill the void. This daily had a report on this, titled "Around 3,000 Army troops, 500 special forces inducted into Jammu area", July 19, 2024.

Recently, news of Assam Rifles troops being inducted in the Jammu region to strengthen the counter-terror operations in the region has been reported by various news agencies, electronic and print. This daily had a report on this too: "CRPF to replace two battalions of Assam Rifles in Manipur; Kuki-Zo groups oppose the move", August 1, 2024. These reports, obviously and correctly so, highlight the seriousness on the part of the government vis-à-vis the increasingly deteriorating security scenario in the entire Jammu region, from Kathua to Poonch and also the Chenab valley comprising Boda and the adjoining sub-regions. However, there are several connotations to inducting troops from outside the region toward beefing up the counter-terrorism grid.

Establishing a grid

A counter-terror deployment grid entails units and sub-units deployed in a manner to dominate the likely vulnerable areas that have the potential to offer terrorists freedom of movement. The establishment of a grid is based on threat perceptions carried out by the Army based on factors such as terrain, vulnerable areas, and



Colonel Shashank Ranjan
a retired Infantry officer with substantial experience of having operated in counter-terror operations in the Jammu region to include command of a Rashtriya Rifles battalion. He teaches at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

There are several connotations to inducting troops from outside the region, but the message is clear — there is a seriousness to handling the security scenario

even inclination of the local population, i.e., whether the population is supportive or otherwise. The sub-units, having been deployed as hunting for terrorists by undertaking tactical operations based on psychological aspects such as people friendliness.

The knowledge of the terrain and winning the hearts and the minds of the people form the basis of operations mentioned above. Given the nature of the tasks at hand, the entire process is well thought through, deliberate and time consuming. Sub-unit commanders gain the confidence of the people by their operational conduct so as to get the local population on their side with the eventual aim of gaining information on terrorists who may be active in the area.

The challenges

As per the classical teaching of counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism, the local population is seen divided into three sub-sets. One minority sub-set each that supports the state and the terrorists, respectively, and a majority that is, by and large, neutral. The success of security forces depends on sustaining the support of the minority that they already have and winning over the neutral majority, thereby winning over two-thirds of the local population. The Indian Army has been combating insurgencies/terrorism based on operations by Infantry or Rashtriya Rifles units, deployed in a grid. The deployed grid in the hinterland supports the counter-insurgency deployment on the Line of Control, forming multi-tiered arrangements.

In the context of additional troops being inducted, it is noted that the newly-inducted troops shall have a challenging task at hand to orient themselves and settle down in the respective area of responsibility. In doing so, one has the inescapable requirements of knowing the area, knowing the local population and, most importantly, winning them over. It is much more

than merely the mathematics of having an accretion. These challenges, to a certain extent, could be mitigated if the newly-inducted troops are superimposed on the already deployed units and sub-units rather than being deployed in an independent manner. As far as possible, the new body of troops in an area should be deployed as sub-units under the respective leaders, and not in a piecemeal manner aimed at numerical increase.

Operation Dudhi

Lastly, vis-à-vis the Assam Rifles unit that is likely to be deployed, and as reported in recent media reports, it is not the first time that Assam Rifles units are being inducted in Jammu and Kashmir. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Assam Rifles units were deployed in the Valley and had performed gallantly as integral units. The successful Operation Dudhi, in May 1991, in the general area of Chowkbal by 7 Assam Rifles is still remembered as one of the most successful operations.

The hallmark of Operation Dudhi was that this was mainly conducted under the commanding officer of the battalion with his sub-units playing the major role. The major lessons that emerge are that commanding officers need to be trusted and allowed to control and conduct operations. However, of late, due to the relatively decreasing intensity of operations, any developing operation these days tends to go into the control of commanders beyond the battalion level, thus adversely affecting seamless control.

In a nutshell, an additional unit inducted needs to be deployed and tasked as an integral body of troops and must be allowed sufficient time to gain control in the new area, supported by the existing command structure of brigades/sectors — against a mathematical distribution and deployment that is bound to be counter productive. It has to be realised that the security forces are in this for a long haul, and expecting snap outcomes will be detrimental in all respects.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bangladesh, the lessons

Without wanting to blame the present regime, many lessons have to be learned from the unfortunate turn of events in Bangladesh. Democracy does not end with elections; it starts at this point. There should be an element of inclusiveness in one's functioning. Depriving a section of society is not democracy. In Bangladesh, a section of the students was kept out when they were unemployed, which created inconvenience. All sections of society, including the Opposition

parties, should be taken into confidence. Draconian pieces of legislation should be repealed. They are anachronistic and have no place in a functioning democracy. There should be a larger space for dissent. The events in Bangladesh are relevant for our thinking. These are all sombre lessons that would lead towards a better democracy. They should not be only the concern of the External Affairs Ministry and the Home Ministry. **N.G.R. Prasad,** Chennai

Torturous path

It is very hard to visualise the kind of agony Indian woman wrestler Vineph Phogat must be undergoing now. But I was shocked to learn about the self-inflicted torture athletes undertake in their quest to victory, orchestrated by the accompanying team. **R. Ramani,** Chennai

Bank's mobile app

I write this letter to the Assistant General Manager, Corporate Communications Department, Indian Bank,

at its corporate office in Chennai. In response to a letter by a reader on the bank's apps, 'IndoSMART' and 'IndoASIS' ('Letters to the Editor', *The Hindu*, August 5), Indian Bank would like to assure its customers that it takes their concerns seriously — as expressed in the letter. The new mobile app, 'IndoSMART', is an advanced version of the 'IndoASIS' app. Customers are being notified through SMS, WhatsApp, and the bank's social media channels, requesting them to switch

to and explore the features in the app. A pop up message has been placed in the existing 'IndoASIS' app to prompt an upgrade to the 'IndoSMART' app by downloading it from the Playstore/App store. The bank's call centre team has been reaching out to customers, and there has been a positive response. The 'IndoASIS' app remains active. The facility for registration with 'IndoSMART' is available through CIF and is enabled at the bank's branches, ensuring the safety and convenience of

customers. The option of self-registration will also be enabled shortly.

The bank looks forward to feedback. The bank would also like to assure its customers that it will continue to keep them informed about new functionalities or improvements made to the app that will enhance their banking experience.

Pavan Kumar Saxena, Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

Court shifts the tide on stray dog policy

Under all circumstances, there cannot be any indiscriminate killings of canines and the authorities have to take action in terms of the mandate and spirit of the prevalent legislations in place."

With this single line, the Supreme Court of India brought to an end a 15-year-old case titled *Animal Welfare Board of India & Anr Versus People for Ethical Treatment of Stray Dogs & Ors*, also known as the All India Stray Dogs case or *AIWS vs PEST*. The last hearing was held on May 9 this year when the judgment was reserved. Since then, all dog lovers (and regrettably, all dog haters) have been waiting with bated breath for the final judgment. That judgment came out on July 12 and has been cheered in some circles and criticised in others.

The case centred on whether municipal and local authorities can wantonly kill stray dogs to reduce the stray dog population, eradicate rabies, and prevent man-animal conflict, or whether local bodies must follow the World Health Organization (WHO)-backed scientific approach of sterilisation, which achieves these objectives.

Legally speaking, the matter was framed as a battle of supremacy between State and Municipal laws, which authorise the killing of stray dogs (euphemistically referred to as culling) as opposed to the Central law (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960, and the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, 2001), which mandates that killing is strictly prohibited and, the only recourse is the scientific solution of sterilisation.

Final mandate

These State and Municipal laws permitting the killing of stray dogs were challenged in various High Courts. The High Courts of Bombay, Karnataka, and Himachal Pradesh ruled that local authorities have discretionary powers to kill stray dogs and are



Perival Billimoria

Senior Advocate and founder of All Creatures Great and Small Animal Sanctuary



Siddhartha K. Gang

Advocate and founder of Animal Trust Animal Rights NGO

not bound by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. On the other hand, the Kerala High Court ruled that local bodies possess no such discretionary powers, and that they are guided by Central law, which penalises cruelty to animals, specifically canines. All these judgments were appealed and came to a head in the Supreme Court, which then issued notices to all the States and Union Territories in 2015, taking the case to a pan-India level.

The denouement of this case was reached when the final order was uploaded on the Supreme Court's website. The Supreme Court laid down that since the inception of the case, a lot of water has flown under the bridge and, specifically, there has been a change in the legislative landscape with the notification of the new ABC Rules, 2023 under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. These two pieces of legislation mandate that wanton killing by municipalities is prohibited and that sterilisation must be followed. The Supreme Court then stated that any parties with issues regarding these new laws can challenge them in the relevant High Courts. In the meantime, the governing law of the land remains the Central law (PCA Act 1960 and ABC Rules, 2023), which prohibits the killing of stray dogs by local authorities or municipalities.

'Duty of every citizen'

The court then capped off this judgment with these stirring lines: "Compassion to all living beings, is the enshrined Constitutional value and mandate, and cast obligation on the authorities to maintain." This refers to Article 51(a) of the Constitution of India, which deals with the fundamental duties of the citizens and states: "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures."

With such a positive and

compassionate conclusion to a very scientifically backed judgment, the Supreme Court ended this matter. The dog haters, or to put it politely the cynophobes, can certainly go to the High Courts and file writ petitions praying for the striking down of the new Central Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023. But the question is what good would that do? Is killing all the stray dogs the panacea that we are promised to deliver us from all evils? Science certainly does not back the claim that killing helps reduce the population.

WHO's Expert Consultation on Rabies, which met in Geneva in October 2004, in its technical report endorses the sterilisation programme by stating that it is the only effective and humane method of controlling stray dog populations.

A 2014 report commissioned by the Bombay Municipal Corporation stated that sterilisation is the only scientific humane solution. The same corporation in a 1994 circular admitted that killing strays does not affect the population.

In this circular, the Bombay Municipality admitted to killing about 4.5 lakh stray dogs between 1984 and 1994 and spent more than ₹2 crore. But what takes the cake is that, despite no evidence to prove the efficacy of killing and evidence to the contrary, the same Bombay Municipal Corporation approached the Supreme Court seeking permission to kill stray dogs in this case.

One can only hope that the spirit of scientific temper and humanism, as enshrined in the fundamental duty in our Constitution under Article 51(a)(ii), imbues itself in the minds of our citizens.

We must eschew unscientific and barbaric methods such as the killing of stray dogs in favour of the scientific approach, which is a win-win for everyone. We domesticated stray dogs around 10,000 years ago and let us not let them or ourselves down.

A call for transparency and reform

Chief Minister criticises the AP excise policy, calling it the biggest scam

STATE OF PLAY

Sambasiva Rao, M
sambasivarao.megh@rediffmail.com

The recent white paper on the excise policy of Andhra Pradesh, presented by Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu highlights a plethora of issues that have allegedly arisen under the previous Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy administration between 2019-24.

The document revealed numerous flaws and inconsistencies leading to significant economic and social repercussions. While terming it the 'biggest scam', Mr. Naidu announced that the government would order a thorough probe by the Andhra Pradesh Crime Investigation Department and refer it to the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

The white paper starts by detailing the promises made by Mr. Jagan during his 2019 general election campaign regarding the reduction of liquor outlets and a phased approach to limiting sales to five-star hotels. However, the reality starkly contrasts these promises.

The assumption that increasing liquor prices would reduce consumption and improve the quality of life is another flawed aspect of the policy. Despite frequent price hikes, this assumption was not properly analysed, leading to increased crime rates, black marketing, and bootlegging. Mr. Naidu informed.

The white paper outlines several orders that introduced various tax rates and changes, creating market instability and confusion. For instance, the levy of the Additional Retail Excise Tax in 2019 and subsequent modifications led to an increase in smuggling and illicit liquor distillation. The sig-



nificant difference in liquor prices between Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring States exacerbated these issues.

The Special Enforcement Bureau, created to control illegal liquor activities, failed to achieve its objectives. Despite the restructuring efforts, the lack of coordination among authorities led to confusion and poor performance.

The policy's economic impact has been severe, with significant revenue gaps compared to neighbouring States. In Telangana, the gap amounted to ₹42,762.15 crore for 2019-24 and ₹4,186.70 crore for 2014-19. This gap indicates a severe loss of potential revenue. In addition, the revenue foregone was estimated as ₹18,860 crore for 2019-24. The revenue loss is attributed to the policy's failure to curb illegal liquor production and smuggling, as well as the mismanagement of the liquor market.

The decline in Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) sales volumes further illustrates the policy's failure. The IMFL sales volume gap with Telangana for 2019-24 was minus ₹324.96 lakh cases, contrast to the positive gap of ₹131.41 lakh cases for 2014-19.

The white paper also exposes a disturbing trend of preferential treatment and alleged corruption. The manual and discretionary procurement procedures have led to the monopolisation of the liquor supply chain by local entities. Ma-

for multinational companies and national brands have faced discrimination, with their market shares plummeting from 53.21% in 2018-19 to just 5.25% in 2023-24. In contrast, local suppliers saw a significant increase in their market share, raising questions about the integrity and fairness of the procurement process.

The removal of low-priced liquor brands, which served the low-income sections of the population, is another issue.

Mr. Jagan responded to the allegations by explaining that his policy aimed to protect consumer health by increasing prices and reducing sales volume. He also maintained that the YSRCP government, in the past five years, did not introduce a single distillery, adding that Mr. Naidu, during his 14 years previous tenure, permitted 14 out of around 20 distilleries. He also said that his government did not allow any belt shops (unauthorised shops), and social impact analyses were conducted till 2019, and ensured that liquor was sold only by the government outlets. Regarding the change in the low-priced brands, he said that all brands were provided by the same distilleries, and they changed the brand names to attract the consumers.

The white paper on excise policy highlights the need for urgent reform and proper inquiry into the alleged scam. To restore public trust and ensure the policy's success, the State government must commit to transparency and consistency in policy formulation and implementation. They should also conduct thorough economic and social impact analyses before introducing new policies and eliminate manual and discretionary procurement procedures in favour of transparent, automated systems.

Tribal vote trends reshape LS election results

Priyanka Jarkiholi's historic win in Chikkodi shows a broader trend in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, where tribal votes shifted significantly

DATA POINT

Sanjay Kumar, Vibha Attri and Jyoti Mishra

Priyanka Jarkiholi, a tribal woman, made history in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Not only did she win as a Congress candidate from the unreserved Chikkodi Lok Sabha seat in the Belagavi district in Karnataka, but she also became one of the youngest parliamentarians in India. She secured 51.2% of the votes, defeating the incumbent MP and BJP candidate, Annasahab Jolle by a margin of a little more than seven per cent votes (Actual vote count).

Chikkodi is a non-reserved seat with a tribal population of only five per cent, about 15% Dalit population, and nearly 10% Muslim voters. The constituency has a large proportion of OBC and upper caste voters. In a constituency with such demographics, securing 51% votes for a candidate from a tribal community especially – a woman – against a candidate from the dominant Lingayat community is a remarkable achievement. The votes polled by Ms. Jarkiholi indicate that she garnered significant support from a broad cross-section of communities, not just the Adivasi community.

Several prominent tribal leaders were elected to the 18th Lok Sabha, including Javansinh Sumanbhai Bhabhor from Dahod in Gujarat, Parbhubhai Nagarbhai Vasara from Bardoli Lok Sabha constituency in Gujarat, Fagun Singh Kulaste from Mundla Lok Sabha constituency in Madhya Pradesh, Jugal Oram from Sandargarh Lok Sabha seat in Odisha and Murari Lal Meena from Dausa Lok Sabha seat in Rajasthan. These MPs, representing various States and parties, were elected from ST reserved constituencies. Against this backdrop, it is important to analyse the tribal factor in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Did the tribal vote overwhelmingly in favour of one party,

or was it more fragmented across different parties?

Out of 47 Lok Sabha seats reserved for tribals, the BJP won 25 seats, six seats less compared to 2019. Its vote share remained more or less the same, i.e. 42.6% in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Meanwhile, the Congress gained both in terms of votes and seats compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The Congress polled 30.1% votes in 2024, nearly 1.5 points higher compared to its vote share in 2019. Compared to its tally of four ST reserved seats in 2019, the Congress won 12 ST reserved seats in 2024. These gains came at the expense of the BJP, which lost six seats, and other regional parties which altogether lost five of the ST reserved seats (Table D).

The Congress indeed made gains among ST reserved seats both in terms of seats and votes, but these gains were not uniform across all States. In some States, the Congress received more votes amongst tribal voters compared to its rivals, but in others, it was less popular among tribal voters. Findings from the post-poll survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti indicate, that tribal votes were largely in favour of the Congress in States like J&K, Goa, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. In several States, tribal votes were evenly split between the Congress and the BJP. For example, in Gujarat, both parties received 49% of the tribal votes, and the same was the case in Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. However, in States like Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and West Bengal, the tribal vote was tilted in favour of the BJP, and, in Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, there was significant support for the BJP amongst the tribal voters (Table 3).

Sanjay Kumar is Professor and co-director, CSDS-Lokniti
Vibha Attri and Jyoti Mishra are researchers at CSDS-Lokniti

Breaking down the ST vote

Tables 1 and 2 are based on election results from the Election Commission. Table 3 is based on the national election study 2024 conducted by the CSDS-Lokniti



Table 1: The table shows the performance of different parties in ST reserved constituencies

Election Year	Congress		I/P		BJP		NDA		Others	
	Won	Vote(%)	Won	Vote(%)	Won	Vote(%)	Won	Vote(%)	Won	Vote(%)
2014	5	27.5	7	31	27	36.4	27	38.5	13	30.5
2019	4	28.7	5	32.5	31	42.7	32	44.7	10	22.8
2024	12	30.1	16	35.1	25	41.6	26	44.8	5	20.1

Table 2: The table shows the performance of alliances in ST reserved constituencies across regions

Region	Year	INDIA		NDA		Other	
		Won	Vote %	Won	Vote %	Won	Vote %
East	2024	2	44.7%	1	20.72%	4	24.6%
	2019	1	36.38%	4	39.9%	2	23.72%
	2014	2	31.19%	7	40.95%	0	27.86%
Hindi heartland	2024	2	37.8%	18	49.42%	9	12.79%
	2019	3	41.11%	15	50.56%	0	8.33%
	2014	7	45.55%	11	47.36%	0	7.09%
North east	2024	5	42.16%	1	19.06%	1	38.78%
	2019	1	27.45%	4	34.89%	2	37.65%
	2014	2	27.53%	3	38.78%	2	33.71%
West	2024	0	36.13%	9	54.17%	0	9.7%
	2019	0	32.82%	8	53.08%	1	14.14%
	2014	0	40.94%	6	50.27%	0	8.79%
South	2024	2	30.98%	1	33.73%	3	35.29%
	2019	1	32.77%	3	35.94%	2	31.79%
	2014	4	43.38%	1	37.27%	1	19.36%

■ Several prominent tribal leaders have been elected to the 18th Lok Sabha including Javansinh Bhabhor from Dahod in Gujarat, Parbhubhai Vasara from Bardoli Lok Sabha constituency in Gujarat, Fagun Singh Kulaste from Mundla Lok Sabha constituency in Madhya Pradesh, and Jugal Oram from Sandargarh Lok Sabha seat in Odisha

Table 3: The table shows how tribal voters voted in 2024 Lok Sabha election

State	Proportion of tribal population	INDIA	NDA	Others
Andhra Pradesh	7%	3%	58%	41%
Assam	12.5%	24%	51%	24%
Goa	10.1%	51%	45%	4%
Gujarat	14.8%	49%	49%	2%
Jammu and Kashmir	12%	76%	17%	7%
Karnataka	7%	40%	54%	6%
Madhya Pradesh	21.1%	24%	71%	5%
Maldives	9.4%	61%	39%	10%
Odisha	27.3%	23%	40%	37%
Rajasthan	13.5%	39%	49%	13%
West Bengal	6%	2%	63%	29%
Jharkhand	27%	36%	38%	26%
Chhattisgarh	31%	59%	42%	1%
Uttarakhand	3%	50%	50%	0%

■ Post-poll survey findings indicate that tribal votes were largely in favour of the Congress in States like J&K, Goa, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 8, 1974

Paper distribution: Govt's approach

New Delhi, August 7: The government will regulate the use of white printing paper by newspapers and evolve a policy of rational distribution of paper to printers and publishers shortly.

This assurance was given to the Rajya Sabha to-day by the Industrial Development Minister, Mr. C. Subramaniam, during the discussion on a calling attention motion on the acute shortage of paper and its soaring prices.

The Government does not impose a ban on the use of white printing paper by newspapers because of certain legal problems. But some sort of control on the use of white printing paper by newspapers was being examined, the Minister said.

Mr. Subramaniam hoped that hoarding and blackmarketing in white printing paper would end after a rational distribution system was introduced. He said the price of white printing paper fixed at Rs. 2,750 a tonne would be maintained. As far as prices of other varieties of paper, a study of the cost of production in the paper industry was being made, he added.

The Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, has written to all Central Ministries to economise the use of paper because of the current shortage, Mr. Subramaniam said. All Ministries were now trying to ensure that the minimum amount of white printing paper was used.

Mr. Subramaniam said about 30,000 tonnes of paper for the educational sector has been allotted to the States in the past two months. He said the Government had now asked the paper industry to manufacture two lakh tonnes of white printing paper for distribution to the educational sector and the Government.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 8, 1924

Earthquakes in Kenya.

Nairobi, August 7: Earth tremors felt in Kenya became severe shocks in the northern districts of Samburu and Turkana, where natives report a large meteor has fallen. Tribesmen are bringing cattle to the south for water because the convulsion split the Turkana and Suguta rivers at their juncture into three extensive gullies. Water in each is now hot and undrinkable. The convulsion also filled the neighbouring ravine with hot boulders.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Her mighty heart

Vinesh Phogat has an arc, will deal with this shock. Rest of us have lessons to learn from a dream cut short



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

BRIGHTER THAN GOLD

Vinesh Phogat has lost out on the medal. But she remains an inspiration, by not settling for less, getting up after every fall

THERE COULD BE a Sisyphian parallel to the Vinesh Phogat story. A day after she beat the seemingly invincible Yui Susaki in the 50kg freestyle wrestling category and reached the Olympics final, her disqualification for having gained marginally over the permissible weight ahead of the finals — as per rule, wrestlers have to stay within their weight category on both days of the competition — seems to be the story of a tragic figure felled by fates bigger than her. But tragedy has never been Phogat's genre. Over and over again, through a rollercoaster of a career, Phogat has been persistent in her refusal to be typecast as a tragic figure. Not for her the quiet resignation of Sisyphus, but the courage of the Herculean. And so, as the Indian Olympic Association appeals against the disqualification, amid the heartbreak there burns a steady belief in Phogat's resilience and her resurrection.

At 29, though, in what is all but certain to be her last Olympics, the death of a dream rankles. Phogat's familiarity with heartbreak runs deep. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, her medal dream crashedlanded after a debilitating knee injury on the mat. Tokyo 2021 dealt her a shock exit and a bewilderment made worse by the relentless accusations by the very authorities meant to nurture athletes like her. In their eyes, she was a "knota sikka", an under-performer. Only, they had misjudged. Headstrong, outspoken, the one thing that Phogat has steadfastly refused to be is a quitter, on the mat or off it. She has fought against injuries and obstacles, depression and self-doubt, but most of all, against an unresponsive system invisibilising its women and their calls for justice. A year before the Olympics, when her international colleagues were preparing for Paris, Phogat, Salsiki Malik and Bajrang Punia were out on the streets of the Capital, waging a lonely protest against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, then head of Wrestling Federation of India, amid allegations of prolonged sexual harassment of women wrestlers. The image of Vinesh and Sangreeta Phogat, decorated athletes, pinned to the ground by the police before being detained, is one that is unlikely to be etched soon from public memory. The fights her opponents get into are on the mat, governed by a strict set of rules, some of which have now stripped Phogat of a medal. In taking on Singh, an influential member of the BJP, Phogat had launched herself into a street fight with no rules, one that was already skewed against her.

For all the slogans of "nari shakti" and women-led development, India still remains a country that largely expects its women to be "good" in a patriarchal sense of the term — docile, unquestioning and subservient — content to be beneficiaries than equals. It is women such as Phogat who show the possibilities of not settling for less, of holding on when everyone else has given up, getting up after every fall, no matter how hard or how bruising it is. A medal might have eluded Phogat at the Olympics, but in her courage and her grit, Vinesh Phogat is a champion for all seasons, burnished brighter than gold.

A WELCOME EASING

Taxpayers can now avail indexation benefit on sale of property. Review of IT Act must address areas of disputes

IN THE UNION Budget 2024-25, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a review of the Income Tax Act, 1961. The rationale for this exercise was straightforward — to make the Act simpler to "read and understand", thus helping bring down tax disputes and consequent litigation. The budget took a step in this direction by proposing simplification of provisions for reassessment and capital gains taxation, among others. There was a need to reexamine the capital gains tax framework considering the differences in both the tax rates as well as the holding periods for determination of long-term gains across asset classes such as equities, debt, real estate etc. The budget had proposed levying a tax of 12.5 per cent on long-term capital gains on all financial and non-financial assets. However, it also proposed to eliminate the benefit of indexation that was available to investors for property, gold and unlisted assets for the purpose of estimating long-term capital gains. While this was done to "ease computation of capital gains for the taxpayer and the tax administration", the proposal was met with widespread criticism. After first defending the proposal on grounds that the lower tax rate of 12.5 per cent, from 20 per cent, compensates for the removal of the indexation benefit, the government has now changed tack, heeding the concerns of taxpayers.

Taxpayers now have the option to pay long-term capital gains tax of 20 per cent with indexation benefits on the sale of a property that has been acquired before July 23, 2024. Indexation refers to the adjustment of the purchase price of an asset based on the rate of inflation over the period that it has been held by the investor. With this option now available, all purchases before the date of the budget presentation have been grandfathered. Investors, though, can also choose the option proposed in the budget of paying a lower tax rate of 12.5 per cent, but, without availing the indexation benefit. This framework now provides investors the option of being able to select the tax structure which leads to a lower tax liability for them.

Over the years, the government has taken steps to ease the burden on ordinary taxpayers. For instance, in order to reduce tax uncertainty and disputes, the recent budget has said that an assessment can only be reopened beyond three years if the "escaped income" is Rs 50 lakh or more. But, more needs to be done. The review of the IT Act, which is to be completed in six months, should examine the contentious sections and aim to address the areas of disputes.

AN HOUR TO DO NOTHING

As the Moon drifts away from the Earth, there might be an extra hour in the day. Don't lose it to productivity

THERE IS A lament among the chronically busy, a cliché really, that "there aren't enough hours in the day". As it turns out, the 24-hour limit isn't going to be around forever. A study conducted by scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has found that as the Moon drifts away from the Earth, slowly but surely, it will impact the latter's rotation. In effect, millions of years from now, there will be a 25-hour day. As with most things, those caught up in the grind miss the forest for the trees.

An extra hour a day is, if anything, a temporal tonic that most people deserve — in fact, need. In an era where plutocrats and tech bros speak casually of 70-hour work weeks, when is the worker — whether his collar is blue or white — meant to just stop? Even with the more usual eight-hour day, it's not as though there is a neat division between work and non-work. It's not just the emails and calls from the overbearing manager. There are children to be taken care of, relationships to be worked on, parents who may need looking after. And as everyone who runs a house knows, there is rarely a Sunday when some crucial appliance doesn't break down and requires either repair or servicing. An extra hour, then, may well be swallowed up. But it need not be.

Long ago, Virginia Woolf wrote, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Perhaps it's time to add that a woman — and even some men — need an hour to themselves to just be (the pressure to write has its own demons). Of course, the day doesn't need an extra hour for that. Just a more flexible cut of productivity.

SHE TOOK DOWN someone who had never been defeated. She reached a peak no wrestler had climbed. And just when it seemed she was staring at a silver of gold at the end of a dark tunnel, she was felled by a rule that had never been this cruel to any Olympian. This was the first Vinesh Phogat didn't deserve.

What was to be the most inspiring moment for Indian sports — a woman repeatedly undermined by the system becoming the country's first female gold medal winner — turned out to be a day of mourning. Sports picked the most inopportune time to showcase its flip side to the world. At an event where athletes were climbing podiums every hour, experiencing indescribable joy, there was a gloomy corner in Paris where a 29-year-old was dealing with a gut-wrenching disqualification.

Phogat had the will and the heart to take on the five-time BJP MP and Indian wrestling supremo Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh and compel the court to hear charges of sexual harassment against him. On the mat, she had the resolve to stun the so-far-unbeatable Japanese wrestler Yui Susaki.

It would be tempting to burn the rule book, tell the officials to have a heart, question the fairness of the world or moan at the cruelty of fate. But that ship has sailed, it wouldn't help. Outrage, at best, can be cathartic. The fact is the 50kg Olympic podium wouldn't have Phogat. The reason: She weighed more than others. By how much? Walk to your dining table, lift the salt-sprinkler, to get an idea. Take a pinch from it and gulp down a glass of water to push the lump down your throat.

In days to come, the world will move on. We might get busy celebrating a javelin medal or hockey's sparkling consistency. Phogat, too, is sure to get sympathy. She will be called for felicitation functions and may even get cash awards. She would be made to feel like a winner. But there are lessons to learn from Paris, a few for the athletes, many for the high and mighty.

First, about Phogat. If there is anyone in

It would be tempting to burn the rule book, tell the officials to have a heart, question the fairness of the world or moan at the cruelty of fate. But that ship has sailed, it wouldn't help. Outrage, at best, can be cathartic. The fact is the 50kg Olympic podium wouldn't have Phogat. The reason: She weighed more than others. By how much? Walk to your dining table, lift the salt-sprinkler, to get an idea. Take a pinch from it and gulp down a glass of water to push the lump down your throat.

Indian sports equipped to deal with this shock, it has to be her. When she was nine, her father was shot dead by someone who is said to have killed her. She was a mentally disturbed relative just outside the front door of their home. That day, Phogat would later say, her mother, a young widow, lost the right to smile. But she did raise a gutsy daughter who wouldn't get intimidated by anything.

Growing up, her cousins, living at a stone's throw from her home in Balli in Haryana, were the more famous Phogats. They were the wrestling royalty, they had a movie made on them. As a junior, she was, at best, the fourth Phogat. But a fearless girl with big dreams wasn't born to be a side story. The Vinesh story is more layered as her hurdles were far higher than those of her sisters. Duggi 2, if it's ever made, will not be a Greek tragedy, it will be a feel-good story. It's unlikely to have a podium finish at the end but then Phogat, after Paris, is perched higher than what an Olympic medal would lift you to.

Phogat has in her what most Indian sportspeople lack. She has the courage and conviction to take on the system and not care about consequences. Even in the company of taller, bigger male wrestlers, Vinesh would stand out because of the fire in her eyes. In those high-pressure Jantar Mantar street-fighting days, she was the one with the strongest spine and resolve. There were times when others would talk about finding a middle-path but Phogat's anger would prove to be a deal-breaker.

Those covering her Olympic march at the Paris wrestling halls talk about the same rage when she took on the best in the world. After winning a bout, she wouldn't wait for applause or appreciation. With blazing red eyes, breathing heavily, she would walk inside the tunnel.

The wrestler from Haryana had systematically channelled her anger. Her opponents didn't know what hit them. Susaki had never lost, but against Phogat she did. Maybe, it's because the Japanese legend had never been up against an opponent who had the angst

and anger of Phogat. There was no one who watched this medal so desperately. In one of her many defiant interviews, during her fight against Singh, she had said: "I will look him (Singh) in the eye and medal like aongri main, to dekh (I will bring a medal, you see)." The medal might have been missed but a very important point has been made.

By reaching the gold-medal round, Phogat has shown how little the government and sports officials know about the nation's sporting icons. When she had raised the importance of women's safety at sporting arenas, she was dismissed as a seasonal slogan-raiser trying to blackmail the federation into agreeing to her demands. They weren't even moved by the graphic details of sexual abuse in the police complaint filed by the country's elite wrestlers. She was labelled a "has-been", dismissed as "knota sikka". They would plant stories against her. She didn't want to attend the trial, she is scared of young wrestlers. "This is politically motivated" — they would tell their media friends. How wrong they were about the only woman in the world to beat the great Susaki.

Phogat's dream run, until it took the nightmarish turn, had cast the focus on those who were silent when the wrestlers needed them most. There have been memes, a sad anticipation of what they will say now. Tragically, there are totally unsubstantiated whispers about the possibility of a conspiracy by an insider. It's an unhealthy Us vs Them atmosphere where a win is seen as a vindication and not a collective celebration of a sporting ecosystem. This is not ideal for a nation with dreams of hosting the Olympics and climbing high in the medals tally.

Phogat was able to take her personal rage to the mat and succeed as a wrestler, now she faces a tougher task. She would now need to get over her Olympic hurt and move on. She might have been denied the silver but she will always be remembered as the one who was neither intimidated by Singh, nor ruffled by Susaki.

sandeep.dwivedi@expressindia.com

POLICING PIETY

Proposed amendment to Waqf Act circumscribes charity, hinders autonomy



M R SHAMSHAD

THE CONCEPT OF Waqf emanates from Islamic religious beliefs. It is not a religious obligation, but a form of religious charity. While creating a Waqf, a believer dedicates his self-acquired or inherited movable or immovable property in the name of God and states that the benefits from such properties are to be used for objectives in consonance with the Islamic understanding of charity. Other religions have similar provisions, with endowments and charitable trusts, and properties dedicated to deities. Like with Waqfs, the nature of these dedications is also permanent.

B K Mukherjee, the fourth Chief Justice of India, said that such charitable institutions (Waqf included) are essential to human existence and not exclusive to any community or set of people. He said that "so long as feelings of piety and benevolence have an abiding place in the human heart, they must find expression in religious and charitable gifts, and 'law', which is a means to serve social ends, has got to provide for their regulation and control, in order that the object of the donor might be achieved. This is how religious and charitable trusts came into existence in almost all systems of civilised law."

The statute for Waqf has a long history, which culminated in the Waqf Act of 1995 with a substantive amendment in 2013. The central government has now proposed a substantive amendment in the existing statutory regulation. From a reading of the

From a reading of the draft Waqf (Amendment) Bill, it would appear that the government has forgotten that Waqf properties are the private and self-acquired properties of the followers of Islam, except those which non-Muslims may have donated. They are not public properties, nor have they been acquired using public funds. In this background, the government must realise that its control over administration, management and further creation of new Waqfs has to be minimal.

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The proposed amendments seek to facilitate interference from "government organisations" in Waqf properties. This is not just an egregious violation of the rights of Muslim citizens but also of Article 26 of the Constitution, which protects the properties of religious denominations from take over. Making the district collector the arbiter of whether a property is Waqf property or government land is a move to exclude Muslims from the management of Waqf properties at a time when even the private properties of Muslims are frequently threatened by bulldozers under the orders of the same collector. Even the requirement of a Muslim CEO in the Waqf Boards has been done away with.

The government proposes to create several impediments to the creation of Waqfs. It has empowered itself and every single body extending up to the local panchayat to interfere in the existing Waqf properties. It has also proposed to do away with the concept of

"waqf by user", which is the most common practice around the world. We have already seen innumerable Muslim graveyards and dedicated properties being taken over by the local residents because they were not used for Waqf purposes for some time.

The amendments reflect the presumption that government land has been taken over by the Waqf Board. As mentioned earlier, the Collector makes the final decision in this regard and then directs the revenue authorities to give effect to his/her decision in the revenue record. By introducing the concept of adverse possession for Waqf properties, many could become victims to the Collector's notes on a file.

This encroachment of rights by the government is clearly against the guarantees under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India. In the past, different governments have encroached on the rights under Article 20, in the name of better administration and challenges to them have largely been unsuccessful. By bringing religion-centric legislation, governments have made Muslims of this country vulnerable to police excesses. The proposed amendment will only add to their vulnerability, especially with regard to properties they dedicate for religious and charitable purposes.

The writer is advocate, Supreme Court of India

AUGUST 8, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

P T USHA'S DREAM RUN

P T USHA CREATED history for India at the Coliseum Stadium when she became the first Indian woman to qualify for the 400-metres hurdles final of the 23rd Olympics in Los Angeles. She clocked her career best time of 55.54 secs to win the second semi-final heat. This provided some instant healing touch as only 30 minutes before that, India had been knocked out of the hockey event.

INDO-PAK TALKS

THE INDO-PAKISTAN DIALOGUE, which was suddenly put off till after September is unlikely

to be resumed soon. Neither Islamabad nor New Delhi is making any diplomatic move to reschedule the foreign secretaries' talks on India's Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Co-operation and Pakistan's draft of a Non-Aggression Pact in the near future. The two governments are not going to sit together and talk peace till the Indian elections are over.

TAMILS IN JAFFNA

ALMOST THE ENTIRE one-million Tamil population of Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula remained indoors as the government ordered a major security crackdown to deal with "increased terrorist activity." A massive com-

bined army and navy operation against suspected Tamil militants in northern Sri Lanka continued centring on Jaffna. At least 22 Tamil separatist suspects were killed, 11 wounded and more than 300 people arrested.

POSTING BULLETS

ABOUT 200 BULLETS of 22 calibre were recovered by ballistic experts from an unclaimed packet kept in the Madras General Post Office. According to the police, the packet, which did not have either the name of the sender or receiver, was found in one of the nearby post-boxes. The postal authorities sent it to the unclaimed parcel section.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Lesson from Wayanad

It is high time we begin to take stringent actions to protect nature and empower institutions of decentralised democracy to turn the tide



MADHAV GADGIL

ON JULY 30, the serene hills of Meppadi in Kerala's Wayanad district were violently transformed by a series of catastrophic landslides. In a matter of moments, entire villages — Mundakkai, Chooramala, Attamala, and Noolpuzha — were buried under massive debris. The toll is staggering: Over 300 lives have been lost, and countless more remain missing. Rescuers faced blocked roads, unstable ground, and threats from the fragile terrain.

This is a tragedy that exposes the terrible chasm in Indian society between the haves and the have-nots. Mundakkai is just three kilometres away from Puthupada, the scene of a very similar disaster in 2019. I could personally visit and inspect what had been happening on that occasion. After driving for over an hour in heavy rain, we started climbing the hills of Wayanad on a winding road. The steep slopes were dotted with tall buildings, and land that had been levelled for tea plantations. Throughout, the roads were covered with mud from the landslides from the road cuts. The river of mud from the landslide had wound its way down a gorge for a kilometre and a half, with several shorter mud tributaries augmenting it along the way. Several feet of mud had completely buried the 55 houses of the tea-estate labourers located at the bottom of the gorge, a site utterly unsuitable for human habitation. This river of mud had left no trace of the eucalyptus plantations in its ruthless march, but one tree stood proud and erect on its route: It was Ficus beddomei, characteristic of the original vegetation. This clearly brought out the fact that the replacement of the original natural tree cover by exotics like eucalyptus had contributed to this disaster.

The story of tea plantations and the labourers forced to live in the gorges tells us much about the history of forest and land management in India when the British tightened their grip. They had the challenge of managing, or rather, draining the country that was described as an ocean of trees in early British travelogues. A major question confronting the foresters was the extent to which village communities should continue to manage forests, and how much should be taken over as state property. Many British officials favoured a key role for local communities. Shifting cultivation was a major bone of contention. At that time, it was widely prevalent. People cultivated millets for two or three years after clearing much of the tree growth while leaving economically important trees intact and burning the brushwood. They then moved to another patch, leaving the land fallow for 15 to 20 years, allowing the tree cover to grow back. The British tea- and coffee-estate owners opposed the continuation of shifting cultivation because unless it was forcibly stopped, they would never get any labour for their estates. These estate owners wanted labour that would be made to work pretty much like slaves; after all, their kin in North America were prospering by exploiting huge armies of Black slaves on cotton plantations.

Overall, the economic interests of the British lay in rendering people resourceless, and dedicating forest tracts to tea and coffee plantations owned by their compatriots and growing timber for their military and



CR Sasikumar

construction needs.

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) took on board this historical background and painted a realistic picture of what was happening in India. The theme of our report was that any nation, including India, may be viewed as harbouring four capital stocks, namely, natural (water, vegetation, biodiversity, agricultural, animal husbandry, fish production), social (cooperative behaviour, sense of security), human (education, health, employability) and man-made capital. India is exclusively focused on building up highly subsidised man-made capital at serious costs to natural, human and social capitals, worsening economic, social, educational and health disparities and thereby depressing overall social welfare as well as the ability of our industrial enterprises to compete internationally. This is leading to increasing frequency and intensity of human interventions such as mines and quarries, roads, and buildings on hill slopes everywhere, including in ecologically highly sensitive regions.

The only way to bring these unfortunate trends under check would be to follow the WGEEP's carefully drafted guidelines for regulation as well as the promotion of developmental activities graded with respect to

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zones with three different levels of ecological sensitivity — high, moderate and low. The WGEEP guidelines are not presented as final, rigid prescriptions but are meant to initiate a bottom-up process of democratic decision-making, beginning with the gram sabhas and mahalla sabhas.

Governments set the WGEEP's proposals aside since they have no interest in protecting nature and empowering people. This 13-year delay in acting on the WGEEP's suggestions is impacting the region more and more adversely, resulting in an increasing frequency of floods and landslides. A careful study of landslides at all scales in the Maharashtra Western Ghats has shown that their frequency has gone up 100-fold between 2011 and 2020 along with increasing levels of human interventions. It is high time we begin to take stringent actions to protect nature and empower institutions of decentralised democracy to turn the tide. Kerala is the country's most literate state and has a notable tradition of empowering people that led to the People's Planning Campaign of 1995-96. It is high time that we revive the spirit of the WGEEP.

The writer is an ecologist and chairman of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As we enter a new era, we must do so with optimism but also caution... To truly honour the sacrifices of our fallen heroes, we must strive to build a future where democratic and egalitarian values triumph over narrow political interests. The time to rebuild our nation is now."

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

A crime against women

Labelling of women with mental-health issues as witches in large parts of the country points to failures of society, abdications of law



BIBEK DEBROY

I ASKED A young man if he had heard of witches. Thanks to Harry Potter, he had. There were the Salem witch trials in 1692 and 1693 and witches routinely feature in films and fiction. There are the good and wicked witches of Wizard of Oz and we read about witches on broomsticks and their owners. Our films and fiction often feature daains. I asked our young man if he had heard of Birubala Rabba. (She died in 2024 and was conferred a Padma Shri in 2021. She spent all her life fighting against witch-hunting.) He hadn't. That's understandable. Indian society has many silences.

In July 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on the elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks (HPAWR). Through the UN, we have data on documented HPAWR (between 2009 and 2019) in 60 countries. Understandably, many cases go unreported and undocumented. Nevertheless, the total figure is 20,000. We might think this is an African problem. As the UN compilation shows, that perception isn't true. The intensity might be higher in Africa. But HPAWR exists in the USA and Europe, and even in India. Since 1953, NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) has been a standard source of data on crime in India. That has a category on "motives for murder" and mentions witchcraft. In 2022, there were 85 such murders, concentrated in Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha. In addition, there are instances from Assam, Bihar and Telangana. The numbers may have declined a bit. But we are still at about 100 a year and these are just murders with witchcraft as a motive.

The word "witch" is gender-neutral, etymologically, although there is a popular perception that the male of the species is wizard (wicca), while the female is a witch. Ipsita Roy Chakraverti is a familiar name in some Indian circles. She declared herself a good witch (she is also an author). In principle, witchcraft can be benevolent. But in perception and practice, it is dubbed malevolent. The roots are old. However, that dubbing as malevolent is used for crimes against women, not always leading to murder. As less diabolical motive, there is a lack of education and ignorance, with mental health patients dubbed as witches, especially when there is disease in the neighbourhood. As a more diabolical motive, there are widowed and single women, who are early targets of a target. (There are also examples of childless women and young and educated women who become a threat to vested local interests.)

Do you remember the film *Kala Sach*, based on a true story? What do we do

about witch-hunting practices? Depend on the spread of education and awareness? Depend on NGOs and panchayats? Jharkhand has "Project Garima", to restore the dignity of women branded as witches. Assam has "Project Pahan", a community-policing initiative. Should a country aspiring to be a developed country do more, or should one hope that the problem will simply wither away with time?

One can invoke parts of the Constitution, IPC (Indian Penal Code) and Protection of Human Rights legislation. But some states have specific legislation — Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act (1993) in Bihar; Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act (2001) in Jharkhand; Tonahil Pratadna Nivaran Act (2005) in Chhattisgarh; Prevention of Witch Hunting Act (2013) in Odisha; Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act (2013) in Maharashtra; Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act (2017) in Karnataka; Prevention of Witch Hunting Act (2015) in Rajasthan; and Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act (2015) in Assam. Notice the vintage of legislation. These are all relatively recent, reflecting the belief that a modern country should have specific legislation to address the issue (There is no Union legislation, though a private bill was introduced in 2016). There are the usual problems with criminal laws — low rates of prosecution, low rates of conviction when prosecuted, hardly punitive penalties (Jharkhand is an instance of the last point on low penalties).

Perhaps more importantly, the intent of the legislation is not always clear. Take Odisha's law for example. It penalises witch-hunting, but penalises the practice of witchcraft too. Assam and Rajasthan also punish alleged witches. Rajasthan also penalises communities/groups. Maharashtra's focus is on practice of black magic. A column is not the place to compare and contrast the state-specific laws, except to point out that they are often like holdalls, with everything lumped in. As a start, should we carefully distinguish practice of witchcraft from witch-hunting? And certainly as a start, NCRB reporting should be refined, with a separate category for both crimes, not simply murders with witchcraft as a motive? Should IPC (and new its replacement) have specific sections on both crimes? More generally, legislation doesn't work if it gets stuck in lack of police reform and tardiness of the criminal justice system. Our young man, with dreams of a developed India and hailing from metro India, may not be aware of a problem that has plagued parts of Indian rural society for ages.

However, it isn't quite a matter of pride that in the UN documentation, India should alone figure in the South Asian list, along with Nepal, And, to repeat a point made earlier, this is incomplete compilation and reporting. The numbers are probably higher.

The writer is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views are personal

Generation of broken dreams

Coaching centre tragedy must make us question the values we are teaching children



IN GOOD FAITH By AVIJIT PATHAK

FINALLY, THE SUPREME COURT had to intervene and remind us that coaching centres in India are becoming like "death chambers". This is not surprising. If you keep your eyes open, you can see the way the coaching industry has been allowed to colonise the domain of education, cripple the imagination of young students and their parents, and make them pathetically dependent on almost every rite of passage. From standardised tests like NEET/JEE/NET/CUET to UPSC civil services exams. Moreover, the neurotic rat race for select careers and job opportunities, and the mythologies of "success" these coaching centres sell through the brand value of their "star" strategists, or well-packaged "success manuals" accelerate the growth of this lucrative business.

However, it is impossible not to notice the inevitable consequences of this pathology: the tales of broken dreams, the innumerable narratives of "failure" amid a handful of much-advertised "success stories". Indeed, as our youngsters are compelled to run after some sort of mythical success, they find themselves mentally exhausted and aesthetically/spiritually impoverished. And this societal neurosis manifests itself in the growing suicide rate and/or psychic depression among young students.

The real question is: How can we save our young students from these "death chambers"? It is an exceedingly difficult task because over the years we have created a generation that confuses education with what the coaching centres popularise — learning the "art" of "merit", "intelligence" and "success" through the never-ending and hugely problematic standardised tests are causing acute aggression and psychic nervousness among the youth. As coaching centres further strengthen this destructive urge, it is high time we began to converse with the likes of Rabindranath Tagore and Jiddu Krishnamurti, or Paulo Freire and bell hooks, and initiate a movement for saving education from this demonic industry and associated social Darwinism.

Second, it is important to urge students and parents to sharpen their critical thinking, expand their mental/political horizons, and raise their voices against the organised assault on meaningful and life-affirming education. Why is it that our government schools and public universities have been systematically destroyed? And why is it that even the children of primary schools have to be sent to tutorial homes and coaching centres to learn elementary mathematics and English grammar? Or, for that matter, why

competitiveness. A world tormented by xenophobic nationalism, climate emergencies and market fundamentalism needs the healing touch of libertarian education.

Sadly, the prevalent practice of instrumental education, and the resultant quantification of "merit", "intelligence" and "success" through the never-ending and hugely problematic standardised tests are causing acute aggression and psychic nervousness among the youth. As coaching centres further strengthen this destructive urge, it is high time we began to converse with the likes of Rabindranath Tagore and Jiddu Krishnamurti, or Paulo Freire and bell hooks, and initiate a movement for saving education from this demonic industry and associated social Darwinism.

Second, it is important to urge students and parents to sharpen their critical thinking, expand their mental/political horizons, and raise their voices against the organised assault on meaningful and life-affirming education. Why is it that our government schools and public universities have been systematically destroyed? And why is it that even the children of primary schools have to be sent to tutorial homes and coaching centres to learn elementary mathematics and English grammar? Or, for that matter, why

is it that our university graduates need coaching centres for sharpening their knowledge of general studies, or, for that matter, history and sociology for civil services exams?

Possibly, this sort of pathetic dependence on coaching centres indicates the fall of schools and universities as sites of rigorous learning or creative and critical thinking. It is, therefore, important to initiate a movement for generating an awareness of this onslaught on education. We must pressurise the state to take public education seriously. Third, we ought to restore the deeper meaning of studentship. A student is not an "exam warrior". A student is not a resource to be shaped and modulated for the neoliberal techno-economic empire; nor is she/he a commodity with a price tag. Instead, let some of us acquire the courage to say that the meaning of being a student is to be a life-long wanderer or a seeker. Studentship is about learning and unlearning; it is about asking critical questions, and striving for a new world filled with love and compassion.

Are we ready for this movement to save education from the gigantic growth of "death chambers"? The writer is an ecologist and chairman of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel

Pathak writes on culture and education

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NERVES OF STEEL

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Triumph of street fighter' (IE, August 7). Vinesh Phogat has shown the world what courage and resilience look like. Human beings are quick to buckle in the face of inconveniences and hurdles. Phogat, who was dragged through the streets of the capital city of the world's largest democracy while peacefully protesting for a cause, stands apart. Her eyes were filled with tears then, and they are filled with tears now. Today, despite the disqualification post facto, she stands as the first to have defeated the undefeated Susuki. Vinesh Phogat stands as a living example of grit and perseverance. With nerves of steel, she createdripples in and out of the ring. No victory or loss can compare.

Ramanpreet, via email

THE WAITING GAME

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A fighting chance' (IE, August 7). Although the ouster of Sheikh Hasina is a setback for India with the fear of Islamist groups calling the shots subverting New Delhi's interests, the best way forward is to play the waiting game. India would do well to avoid any prejudiced view against the current or future dispensation in Bangladesh. India has to be watchful of the turmoil next door and, at the same time, send signals that it is ready to do the waiting game. India would do well to avoid any prejudiced view against the current or future dispensation in Bangladesh. India has to be watchful of the turmoil next door and, at the same time, send signals that it is ready to do the waiting game. India would do well to avoid any prejudiced view against the current or future dispensation in Bangladesh. India has to be watchful of the turmoil next door and, at the same time, send signals that it is ready to do the waiting game.

Vijal Pant, Hempur

TREAT THE HATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Reading the riots' (IE, August 7). The wave of far-right violence in the UK is a disturbing pointer to the persistent undercurrents of xenophobia and misinformation in their society. The stabbing of three girls has been exploited by far-right agitators to fuel hatred and incite chaos. The far-right's hostility towards immigrants is not merely a reaction to isolated events but a symptom of broader societal and political failures. Misguided beliefs about immigration and cultural integration have been stoked by those looking to gain from such rhetoric. PM Keir Starmer's condemnation is a necessary first step, but more must be done.

Kholan Das, Kolkata

ONLY AFTER POWER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A widening war' (IE, August 7). The recent killings represent a victory for Israel's embattled Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, whose popularity is at an all-time low. At a time when talks to end the war were reportedly progressing, the killing of Ismail Hanjeh will make it harder to keep that dialogue alive. Meanwhile, Iran cannot afford to sit quietly after its sovereignty has been violated. Other nations wading into the conflict is unlikely, despite all their bravado. Netanyahu has ensured the conflict gets prolonged just so he can retain his position for longer.

SS Paul, Nadia

OUR VIEW



A new regime in Dhaka may help reset relations

While India has real concerns of a potentially anti-India shift in Bangladesh, the ascent of Muhammad Yunus holds out the hope that New Delhi could forge better ties on a new basis

Every crisis comes twinned with opportunity—not just to solve the proximate problem, but also to effect a paradigm shift, away from the conditions that led to the crisis. So it is with Bangladesh. The country has a chance to forge a new politics more in tune with its recent economic dynamism, which calls for a political system that enables free thinking, new ways of doing things and decentralized decision-making. That would help the country overcome a legacy of political feuds that drew in successive generations and trapped them in pre-set patterns of irredeemable conduct. India has legitimate concerns about the ouster of its long-term ally Sheikh Hasina from Bangladesh's leadership and the possible rise of elements that are not just anti-India and pro-Pakistan, but may also be ready to serve as agents of Chinese interests in the region. The Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist outfit that makes no bones about its affinity with Pakistan, is capable of fomenting sentiment against India, persecuting minorities and pushing Bangladesh politics towards sectarian violence and away from democracy. India has vital security and economic interests that an anti-India government in Dhaka could hurt. However, this does not mean that we should view with hostility any successor to the India-friendly Hasina regime. Instead, New Delhi's best bet would be to encourage any nascent political tendency to create a new politics that emphasizes inclusion and democratic accountability.

Fortunately, the newly appointed head of an interim administration to govern Bangladesh and conduct fresh elections is Muhammad Yunus, a globally respected figure in developmental economics, committed to openness and

inclusion as a matter of ideology and business sense. He is best known, of course, for his work in the field of microfinance. In a guest essay for *The Economist*, Yunus calls upon the country to aim for three zeroes: zero net carbon emission, zero wealth concentration and zero unemployment. These are welcome goals. While some may cavil that he has not explicitly called for zero attacks on minorities and zero relapse into religious fundamentalism, we must not overlook his call for new leadership drawn from the student movement, an uprising he has dubbed the country's 'second liberation.' This snub to the political class signals both a commitment to change and the skill needed to fashion it in a way that avoids overt confrontation.

Rather than waste time bemoaning a potential tilt in Dhaka away from India, New Delhi should reach out to emerging power players in Bangladesh and aim for a consensus on the mutual benefits of cooperation. Yunus's ascent can be interpreted as an olive branch held out to us. We should grab it with both hands and reciprocate. Indians at large must refrain from irresponsible rhetoric on social media which equates Bangladesh's second liberation—there's enough evidence of Hasina's dictatorial record—with an Islamist takeover that dooms the future of minority Hindus there. Indian investors who have initiated major projects in Bangladesh should make it clear that they will carry on, provided they are assured of security. The success of its garment industry has lifted large numbers out of poverty and empowered women. Let's not express glee over potential gains to be had from business disruption there. Many of our value chains are linked. We must strengthen them. Hasina's departure offers a chance to forge better relations on a new basis.

MY VIEW

Do GenAI Cassandras deserve a hearing amid market volatility?

Sceptics have grown vocal as stocks slump but their arguments don't alter the technology's promise



NILESH JASANI
is a Singapore-based innovation investor
for LC Gentlemen Fund.

The meteoric rise of GenAI has ignited a firestorm of debate, with a maelstrom of scepticism consulting AI-sensitive stock prices. When perma-bulls—such as 'experts' who rarely have a negative word about any growth arena—sound bubble alarms, it becomes crucial for believers to revisit all arguments. Let's analyse what AI 'Cassandras,' or soothsayers of a bleak future, have to say. While some of their concerns warrant attention, it's crucial to understand what their assessments may be missing.

History seekers: Our first Cassandras are those who view everything through the lens of historical events, claiming, 'This time isn't different.' They tend to weaponize narratives with seemingly irrefutable claims that often crumble upon scrutiny. They draw parallels between the GenAI boom and previous bubbles, predicting an inevitable bust. These experts will be right about price peaks in financial markets, but their analysis isn't useful for the long-term path of a new technology.

Tech sceptics: These folks doubt any major technological leapfrog through GenAI. They focus obsessively on errors or what AI models still cannot do. These pessimists relish pronouncements like 'machines can never develop consciousness.' Their unfalsifiable claims about ill-defined terms distract from understanding real AI risks.

Heuristic methods, like those in quantum physics, deserve doubt. For AI transformers, it's about how well they work. And, like quantum physics so far, they do work spectacularly. Yet, such validity is unpredictable. Potential risks must be acknowledged and addressed, such as the harmful effects of AI.

Sustainability warriors: Perhaps these are the most pertinent Cassandras, voicing GenAI's environmental and societal impact. The energy consumption of AI models, their potential for job displacement and the ethical implications of AI-powered decision-making are concerns that demand careful consideration. Unfortunately, in a world of fierce tech rivalry, their voices stay in their echo chamber, with most real-life players paying mere lip service.

Killer-app hunters: They are the most vocal. They focus on the lack of meaningful revenue growth from AI products, accustomed as they are to financial upswells from new software advances. Despite booming data centres and cloud services, they are dismayed by portfolios that lack revenue drivers. A permanent power shift to non-application layers of technology seems to out such folks off. They not only predict a bubble, but see the current situation as one. And it is not just about stock prices, but about revenues within tech sub-segments.

Historically, hardware players lacked pricing power and often had to sacrifice margins. However, they are learning to leverage their advantages in an era led by companies like Nvidia. The 'killer app,' once the holy grail of technology, may not exist in a world where application barriers fall, allowing data to converge and develop intelligence through language models.

But then, GenAI could deliver returns on investment without application-layer benefits. This could happen through driverless cars, new consumer gadgets, robotics, drug discovery and other use cases. This is not a given, but most businessmen and investors should

be ready to evaluate potentially unlikable business-most shifts brought about by GenAI in contrast with the internet era.

Valuation concerned Cassandras: They worry about stock-market correction risks. GenAI stocks, which were outperforming other market darlings till recently, do bear high volatility risks, as they are the first to come under pressure on account of direct disappointments, even as they are susceptible to the usual economic, political and other factors that cause market falls, this week's events being an example. Any cyclical slowdown or negative news from major players could make severe corrections worse than being witnessed now. But the best innovation stories are long-term. Interim market drops will have to be taken in our stride.

Embrace GenAI's transformative potential: As we look ahead, the threat of a global economic downturn remains a real concern. Should a severe recession materialize, it could dampen worldwide consumption and corporate investment, potentially slowing the pace of innovation. AI, however, is unlikely to be knocked off its broad trajectory.

While Cassandras' warnings remind us of the potential pitfalls of GenAI, one must separate those anxious about near-term stock prices from others worrying about cyclical risks, structural changes, and other societal or environmental issues. Collectively also, we—including all Cassandras—should not take our eyes off GenAI's immense promise. The technology is likely to revolutionize entire industries, improve lives and address some of humanity's most pressing challenges. By acknowledging risks and addressing them proactively, we can harness the power of GenAI for the betterment of society. Let's be clear. The future of GenAI is not predetermined; it's up to us to ensure that the picture we create is one of progress, responsibility and shared prosperity by trying to understand the new technology for what it is.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

In our view, derivatives are financial weapons of mass destruction carrying dangers that, while latent, are potentially lethal.

WARREN BUFFETT

GUEST VIEW

Market crystal ball: Look beyond Sebi's F&O proposals

DHIRAJ RELLI



is managing director and chief executive officer, HDFC Securities.

Global stock markets have corrected sharply in response to a weak job scenario in the US that led to a recession fear, coupled with worries of a reversal of the yen carry trade after a rate hike by the Bank of Japan. A rotation away from tech shares that powered this year's rally was also witnessed. A debate has arisen over whether the US Federal Reserve must ease policy in support of growth. Indian equities were impacted, too, and global risk factors could play a role in the period ahead. What about domestic factors? Let's analyse these.

Impending futures and options (F&O) curbs have not had much impact, so far, on the trend of indices. The adverse impact of India's election result and budgetary provisions were also overcome quickly. First-quarter corporate results have not had any major positive surprise. We think India's macro stability and hopes of continued strong growth, aided by normal monsoon rains this year, may be key factors in the recent bullishness. Also, local investors,

including those who came in after covid, have made good money, which may have drawn in more funds. The equitization of savings has reduced market dependence on foreign inflows, and while this week's shake-up had global origins, this has given Indian markets greater stability.

However, we cannot overlook the risk of another correction setting in over the next few months. Globally, the flow of money from quantitative easing by the world's four central banks since 2008-09, with similar infusions during covid, has resulted in asset inflation across all classes. The big four's balance sheets swelled from \$4.4 trillion in September 2008 to \$15.2 trillion in February 2020 and then to \$26.4 trillion in February 2022, but their liquidity withdrawal is taking quite long, with the figure still at nearly \$20 trillion in July 2024.

Expected rate cuts by the US Fed could further rise values, as equities typically rise in a falling interest-rate scenario (though past correlations don't seem to be working nowadays). However, one should be cognizant of the 'buy on expectations and sell on news' theme that plays out in markets time and again. The upside in the NSE Nifty seems limited from now on. We may be not very far from the top of the current move.

However, after a period of correction or consolidation, we may aim for much higher targets, given the strength of Indian markets.

Our markets face potential risks on both the internal and external fronts. Internally, if monsoon rainfall is below expectations, then India's much-awaited rural resurgence may have to wait longer. In case India's ruling coalition faces setbacks in state elections slated for October, there could be uncertainty over the Centre's reform thrust, should the political climate get vitiated. Inflation (especially food) needs to come under control to allow for monetary policy easing that could boost the economy. Externally, if the geopolitical situation worsens to India's disadvantage (by way of slower exports, higher logistical costs, firmer crude prices and/or larger defence expenses), or if there is a meltdown in the small- and mid-cap space, it could slow down the momentum of Indian markets. Also, if the risk appetite of global investors shrinks, then we could see slower inflows and large outflows.

The next set of triggers for stock markets include the final outcome of the ongoing monsoon season (its spread and intensity), state election results, food inflation trends and the global interest-rate trajectory, apart from geopolitical developments. Second-quarter corporate results, due in October

and November, will show us how the pre-festive season has fared and whether a rural revival has happened. Mid- and small-cap stocks have traditionally helped diversify investor portfolios and boost portfolio returns, which explains their sustained attraction. The proliferation of portfolio management services and alternate investment funds over the past few years has meant mid- and small-caps being chased by fund managers who must outperform benchmark indices. This trend could prove counter-productive if economic growth filters or some unknown unknown hits markets. Till such time, investors basking in the glory of recent gains may grow even bolder, given how they are ready to pay

high valuation premiums for such stocks. Promoters of such companies have tasted blood with market capitalizations growing, and many have changed their attitude towards minority shareholders, which is a welcome development.

With cautionary statements and warnings issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), we have seen a series of measures and proposals aimed at strengthening the derivatives regulatory framework for increased investor protection and market stability. If Sebi's proposals are implemented as proposed, they could hit trading volumes by high-frequency and retail traders (who tend to trade mostly in the last hour of contract-expiry days). This could have an impact on exchange volumes and their revenues, apart from missing impact/transaction costs. While the risk of a shift in volumes to 'dabba trading' remains, we could also see investor interest move to index and stock futures—though, given the large margin requirements for futures, the number of participants may not rise meaningfully even as volumes do. Indian market players are known to be adaptive. Even in a scenario of tighter rules, they may find a way out that again attracts the participation of retail traders, though not to the extent previously seen.



THEIR VIEW

A trade policy for Viksit Bharat: Reduce tariffs and rethink pacts

India should resolve internal differences over self-reliance and strengthen trade alliances to maximize global opportunities



MONTEK SINGH AHLUWALIA
is former deputy chairman, Planning Commission, and currently distinguished fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress.

The budget speech gave pride of place to the long-term goal of Viksit Bharat and also said that reforms in many areas would be needed to achieve it. This article focuses on one of those areas: trade policy.

Policies should be tailored to specified targets, and in this respect, commerce minister Piyush Goyal has set an ambitious target. Exports of goods and services must rise from \$775 billion in 2023-24 to \$2 trillion by 2030. This implies a growth rate of over 14% in nominal US dollars. This is three times faster than the IMF projection of global exports of goods and services in the same period.

The trade policy we need to achieve this target requires resolving some internal differences and also evolving a new approach to handling the global environment we now face.

Resolve internal differences: The key difference arises from the impression in some quarters that 'atmanirbharta' or self-reliance implies increased protection for domestic production to reduce imports. To be fair, the government has denied subscribing to this view. But protectionism is on the rise everywhere, often covertly supported by business interests, and it is no surprise if this is also happening in India.

Perceptions that the government favoured protectionism surfaced in 2017, when import duties were raised on several items, reversing a policy of gradual reduction of duties that all previous governments had followed until then. It was reinforced when duties were raised in subsequent years.

This year's budget has sent a welcome new signal by reducing import duties on several items in an effort to make domestic production more competitive. The finance minister also announced a comprehensive internal review over the next six months of India's tariff structure. This is to be welcomed, though I wish the minister had appointed an external expert committee, including retired officers of the revenue service, to present a bold plan for tariff reform. Internal reviews too often end up dusting off old proposals without coming up with drastic changes.

Yet, drastic changes are precisely what we need. Ideally, we should announce that our upper-end duties are too high and they will be brought in line with those prevailing in peer-group emerging market economies. Investors must also have some assurance of stability in the structure proposed.

This proposal is not new. It was proposed earlier by Arvind Panagariya, the first vice-chair of Niti Aayog and current chairman of the 10th Finance Commission. It has also been proposed by other academics, including Amrita Batra (a colleague at CSEF).

Domestic industry would not be adversely affected if reductions are staggered over a few years and parallel steps are taken to achieve some



rupee depreciation to offset duty reduction. This would leave industries competing with imports adequately supported while aiding exporters.

External developments that affect trade policy: In addition to restructuring customs duties, our trade policy must deal with two new developments in global trade. The first is that advanced countries have lost faith in multilateral trade negotiations (MTNs) and moved towards Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The second is that global value chains (GVCs) now account for a substantial part of the world's goods trade.

These developments imply that if we want our exports to benefit from GVCs, we need to (a) attract the multinational companies that dominate them to locate part of their production facilities in India, and (b) we need to join FTAs that ensure seamless duty-free access for parts and components which are essential for GVCs to work. We have recognized the need to welcome FDI in order to attract GVC-related production, but our policy on FTAs needs to be rethought.

This has acquired urgency because of geopolitical developments. There is growing tension between the West and a China-Russia partnership in which Russia is the weaker partner. Western countries no longer talk of globalization and trade liberalization. Instead, we have discriminatory trade policy aimed at 're-shoring', 'near-shoring' or 'friend shoring'.

The discriminatory trade measures against China and Russia will have a negative impact on all sides. The IMF has stated categorically that global growth and world trade will be hurt. India will also be hurt by this. However, the attempt to shift trade away from China also offers India an opportunity. MNCs with GVCs heavily concentrated in China will not exit the country completely, but may want to evolve a 'China plus one' policy, and India is particularly well placed to benefit from this.

A sensible customs duty structure on the lines discussed above is one pre-requisite for India to benefit. Equally important is membership of trade pacts which allow the smooth movement of components across borders. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is the world's largest regional trading arrangement, covering all of East Asia, including China. We were on the verge of joining it in November 2016, but

backed out at the last minute. This was reportedly because Indian industry groups were nervous about giving duty-free trade access to China.

If China was the only reason for walking out of the RCEP, we should seriously consider joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). This agreement was originally pushed by the US under President Barack Obama, but the Donald Trump administration took the US out. It currently covers 11 countries including Japan, South Korea, Australia and some from Asean. The UK has recently been cleared for membership, so it will soon be 12 countries. China has applied to join the CPTPP, but has not so far been accepted. The geopolitics that is keeping China out is likely to work in our favour if we apply. The real problem is that joining will require acceptance of high environmental and labour standards which we have traditionally opposed on the grounds that it restricts our policy space. This approach needs a rethink. Our ambition to reach developed-country status by 2047 doesn't sit well with rejecting obligations that other developing countries are willing to accept. These obligations can always be phased in over time, and the length of the adjustment period could be negotiated.

A consensus issue that will come up in negotiating FTAs is the signing of acceptable Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs). We recently cancelled all existing BITs unilaterally, and proposed that our partners accept our new model BIT. The problem is that under the new model, aggrieved investors cannot invoke international arbitration to resolve disputes with the host state without first exhausting all other possibilities under domestic law. This may seem minor, but it ignores the notorious delays which characterize our legal system. We cannot expect billions of dollars to pour in for the development of critical industries (and in technologically sensitive areas) without providing investors with speedy redress avenues along the lines that other countries offer.

We have made progress on some FTAs, but the gains are small. We have signed an FTA with the UAE and European Free Trade Association, but this is a very small group of countries. We have also signed a limited 'early trade pact' with Australia, but the coverage is limited. We are negotiating FTAs with the UK and EU. Both are important, but progress will depend on our taking a more flexible line on harmonizing other standards.

One of the problems that could arise is the treatment of restrictions under the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). We could argue that an FTA by definition must rule out CBAM type penalties on trade flows. It is unlikely that the EU will agree. If CBAM does pose us problems, but we may have to deal with it separately.

The US is our most important trading partner, but has indicated that it does not propose to sign any more FTAs. However, we should perhaps review our position of not joining the trade pillar of the US-sponsored Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. This does not offer any market access, as of now, but there is no harm in joining it.

It is possible the combining of modern negotiators find it difficult to get other ministries to agree on the flexibilities needed. Perhaps these issues should be referred to the Niti Aayog to take an overall view and seek clearance at the highest level.

Finally, trade policy is only one of the factors that can deliver strong export performance. Other initiatives, such as developing good infrastructure, reducing logistical costs, development of human skills and improving the ease of doing business, are also important. And these are relevant not just for exports, but for the economy as a whole.

MINT CURATOR

Big tech firms are swallowing AI talent to corner the market

Instead of snapping up startups, they are recruiting AI whizkids



PARMY OLSON
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.

Big Tech is following a crafty playbook to hoover up AI talent: Instead of buying the hottest AI startups, the giants hire their leadership and license their intellectual property, essentially sucking the life out of them. So long as they leave behind the shell of a company, anti-trust scrutiny can be avoided. Alphabet's Google [which just had bad news in the form of a court ruling against it for its search market monopoly], is the latest to follow this template by hiring the co-founders of Character.ai, Noam Shazeer and Daniel De Freitas, along with a few other employees. Most of the startup's staff will remain with the smaller company while its general counsel will become CEO. Why a lawyer? Because Google is entering a licensing agreement to use Character.ai's technology—in addition to buying out the startup's investors, principally Andreessen Horowitz, who'd put in more \$150 million.

Microsoft last year hired the founding team behind Inflection, a high-flying startup that was also creating an AI companion. Amazon.com then hired the team at Adept, a San Francisco-based firm co-founded by former OpenAI and Google researchers. It's a sleight of hand that reaps big benefits for tech giants, who can afford the vast computational power and data needed to build General AI, but struggle to attract the best talent. Now they can do the latter too.

Shazeer is a big hire for Google, which has grappled with glitches in its flagship AI model Gemini that could hinder its efforts to catch up to Microsoft and Amazon in the cloud wars. So venerated is Shazeer that Google may be paying him in the tens of millions of dollars (or more) to rejoin the company. He was one of the lead inventors of the Transformer, a powerful blueprint for AI systems that formed the basis of the recent boom. Back in 2017, he was perhaps the most respected Google scientist named on a landmark research paper detailing how the Transformer could exploit powerful AI chips to quickly process and generate information. Google was slow to capitalize on the technology, but OpenAI made the Transformer the basis of ChatGPT (it's what 'T' stands for). All eight authors of the research paper left Google, mostly to start companies that raised billions of dollars thanks to their pedigree, including two co-founded Adept.

When Shazeer co-founded Character.ai, he was continuing work that Google had shut down, to build lifelike chatbots that humans could use as companions. Character.ai went on to become one of the most



AI competition would suffer if startups are starved of critical talent. STOCKPHOTO

popular AI apps outside of ChatGPT, particularly with teenagers. The app lets you chat with a bot specially-trained to emulate a celebrity, fictional character or historic figure, and several teens have told me they spend hours a day on the app, role-playing or chatting with an artificial confidante.

Shazeer's goal was to create an AI model that could remember everything about you. 'A person has probably heard or read hundreds of billions of words in their lifetime, so that's about the scale of data that you need—a quarter of a gigabyte—is a lot of context on a person's life,' Shazeer told me in January. 'This is not beyond the realm of feasibility as we improve our algorithms... The model would know billions of things about you when it's talking to you.'

However intriguing that vision is, Shazeer will now be bringing it back to his old bosses at Google, where he'll likely have more sway than he did before, perhaps by working directly with Google DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis.

The question is whether the likes of Meta or Elon Musk's X.ai will follow a similar acquiring-hiring strategy. Both reportedly looked into picking up Character.ai, before Shazeer went to Google, but there are other AI companies in the market that are likely grappling with the costs of building the technology amid unclear revenue prospects. Cohere, a Canadian AI start-up founded by another author of the Transformer paper, is likely in play, along with Perplexity, a San Francisco startup that is competing with Google on AI search.

Even the founders of Anthropic and OpenAI, the two AI startups that have raised \$8.8 billion and \$11.3 billion respectively, must surely be glancing at the exit doors. OpenAI could lose \$5 billion this year, according to an analysis by *The Information*, which looked at the company's internal financial data, meaning it will need to raise more cash one way or another.

The US Federal Trade Commission is scrutinizing what Microsoft and Amazon are doing, but there's no indication they will turn into formal probes or hit deals. More likely, we'll see tech giants gobble up more leaders of the GenAI industry, consolidating power as they ride out the current market rout right under the noses of regulators. Perhaps this is what AI startups had expected. **CBLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

The Wayanad tragedy reveals how sticky beliefs can be

BIJU DOMINIC



is chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics, and chairman, FinalMile Consulting.

To grasp just how difficult it is to build a sustainable world, just look at what is happening in Kerala. In 2018, the state witnessed its worst ever flood in history. In 2019, floods repeated. Over the last few years, there have been several landslides across the state. Last week's landslide in Wayanad is the worst Kerala has witnessed. In the world of policymaking, there is a strong belief that awareness will lead to appropriate action. So, the most prescribed solution to mitigate any human behaviour problem is an awareness campaign. Ever since the Wayanad tragedy, Malayalam TV channels and newspapers have been relentlessly reporting various facets of the tragedy. There could not have been a bigger awareness campaign about the consequences of not protecting nature than the combined media coverage of the Wayanad tragedy. But the question is: What impact will this media blitzkrieg have on the behaviour of people, at least in Kerala?

Forgetting is an important and integral

process of the human brain. Forgetting frees up the brain's memory storage and space, and allows even those who lose their near and dear ones to move on with life. Given this inherent brain process, it is inevitable that once media reports on the issue fizzle out, the Wayanad tragedy too will follow the inevitable forgetting curve.

Evolutionarily, humans are more focused on rewards in the present. The human brain is not really geared to think about the future, even less so about risks that lie ahead. Most humans tend to believe that their future will be better than the present. So, it is unlikely that even those living in Wayanad would be able to foresee a similar tragedy befalling them again.

In the aftermath of the Wayanad landslide, various interested parties are trying to ensure that this tragedy does not become a catalyst for changing the status quo. They want to keep building houses and resorts in the Western Ghats, as done and overdone in the past. They even want rock quarrying to continue unabated.

Meteorologist Edward Lorenz was among the first few to realize that climate prediction involves working out complex relationships between multiple factors. This led Lorenz to combine his knowledge of meteorology and

mathematics to create Chaos Theory. While doing an experiment that modelled a weather prediction, he entered an initial condition as 0.506 instead of 0.506127. The result was surprising. It led to a very different prediction. From this, he deduced that a tiny change in initial conditions can have enormous long-term implications, and this gave rise to his famous cliché: the flap of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon can cause a tornado in Texas.

In the aftermath of the Gadgil Committee report based on a pioneering study of the complex ecological problems of the Western Ghats, and even after the recent Wayanad tragedy, concerted efforts were made by vested parties to disregard the complexities of climate change and reduce this problem to simple linear arguments. An example of this trend is a video that has been released after the Wayanad tragedy. In the video clip, the narrator says, 'In 1924, there wasn't much cultivation in Munnar. But disastrous floods happened in Munnar in 1924.'

Then the narrator leaps to a conclusion: 'If so, how can we be implicated for what happened in Wayanad?' The motive of this message is obvious.

Oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon is a strategy commonly adopted by vested interests to keep subject experts out of the discussion on that topic. No wonder, the Gadgil report on the precarious state of the Western Ghats was vehemently rejected by them.

By oversimplifying discussions on climate change and making the arguments linear, it is very easy to involve lay individuals in a public debate and convert the real issue into an emotional one. The justification trotted out for such an approach is that climate change impacts everybody and so everyone must have a say. But then, just because a heart attack could happen to anyone, we don't keep the cardiologist away from discussions of our cardiac health.

Post the Wayanad tragedy, a debate has sprung up over who is responsible for the

intense rains in the Western Ghats: Farmers and resort owners, or the city dwellers who contribute to global warming by using private vehicles and air-conditioners. The point of this blame assignment is to avoid taking any collective responsibility for the tragedy.

As the obfuscation and debates continue, there is a truth that no one can deny. The train has already left the station as far as protecting the ecology of states like Kerala is concerned. The consequences of climate change now stare at us. This is a time to take steps to protect those who would be affected by the next landslide waiting to happen in the fragile Western Ghats.

We often think that solving the problem of ecological sustainability is an easy job. Given the belief that humans are rational beings, all we need to do is organize a few conferences and launch a few awareness campaigns about the need for a sustainable world. But events since the landslide in Wayanad show that even in the aftermath of a horrific occurrence, humans are not really willing to change their behaviour patterns. The forces that want to preserve the status quo are very strong. Making people believe that climate change and its consequences are real remains a challenge.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Finance Minister yields

Facing a backlash over changes to the property transaction taxation, the FM has given some concessions to homeowners

Bowing to the popular pressure and critiques from MPs within the NDA coalition, the Central Government has relented to grant some relief for property transactions. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in the budget that the tax on long-term capital gains was reduced from 20% with indexation benefits to 12.5% but without indexation benefits. However, following significant opposition, an amendment is being made to The Finance Bill, 2024. For the transfer of a long-term capital asset such as land or a building acquired before July 23, 2024, the taxpayer can now choose to calculate their tax either at 12.5% without indexation under the new scheme or at 20% with indexation under the old scheme and pay whichever amount is lower. Indexation adjusts purchase price for inflation, reducing tax liability on gains from investments like debt funds. The government eliminated indexation benefits on long-term capital gains, increasing taxable gains. It prevents inflation from eroding returns on long-term investments. This adjustment marks a significant reversal from the government's firm stance on the issue after the Budget.

The ministry officials had argued that the new tax rate structure, with a lower tax rate minus the indexation benefits, would benefit people in almost all cases. However, the industry experts had different opinions. Industry bodies had sought to rethink the proposal, observing that the removal of indexation benefits amounted to a retrospective tax change for those who had bought properties earlier. They pointed out that this would particularly hurt those who

had invested in assets that had delivered lesser appreciation in value over the years. It was widely feared that the removal of indexation benefits on long-term capital gains would slow down property transactions in the Mumbai real estate market, and the real estate engine of the country and could have cascading effects throughout the country. Besides, several MPs also urged the Government to reconsider the proposal. During the debate on the Finance Bill in the Lok Sabha, TDP MP Lavu Sri Krishna Devarayalu echoed the concerns of other MPs, emphasising that this issue involves taxpayers' hard-earned money and impacts middle-class people the most. He noted that the middle class views real estate as a safe investment and and so should be protected. Indeed he had a point, as the middle-class is facing the pinch of price rise and rising unemployment. If their small investments and savings are wiped off they would have nothing to fall back upon. Providing taxpayers with the option to choose between the two tax regimes would address some of their concerns. Thankfully the finance minister yielded to allow for the second option. This would indeed give some relief to small and middle-class homeowners, providing a more balanced approach to long-term capital gains taxation in the real estate sector.

PICTALK



Fishermen cast their nets in the Arabian sea, at the Kochi coast

The evolution of Rahul Gandhi

It may be premature to assess Rahul Gandhi's effectiveness as the new Leader of the Opposition, but his initial performance is promising



KALYANI SHANKAR

It might be too soon to judge how well Rahul Gandhi is doing as the new Leader of the Opposition. The current budget session ends in just a few days, so we'll need more time to understand his leadership fully. But he has begun well. After winning in the Lok Sabha polls, Rahul has been confident and strong both inside and outside the house, which is appropriate for an opposition leader. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recently discussed Rahul's evolution since their days at Cambridge University. Sen underlined that Rahul has significantly matured over the years and underscored that his true test lies in how he steers the Opposition in Parliament.

Rahul stepped into the shoes of the Leader of the Opposition, a quarter of a century after his political debut in 2004. The Lok Sabha had been without a Leader of the Opposition for a decade, as no opposition party had the requisite number of members to stake the claim in the last two Lok Sabhas. During the recent budget session, the first after Rahul became the LOP, he took a vital leadership role in his party and the Opposition. Since becoming the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi has taken on more responsibilities.

He now leads and represents the Opposition's viewpoint on various subjects. This is a new role for him. He organised protests, delivered powerful speeches against the Modi government, and worked closely with allies to coordinate their efforts on the floor. He also focused on critical issues for the people and made himself more accessible. In the recent budget session, Rahul Gandhi, as the Leader of the Opposition, took on an important leadership role within his party and the Opposition. He has organised protests, delivered powerful speeches against the Modi government, and worked closely with allies. Additionally, he has focused on critical issues for the people and made himself more accessible. Rahul Gandhi's backroom office has a



team of about twelve key members.

This team led by General Secretary K.C. Venugopal and including Sam Pitroda, Sunil Kanugolu, K. Biju, B. Srivatsa, Manickam Tagore, Alankar Sawai, and Kaushal Vidyarthi, plays a vital role in managing Gandhi's political activities and election strategies, including logistics and social media. Rahul's growth and evolution in the political arena have transformed him into a more confident leader, marking a significant departure from his previous image as a reluctant politician. This change has been compelling to witness in his political journey. Rahul finds it easier to take on a more assertive role now, with a substantial number of opposition members in the 18th Lok Sabha. Furthermore, the success of united allies in the 2024 polls has made them realise the power of unity.

When Rahul spoke as the Leader of the Opposition for the first time, he said, "While the government has political power, the Opposition also represents the voice of the Indian people. This time, the Opposition represents significantly more of the Indian people's voice than it



DESPITE BEING AN MP FOR THE PAST TWO DECADES, RAHUL WAS NOT CONSIDERED A GOOD PARLIAMENTARIAN. HE ASKED ONLY 99 QUESTIONS, PARTICIPATED IN 26 DEBATES, AND WASN'T ALWAYS PRESENT AT CRITICAL TIMES

did last time." Rahul Gandhi's criticisms of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have caused strong reactions from the ruling party. During Rahul's maiden speech as LOP, PM Modi spoke up for the first time in 10 years. Modi accused Rahul of saying that the entire Hindu society is 'violent'. The Prime Minister stated, "Democracy and the Constitution have taught me to take the Leader of the Opposition seriously." Modi's responses to Gandhi's criticisms show an acknowledgement of the changed situation and the resulting tension in the Parliament. Rahul Gandhi has been speaking out against the Modi government's decision to arrest AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal and JMM chief Hemant Soren. He opposes the BJP's attempts to silence opposing viewpoints.

This has caused increased tensions in Parliament for the ruling party. During his Lok Sabha campaign, Rahul Gandhi strategically showed a small red pocket edition of the Constitution at public meetings. This move effectively highlighted what he called the perceived threat to the Constitution from the BJP.

His use of the Constitution helped him gain support from reservation beneficiaries.

Despite being an M.P. for the past two decades, Rahul was not considered a good Parliamentarian. He asked only 99 questions, participated in 26 debates, and wasn't always present at critical times. Since 2014, he has been noticeably absent during budget sessions, only appearing occasionally. He also frequently went abroad, leaving the party in a crisis. Rahul is doing well as the Leader of the Opposition (LOP). His success will depend on his political planning. He missed some opportunities in the past, like becoming a minister in Manmohan Singh's cabinet or strengthening the party as the Congress President. However, his current role shows his potential. He must use this opportunity to face future political challenges confidently. Rahul's belief in the power of the LOP to raise its voice in Parliament gives hope and optimism to the party.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PRESIDENT'S STATE VISIT

Madam — President Droupadi Murmu embarked on a six-day state visit to three nations: Fiji, New Zealand, and Timor-Leste a couple of days ago. I wonder why the President has undertaken this visit? How will engaging with these nations benefit India? Fiji and Timor-Leste are almost unheard of countries in India. What is the government's agenda really? As both Fiji and New Zealand are approximately 11,000 kms and Timor-Leste is about 6,500 kms away, it goes without saying that a to and fro visit to these countries would cost our nation a humongous sum. Besides, the President who would be travelling by a state aeroplane (read, like a private airliner) would leave a heavy carbon footprint. Will a RTI query in respect of the purpose and cost of the tri-nation jaunt be answered, if at all?

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

BLINDING HEADLIGHTS CAUSE ACCIDENTS

Madam — Blinding headlights are one of the important causes of road accidents in India. A driver can be blinded by the opposite vehicles as well as the rear ones. On an ornamental illumination like flashy headlights. Flickers, Light emitting diodes (LED), and its variants, are freely used by irresponsible drivers. Section 177 of the Motor Vehicles Act (MVA) has explicitly detailed the proper and improper use of headlights. Many drivers, especially the non-professional ones, are oblivious to the correct usage of headlights and

Justice delayed is justice denied



This is with reference to your editorial "Justice Delayed". The Chief Justice of India's deep concern over the excessive delay in disposing of cases, as noted in the

this can mainly be blamed on poor quality of driving schools and doling out licences without proper application of mind.

Ganpat Bhat | Akola

TURMOIL IN BANGLADESH

Madam — Sheikh Hasina's resignation as Prime Minister of Bangladesh is a result of socio-political upheaval of her own making. Every nation is an enterprise owned and run by people who elect a government to run it as also simultaneously place an Opposition as the auditor. So long as the auditor is facilitated by the government to put up dissenting notes and is willing to correction, the shareholders let the checks and balances play out. When the government fails to give credence to the opposition, a plethora of public fora and institutions come in to press an alternative narrative. Should the government resort to suppressing them too, the people step in as suo-moto auditor. The likes of social media then expound dissent and if this too goes unheeded, people act as regulators leveraging electoral

editorial is a concern shared by all. The staggering fact that 44 million cases are pending and could take 300 years to resolve at the current pace should prompt the ruling government to seek a tangible solution. Currently, filing a case itself feels like a punishment for both parties involved.

Even after winning a case, the appeals process undertaken by the losing party makes the entire affair extremely frustrating. There is a pressing need to increase the capacity of courts at all levels to handle and dispose of cases in a timely manner. However, it is unfortunate that even the existing courts are forced to operate with severe manpower shortages. Simply changing the Acts and their names is not the change people desire; what is urgently needed is systemic and infrastructural improvement.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

platforms to tone down aberrations in governance by impinging on electoral standing of the ruling dispensation. Should a government seek to neutralise the process of such franchise itself, as has been in many nations across the globe, people take to roads to convey the message. An extremely recalcitrant government could then compel people to set up tribunals and don the robes of judge and jury. Bangladesh has apparently slipped into this unhappy final phase. It's military may yet be sagacious enough to restore law and order and enable the nation to reclaim governance and eschew going the Myanmar way. There is a lesson for every progressive democratic nation. Stifling the elected opposition and relentless heavy handed suppression of dissent per se in hubris of power, is bound to heavily set back economic progress while the socio political fabric stands frayed beyond repair.

R Narayanan | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letters@pioneer@gmail.com

Renewable energy: Paving the way for a sustainable future

By 2030, India plans to achieve 500 GW of installed capacity from non-fossil fuels, marking a significant shift towards sustainability and energy security

India's growth story over the past two decades has been marked by vibrant economic progress, largely driven by service exports and rising domestic consumption. As of 2024, the economy appears robust, poised to replicate its service sector success by transforming into a global manufacturing hub to leverage its demographic dividend.

A robust manufacturing sector necessitates significant resources, with power being a crucial component. Despite this, India's per capita electricity consumption remains low compared to global averages. As the country embarks on its manufacturing-focused era, electricity demand is expected to rise significantly. To meet this demand while adhering to climate commitments, India plans to add new electricity generating capacity primarily from non-fossil fuel sources. The goal is to achieve 500 GW of installed non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030.

By May 31, 2024, India's non-fossil fuel-based power generation capacity stood at 201.7 GW, with renewable energy, including small hydro pro-



jects, contributing 146.6 GW. To meet growing demands, a significant increase in renewable energy capacity is anticipated, supported by the renewable energy procurement roadmap from the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE), which targets 50 GW of bids annually from FY 2023-24 to FY 2027-28. Regulatory policies for the renewable energy sector are governed by both central and state governments, as electricity is part of the concurrent list. Key aspects of central government policy include promoting domestic manufacturing of solar modules and electrolyzers, safeguarding domestic manufacturing, and implementing policies to encourage specific types of electricity genera-

tion like rooftop solar and offshore wind. India's renewable energy policy framework adopts a holistic approach, addressing multiple factors. For example, the Ladakh region, with excellent irradiation levels, lacks sufficient infrastructure to integrate its power into the grid. To tackle this, the government announced the green energy corridor. Furthermore, the government identified states with offshore wind potential and introduced a viability gap funding scheme with an outlay of Rs 7,453 crores for installing 1 GW of offshore wind projects. Regulatory policies also aim to enhance self-sufficiency in the energy.

The Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, with an outlay of Rs. 24,000 crores, targets achieving gigawatt-scale manufacturing capacity of high-efficiency solar PV modules. Additionally, the Strategic Interventions for Green Hydrogen Transition (SIGHT) Program, with an outlay of Rs. 17,490 crores under the National Green Hydrogen Mission, supports domestic manufacturing of electrolyzers and green hydro-

gen production. These investments are expected to generate numerous direct and indirect jobs while ensuring energy security.

The government has also introduced schemes to promote distributed solar generation at the household level in both rural and urban areas. The PM-KUSUM scheme aims to reduce the agricultural sector's reliance on diesel and boost farmers' incomes by providing central government subsidies of up to 50% for installing standalone solar pumps and solarizing existing grid-connected agricultural pumps. Farmers can also install grid-connected solar plants on barren land and sell electricity to local distribution companies (DISCOMs). In the interim budget for FY 2024-25, the government announced the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojna, which offers subsidies covering up to 40% of solar panel installation costs. This scheme aims to equip 10 million homes with solar panels, saving INR 75,000 crores in electricity costs.

(The writer is a manager-investments at AMPIN Energy Transition, views are personal)



GAUHAV PRABHUMI

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Liquor ads

The forthcoming regulations by the Centre to clamp down on surrogate advertising in the liquor industry mark a significant step towards consumer protection and public health. These regulations, set to be finalised within a month, will not only prohibit direct advertisements of alcohol but also ban the more insidious surrogate ads and event sponsorships that have long circumvented existing laws. Surrogate advertising, a clever but misleading tactic, has been used by liquor companies to promote their brands under the guise of unrelated products such as bottled water, soda, and music CDs. These advertisements often feature logos, slogans, and imagery closely associated with their alcoholic products, creating a strong brand recall among consumers. By using popular Bollywood stars and high-profile events, these companies have managed to keep their brands in the public eye despite the ban on direct alcohol advertisements.

The new rules will impose fines of up to Rs 50 lakh on companies found guilty of misleading surrogate advertising. Celebrities endorsing these products will also face penalties, including disbarment from advertising for one to three years. This move is a clear message from the government that circumventing advertising bans through creative loopholes will no longer be tolerated. Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare has emphasised that these regulations aim to close the circuitous routes companies take to promote their products. By targeting the entire ecosystem of surrogate advertising, the government hopes to reduce the pervasive influence of alcohol advertising on Indian society. India's alcohol market, valued at approximately Rs 3.76 lakh crore, is one of the largest globally, with a rapidly growing middle class driving demand. However, this growth comes with a significant public health cost.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has noted that comprehensive bans on alcohol advertising are among the most effective measures to reduce alcohol consumption and related harms. India's per capita alcohol consumption is projected to increase from about 5 litres in 2019 to nearly 7 litres by 2030, outpacing even China. The high rate of alcohol-related deaths in India further underscores the need for stringent regulatory measures. The new regulations are inspired by global best practices, such as those in Norway, where strict advertising bans have successfully reduced alcohol sales over time. By prohibiting the marketing of products like soda and glassware that use designs similar to alcohol brands, India aims to eliminate the subtle yet powerful brand recall these ads create. Critics might argue that these regulations could stifle the business interests of major corporations and impact the economy.

However, the long-term benefits of a healthier population and reduced alcohol-related harm far outweigh the short-term economic gains. The liquor industry must find more responsible ways to market their products without resorting to deceptive practices that undermine public health. Responsible advertising practices will not only comply with the law but also foster a healthier society. The government's proactive stance should be commended, as it sets a precedent for prioritising public health over commercial interests.

Silent Betrayal

As India navigates the complexities of modernisation and urbanisation, a troubling paradox has emerged. Despite a cultural foundation that venerates the elderly, a growing number of senior citizens are being abandoned by their families. This phenomenon, largely hidden from public view, is a stark betrayal of India's deeply rooted values of familial duty and respect for elders. Traditionally, Indian society has revered the elderly, with multi-generational households serving as the norm. The expectation that children will care for their ageing parents is ingrained in both religious tenets and social customs. Yet this once unshakable bond is fraying. The reasons for this shift are manifold and complex. One significant factor is the economic pressure exerted by longer lifespans. Advances in healthcare have increased life expectancy, but they have also introduced new challenges. Elderly parents often require extensive medical care, which can strain the financial resources of children. The younger generation, already grappling with its own familial responsibilities and economic pressures, finds itself in a bind. This dilemma forces many to make difficult decisions between caring for their children or their ageing parents. Urbanisation and the migration of young people to cities in search of better opportunities exacerbate the issue. As the young move away from their homes, the traditional support structures weaken.

The physical distance complicates caregiving and fosters a sense of disconnection. In the hustle and bustle of urban life, the elderly, left behind in rural areas or small towns, become isolated and neglected. Moreover, the creeping influence of Western values has begun to erode the tradition of multigenerational living. Individualism and the pursuit of personal goals often take precedence over collective family responsibilities. Nursing homes and professional caregivers, once seen as taboo, are becoming more accepted as viable alternatives. While these institutions can provide necessary care, they also signify a departure from the familial bond that has historically underpinned Indian society.

The result is a burgeoning population of abandoned elderly, a demographic that now calls the streets, hospitals, and temples home. Sheltered after a refuge, they are merely a hand-aid on a gaping wound. They are filled with stories of heartbreak and betrayal, of parents discarded when they become too burdensome. The government's response, including the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. Many elderly people are unaware of their rights, and even those who know are often reluctant to take legal action against their own children. The stigma and emotional turmoil associated with such actions are significant deterrents. Ultimately, how a society treats its most vulnerable members is a reflection of its values. The abandonment of the elderly is a silent crisis that undermines the moral fabric of Indian society. It is imperative that India rekindles its traditional respect for the elderly, ensuring they live their final years with dignity and love.

Maps as milestones

The myth propagated by British colonial authorities that Indian 'natives' had neither any sense of history nor the ability to maintain records lies shattered. Court records of Princely States provide details of daily events, visits, letters received and despatched, accounts and payments, assets and inventories; in today's parlance these would be MIS reports...



needed maps. In times of peace and war, the importance of maps was always underscored; the accuracy of maps in marking out frontiers was highlighted, and those who contributed to the creation of maps were acknowledged for their meticulous work, for pushing the boundaries of knowledge. Maps, whether in the ancient, pre-modern or modern world, are clearly termed as 'knowledge products' whose worth continues to be recognised by Kings and Heads of State.

At the Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum in Vadodra, a selection of rare archival maps and paintings is driving home the significance of these artefacts, painstakingly restored and exhibited as 'Picturing Place: Painted and Printed Maps at the Udaipur Court'. It is a collaborative effort of The Getty Paper Project and The City Palace Museum, Udaipur which has made possible the building of these bridges with the past, adding another dimension to our understanding of how our history was mapped, as it was shaped. Launched in 2018, before the pandemic stopped the physical world in its tracks, the Getty Paper Project was focused not only on funding professional development of curators around the world, it was designed to bring prints and drawings on to the centre stage of museums and collections. For far too long paintings, sculpture, textiles, arms and armouries, architecture took pride of place in museums, big and small.

Through the Paper Project, it was books, documents, prints and drawings which assumed rightful significance as interest in these collections grew with 21st century audiences. The Getty reached out to museums for experimental projects to challenge the creativity of their curators, besides providing opportunity to proactively restore archival materials.

Many may not be aware that the US-based Getty is a leading global arts organization committed to the exhibition, conservation, and understanding of the world's artistic and cultural heritage. Working collaboratively with partners around the globe, the Getty Foundation, Getty Conservation Institute, Getty Museum and Getty Research Institute are dedicated to greater understanding of relationships between the world's many cultures, bringing together people, professions, and institutions in meaningful ways.

It was in 2021 that the Udaipur-based Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum (MMF) received the grant from the Getty

Foundation. The objective was to research, restore and plan exhibitions of rare, never-seen-before array of maps and cartographic-related documents. The curatorial and research teams of the City Palace Museum were working on preserving the cartographic materials in its archives, many of which dated back to the 1700s. Digging into archives of Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum (MMF), it was clear that historical documentation in the pre-modern era, whether in Mewar or in other Princely States, was second to none. The myth, propagated by the British colonial authorities, that Indian 'natives' had neither any sense of history nor the ability to maintain records, lies shattered. Court records of Princely States provide details of daily events, visits, letters received and despatched, accounts and payments, assets and inventories; in today's parlance these would be MIS reports.

At MMF, for instance, records of the last 400 years are available, awaiting digitization while several abhidas have been published. 'Picturing Place: Painted and Printed Maps at the Udaipur Court' was initially exhibited at the City Palace Museum, and curator Dr Shaikha Mishra explained "it has been curated in different themes. We have showcased some 53 objects including a diverse array of maps meticulously commissioned and collected by the Maharajas of Mewar. On display are seven paintings, 31 maps, one architectural drawing, 12 photographs, one photo album and one abhida from the MMF." Topographical maps, as in the State of the Udaipur Court, were British painters on Mewar and Udaipur, besides the early printed maps of India, world maps, and local district maps created for revenue administration have been presented. The exhibition gives visitors fascinating insights into how places, landscapes, and the topography of the State of Mewar were produced on maps, paintings, and other related documents. The iconic architecture of Udaipur's palaces and temples can also be seen in these artefacts, as depicted by cartographic printers and painters of the past.

Once again, a myth-shattering moment: it had been assumed that map-making and collection of topographic details began with the coming of the British, especially after the British imperial authorities began their subjugation and rule over India. The vast collection, of over 500 maps, architectural drawings and blueprints preserved at the MMF, bring to light the brilliance of painted maps. "In pre-modern, or pre-colonial times, these painted maps were the visual means to tell stories," curator Dr Mishra pointed out.

The pride of place is taken by the Chittorgarh maps; Chittor being acknowledged since the 8th-9th centuries CE as the 'fort among all forts'. Presented are fascinating details of Chittorgarh's history, genealogical charts of its rulers, and most significantly, the public spaces have been highlighted on the landscape and waterbodies marked, the till-date famous temples can be seen on these maps. No wonder these painted maps, some very large in size, remain historical documents providing an overview of the social and cultural life with the fort-city of Chittorgarh, once the capital-city of Mewar before the Maharajas established Udaipur and moved to the 'city of lakes' in the middle of the 16th century CE. While the Court of Udaipur was famous for its writings on history and literature, exhibitions like 'Picturing Place' have put the spotlight on these maps, as part of a vibrant intellectual culture belonging not just to Rajasthan but the entire nation. Through this exhibition, Dr Mishra highlighted the multifaceted purposes and interpretations of maps, from political and cultural motivations to imperialistic ambitions. "Seen together, it provides an opportunity to examine the visualization of architecture, landscape and topography in different mediums over two centuries," said the curator.

Moreover, the exhibition, as it moves across India, provides avenues for further research on this unique collection and elaborates on the agency of court artists within the challenging field of cartographic knowledge. Reading the map titled 'Mewar State', published by Hiteshi Prakashan, 1945. (Accession No.: 2020.42.0050) is an interesting exercise in seeing resurgent identities through maps in regional languages, Hindi in this case. The late 19th and early 20th century CE were a period of cultural

renaissance and linguistic movements in India. These maps, especially after the British imperial authorities began their subjugation and rule over India. The vast collection, of over 500 maps, architectural drawings and blueprints preserved at the MMF, bring to light the brilliance of painted maps. "In pre-modern, or pre-colonial times, these painted maps were the visual means to tell stories," curator Dr Mishra pointed out.

Maps of historical kingdoms like Mewar with its boundaries, landmarks, and cultural sites gained popularity, reflecting the region's rich legacy. Hindi emerged as a prominent language during India's independence movement, and the demand for maps in Hindi soared. By 1937, Hindi maps were locally available in Udaipur, emphasizing Mewar's identity within Rajasthan and India. Several maps showcased administrative units, physical features, local produce, economy, infrastructure, colleges, population, and mines, offering fascinating insights into the vibrant past of Princely State of Udaipur-Mewar. For those keen on military history, maps of the Western campaign of World War I are displayed. The map, printed by W & AK Johnston, highlights the German Empire's western front during 1914-1918, marked by a bold red line. Maps in the inset provide detailed views of Paris and Berlin, key cities in the campaign. The British relied heavily on the Indian contribution to the war effort," said Dr Lakshya Singh Mewar, trustee of MMF. "Our illustrious great-grandfather Maharaja Fateh Singh extended a generous financial aid including a loan of Rs 5 lakhs, troops and resources to the British. Mind you, he was the only invitee among the Indian Princes who, on a matter of principle, did not attend the Delhi Durbar of 1903 and 1911."

Maharaja Fateh Singh had steadfastly refused to offer obedience to the British Monarch or to admit a subservient sovereign status. In 1911, he made the journey to Delhi by a special train but did not attend the Durbar. His chair, made for the occasion, was never sat upon. King George V came to Salimgarh railway station to meet him, thus making Maharaja Fateh Singh the first Indian ruler to meet the King-Emperor in private audience. Maps have an extraordinary power to unfold stories, making us proud of our history and exemplary personalities.

(Photo: Former Royal Family Members of Baroda and Mewar at Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum gallery, Vadodra.)

There is a concern that digital filtrations and a rise in terrorism may occur in northeastern parts of India, and the country must take on the responsibility of addressing these threats.

In Sheikh Hasina's ignominial fall there lie lessons for all developing nations, particularly those in South Asia, that political repression, mixed with economic frailty, is a perfect recipe for public unrest.

And when all avenues for dissent are shut, the stage will be set for either violent upheaval or the entry of unselected forces moving

in to 'save the day.' Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai, 7 August.

STUDENTS' ROLE SIR, This refers to the article, "Movement hijacked by fundamentalists", published in today's edition of The Statesman.

Erina Haque Bibi has provided a clear picture of the developments that took place in Bangladesh over the past few weeks. While the quota reform movement started by the students can be regarded as successful taking into consideration the Supreme Court order of a substantial reduction in the freedom fight-

ers' quota, the apparent hijacking of the movement and transforming of the same into a broader, aggressive and violent anti-government protest by fundamentalist parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh is a matter of grave concern for the immediate future of the nation.

It is imperative that the students not get instigated by these undemocratic approaches and maintain their focus in an effort to restoring normalcy through pragmatic and meaningful approaches.

The future of Bangladesh lies in their actions.

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, August 7.

ASIAN VOICES

Viet Nam is in golden population period

The golden population is the period when the proportion of people in the working age (15-64 years old) is higher than the proportion of dependent ones (under 15 years old and over 64 years old).

This structure often occurs when birth rates decrease and average life expectancy increases. The golden population is considered an opportunity for the economic development of a country.

During this period, the labour force is abundant, which can promote production and economic growth. However, the golden population can also lead to a number of challenges, such as increased pressure on the health and education systems, increased risk of unemployment and increased social inequality.

Viet Nam is in the golden population period. According to forecasts of the General Statistics Office, the structure will last until 2041. This is an opportunity for Viet Nam to promote economic and social development.

The golden population only appears once for each country, so it is necessary to have a long-term strategy on employment to adapt to the period.

The Ministry of Health will have to improve population quality and take care of people's health, especially health examinations before marriage.

Viet Nam News

prenatal and neonatal screening, diagnosis and treatment according to the Prime Minister's Decision No. 1999 issued on December 7, 2020.

Fertility is one of the most important factors affecting population growth rate, population size as well as population structure in a country.

If the birth rate is too high compared to the death rate, it will lead to rapid increase in population size, negatively impacting the ecological environment and socio-economic development goals.

On the contrary, if the fertility rate is too low, it will have a direct and profound impact on the population structure and leave many consequences.

One is the shortage of workers. Second is increasing the ageing rate and number of the elderly. Third is a decline in population size and negative population growth. These will greatly impact socio-economic development, national defence and security.

The consequences of population problems are very long, only seen decades later, even a generation later. The future generation born will enjoy the benefits of our policies today. Even to achieve replacement fertility level, we have to go through three or four generations of childbearing. Replacement fertility is the fertility level at which a woman has, on average, just enough daughters to replace herself in the next cycle of population.

Therefore, when the replacement fertility rate is maintained, it will continue stabilising the population structure at a reasonable level, contributing to the country's sustainable development.

Viet Nam's population is in the transition stage from replacement fertility level, to low fertility trend, from early birth model to late birth model, from high death rate to low death rate, from young population structure to ageing population.

The decreasing fertility, in addition to the impact on population size, also leads to a decrease in the proportion of children under 15 years old and an increase in the proportion of elderly people.

Currently, Viet Nam is still in the process of ageing population and is one of the countries with the fastest aging rate in the world.

While it takes developed countries decades and some countries centuries to transition from the ageing population stage to late birth model, in Viet Nam it only takes about 26 years.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Lessons for S Asia

SIR, This refers to your editorial, "Bangladesh's crisis" (August 7). The political journey of Sheikh Hasina had been marked by significant highs and dramatic lows.

Her 15-year grip on power has lapsed abruptly and in a dramatic fashion. Despite plaudits for boosting a struggling economy, Hasina's administration was increasingly criticised at home and abroad over claims it was becoming authoritarian, with accusations of extrajudicial killings, strong-arm tactics toward critics, political vendettas and shrinking press freedom.

The South Asian nation of about 171 million has seen a cycle

of coups and political unrest over the decades, but the recent turmoil was among the bloodiest in the country's history.

As for India, the turmoil in Bangladesh poses a significant challenge and security dilemma. There is a concern that digital filtrations and a rise in terrorism may occur in northeastern parts of India, and the country must take on the responsibility of addressing these threats.

In Sheikh Hasina's ignominial fall there lie lessons for all developing nations, particularly those in South Asia, that political repression, mixed with economic frailty, is a perfect recipe for public unrest.

And when all avenues for dissent are shut, the stage will be set for either violent upheaval or the entry of unselected forces moving

in to 'save the day.'

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A thought for today

In the age of live-streaming, it's necessary judges show greater restraint in proceedings...observations made can cause palpable harm to the judicial process

SUPREME COURT

Courting Differences

SC dealt with HC judge's remarks against it. But the real issue is courts must justice over remit

That an SC bench had a special sitting to take to task a judge of Punjab & Haryana high court over comments the HC judge made about the top court, is a complex and troubling situation, with important lessons. It's not simply a matter of an HC judge's criticism of SC, which the top court dealt with yesterday, calling Justice Rajbir Sehrawat's remarks "unnecessary and unwarranted", and expunging them. SC made it abundantly clear that parties may be aggrieved by an order, but a judge can never be aggrieved by a higher appellate forum.

The matter | It's necessary we understand what triggered Justice Sehrawat's outburst. SC stayed a contempt-of-court order on which Justice Sehrawat, in-charge of roster of contempt proceedings, was initiating action against Haryana govt for non-compliance of an earlier HC order. The appeal in SC was only against the contempt order, not the original order. Upshot: a stay on contempt risks being interpreted as a stay on non-compliance. Justice Sehrawat said SC hadn't considered "consequences" of staying the HC's contempt order. That such stays had implications on the ground. For instance, it was argued that a stay by SC on HC's contempt orders had been interpreted as "de facto" stay on the order itself in a case pertaining to pay grades of judicial officers, which is still hanging fire.

The worry | The judiciary is best placed to carry out its own damage control measures. Justice Sehrawat's outburst was uncalled for. The roster to hear contempt matters was transferred from him. Yesterday, a bench of HC Chief Justice Sheel Nagu and Justice Anil Kshetrapal stayed Justice Sehrawat's contempt order itself until the next hearing, "to prevent any further damage to the reputation and majesty of the rule of law". But that is not the point.

The lesson | Reputation is built on trust, integrity and smooth functioning. It's clear the judiciary's federal structure is feeling a certain strain. There've been far too many occasions where high courts and trial courts have bristled at SC's initiatives to improve judiciary functioning, seeing these instead as SC "overreach". What all this says is that judges need to always put the goal of delivering justice fairly and efficiently above disputes on remits. Judiciary across levels should pay heed to what SC said yesterday, that "courts are not supreme but the Constitution is."



Job Half Done

Indexation benefit for house sale should have been retained even for transactions post-budget

The govt's move to introduce a grandfathering clause for the contentious budget proposal that removed indexation benefits for real estate transactions will be welcomed by homeowners and investors alike. Post-budget, calculation of long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on unlisted assets like property would have entailed a higher tax outgo for a large section of real estate sales, notwithstanding the reduction in tax rate from earlier 20% to 12.5%. With sellers now having the option to choose between old and new regimes for transactions done before July 23, finance ministry has heeded criticism that any such retrospective tax was bound to evoke.

Reality a special category | The reasoning behind the change in capital tax regime was sound at a general level. Having a uniform LTCG rate will no doubt make the tax structure simpler and create a level-playing field across asset classes.

However, an exception is warranted for assets like land and buildings. For many Indian families, buying or selling property can be a life-changing decision. As compared to the markets, real estate assets also offer more assured return on investment. Even at the sectoral level, removal of indexation benefit was expected to hit secondary sales market and dampen investment in real estate. Investor-driven markets like Delhi-NCR and Mumbai were likely to take a hit.

Bringing back old regime | But govt hasn't gone far enough, as the new tax regime stays for prospective transactions. In an era when inflation is almost a constant, investing in real estate assets for long term would thus be less attractive than before. Redirecting investment from short-term to long term was one of the primary objectives of the capital gains regime being reworked in the budget. By not reintroducing indexation benefits, govt might be upending that goal.



GenZ, chill!

GenABC is Brut too

Ruchi Karkaria

We are a community all our own. The golden-oldest of our complex. We live up to its name. We live ready company from the Dostis we forge here. At our communal celebrations, we become Flamingos, dancing queen-norms in rani pink, we rock to retro tunes undered by retro knees. So what if the "way" is due to hips more stiff than silk?

We aren't only showstoppers at festive events in "toughie" or "banquet hall". Grey brigade meets up every ordinary evening too. Like parrots on our palm fronds, *malika mandal* sits lined up on garden parapet, umbrellaed by benign champs. Four metres away, 3-year-olds negotiate with baby steps the seesaws and swings of socialised living.

There's an old boys club too. They walk in twos and threes around the half-kilometre circuit before settling down to conversation. It's usually a stocks exchange, and shared aches and pains.

Growing old together has ups and downs. Still grudgingly peers elicit envious admiration, sympathy rises as our hearts sink to watch the southward spiral from slower gait to shuffle to wheelchair. Walking partner is increasingly held attendant. Yet, defying even strokes, they soldier on, losing mobility but not spirit.

Then, someone loses life itself - and one man's death diminishes us all.

erratica
Like last week, Mr. Gandhi, spy and ever smiling till a few evenings earlier, suddenly ended up in ICU. Sensing the worst, his brave wife chose to bring him home. The professor couple had a fulfilled life with daughter, twin granddaughters and a banquet room sized *bandar* as borne out by his 90th party in June. So, if he had to go, better ended in loving arms than in tangle of tubes which prolongs life but ends all human-ness.

Mr. Gandhi's slight frame has left a big hole in the evening podium, and deeper inside me. Not a week passed when he didn't double-ring my doorbell bearing big-hearted Ramesh's *malhiya*, *beha*, *kudhi*, *dai-dhokhi*... *Sambhalo, garm chhey*, he'd say before departing with a cheery "Have a nice day" - whatever the time.

Now it's a departure with no return ticket. Dost's platform filled with *dostis* bidding goodbye.

Alec Smart said: "Let's never again say 'landslide victory'."

SHE'S STILL GOLD

Vinesh Phogat's disqualification feels like a Shakespearean tragedy. Its cause must be investigated and made public. But her dangle in different arenas remains as inspiring as ever

Avijit Ghosh@timesofindia.com



Allot us have seen photos of that day, the day when Vinesh Phogat and fellow wrestlers, including Rio bronze medalist Sakshi Malik, tried to march towards Parliament last summer. They were protesting against a subliminal and inaction by authorities on sexual harassment allegations against then WPI boss Brij Bhushan Singh. But their efforts to demonstrate were cut short by a determined police.

In the pics, we see Phogat in every shade of defiance. In one photo, she is climbing over a barricade. In another, she is at the centre of a tug-of-war between cops and fellow protesters. But a third frame is the most poignant. Phogat is on the ground with another woman wrestler, desperately clutching a tricolour, with the police trying to drag them away.

On Wednesday, over a year later, another Phogat photo was splashed in newspapers across the country. It was clicked moments after she had overpowered Japan's seemingly unbeatable Yui Susaki, who had won the Tokyo 2020 gold without giving away a single point. In the pic, Phogat is lying on the mat, her arms and legs splayed in the pose of a human X, her hair creating a dark halo.

But it's the face that best demands a closer scrutiny. It's a face where a cyclone of emotions seems to have converged. And it isn't easy decoding them. Is it a face of unbearable happiness where tears seek to compensate for the inadequacy of words? Or is it indicative of an enormous relief in winning a battle that few thought she could win? Or is it an expression of a more complex cocktail, encapsulating everything endured on and off the mat over the past 18 months?

In Paris during the bouts, Phogat seemed to be in a zone of her own. The TV commentator had described Susaki as "a force of nature". Phogat, tanned her, defending every move her rival made like her life depended on it. And yet the

new life. What caused the slip-up must be investigated and made public.

But that doesn't take anything away from the immensity of Phogat's achievement. Consider that after spending weeks in a tent in Jantar Mantar, after a soul-crushing bout with the authorities, she underwent another surgery to reconstruct the knee ligament last Aug. Olympic Gold Quest, a not-for-profit company, supported her all the way. The psychological ordeal would have been agonising as the physical pain of rehabilitation that followed. The rebel and the warrior was also seen by some as a political proxy, when wrestlers like her were just fighting for their right to be respected.

To that extent, the story of Vinesh Phogat, who belongs to a family of protest, extends beyond medals. Battling physical injuries, overcoming the blows of officialdom, regaining fitness after a major surgery, qualifying for the Olympics and overcoming the inevitable, she's inspiring not only for those who seek to attain individual excellence in sports, but also for those fighting for a cause.

Her ongoing struggle is actually a *dangle* against inappropriate conduct in the workplace, a plea for safety, especially of young girls whose protests aren't acted upon. A true tribute to her lies in ensuring a better environment for all future wrestlers. And that requires more and more protest than just posting cheery messages on social media.

Phogat turns 30 later this month. One hopes that this is not the concluding passage of her glittering career. For she has the gift of creating fire from the ashes. After the disqualification, she may not win in Paris, but it doesn't change the fact that Vinesh Phogat is gold.



Can Bangladesh's Banker To The Poor Save Its Democracy?

Yunus as head of interim govt will be working on an agenda set by other forces. Legitimacy of his administration will depend on how quickly he restores order and holds free and fair elections

Shikha Mukerjee



The test of the interim govt headed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus appointed by President Mohammed Shahabuddin in consultation with Bangladesh's defence bosses and the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement, will be to restore normalcy, end the targeted killings of Awami League leaders and activists and who else is the latest disappeared persons. Yunus may possess the courage, conviction and ambition too. But the question is does he possess the power to take on the political and fundamentalist forces that ran amok this Monday and Tuesday?

There are three impediments that Yunus has to know how to navigate. First, the cabal of political forces that seems to have taken over after Hasina's ouster. Second, the army, which first conspired with Jamat-e-Islami and BNP before it sat down to negotiate with student leaders mediated by the president. Third, ensuring that elections that must follow after parliament was dissolved are free, fair and credible.

Will Yunus be his own man?

Yunus has agreed to work on a slate that is half full, since decisions have been taken and he has been co-opted to handle and implement a roadmap that has obviously been drawn up by others. What comes next is a matter of speculation. The bit that is absolutely certain is the army and the two political parties it consulted immediately after Hasina fled, will be the final decision makers.

Yunus's decision to step in as head of an interim govt is intriguing. In 2007, when the army asked him to take over as interim govt, he declined. Given the long march to Dhaka on Aug 5, are they thought they had achieved is not restoration of democracy.

Hasina's resignation and expulsion ended the tenure of her autocratic govt. But it did not restore democracy and the enjoyment of freedom, justice and human rights. The announcement by army chief Waker uz-Zaman that an interim govt would be formed and the "crisis" would end overnight, may have been designed to reassure people anxious about the volatile demonstrators who had swarmed the streets of Dhaka and out in the districts. But it was vacuous.

The crisis is far from over. By asking the president to front the meeting with the students in order to satisfy their primary demand that they won't

accept any army supported or army led govt, the leaders of the movement, including the visible and vocal Nahid Islam, have been co-opted into sponsoring the Yunus-led interim regime, which incidentally coincided with their original choice.

The students' movement served as a veil for Hasina's political opposition to settle the moment and to enter into the so-called second liberation struggle. The protests, violence including state violence, arson, killings, served to bring about a regime change without an election, forced ouster rather than a democratic transition.

What are the lessons for India? Yunus knows how imperative it is to get order back, regardless of how new the regime may be, without the army patrolling the streets. The uprising was also when civilian authority died and a different set of rules took over. How he have the authority to write the new rules and bring back a semblance of civilian order?

In the age of social media and viral videos, the temptation to mimic what others do is overpowering. Not only does India need to watch out for what happens within Bangladesh and figure out its impact on domestic security and politics, it needs to grasp that economic problems, the despair that follows from unsatisfactory unemployment jobs, unemployment and, above all, a trust deficit in the leadership are dangerous. Thwarted aspirations can snowball rapidly into a confrontation that can precipitate a crisis.

The writer is senior journalist

Who are Bangladesh's new power brokers? Hasina may have sworn never to return but that does not mean Awami is finished. The targeted violence and horrific killings within hours of the interim takeover point to settling of political scores.

For starters, the various student and youth-led organisations that participated in the upsurge were not in control of the violence that engulfed Bangladesh following Hasina's exit. Contrary to expectations, her departure will not be the second liberation

of Bangladesh. The celebrating young people and even older demonstrators who hit the streets after July and joined the long march to Dhaka on Aug 5, are beginning to discover that the liberators they thought they had achieved is not restoration of democracy.

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Calvin & Hobbes

THE TV LISTENING SAN THIS MOVIE WAS "ADULT SITUATIONS" WHAT ARE ADULT SITUATIONS?



PROBABLY THINGS LIKE GOING TO WORK, DRIVING BULLS AND TAXES. TAKING RESPONSIBILITIES...



WOW, THEY DON'T KID AROUND WHEN THEY SAY "FOR MATURE AUDIENCES"



Sacred space

The wise man beholds all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings; for that reason, he does not hate anyone. To the seer, all things have verily become the Self; what delusion, what sorrow, can there be for him who beholds that oneness?



Isha Upanishad

Why Boundaries are Essential For True Freedom

Neil Vimalakumar

The striving for personal space and freedom is a mark of a progressive society. Ironically though, freedom thrives only within boundaries. An autonomous culture might get chaotic with a lack of protocols to distinguish what is legitimate and what is not. For example, the Olympic Games can become a mockery and dangerous without rules and regulations. Imagine how all the potential of fun and enjoyment could be soured by unending meaningless discussions of dress codes etc.

Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore brings home this point: "I have a violin string on my table. It is free to move in and out as it wishes. If I twist one end, it responds. It is free. But it is not free to sing. So, I take it and fix it into my violin. I bind it, and when it is bound, it

is free to sing for the first time." The nature of freedom is that it needs the confines to work best.

However, it is fascinating to note how one might use "freedom" to justify lawless actions. Albert Camus' "judge-penitent" presents the story of a judge who provides legal support to condemned criminals. He used considerable skill and expertise within the constraints of law to set murderers free. His motivation was also to retaliate against the lawless moral acts. Earlier in life, while walking across a bridge over the river Seine, he sensed that a woman behind him was about to take her life.

The protagonist continued walking as though nothing had happened, even though he heard someone jump into the river. He responded with a numbness to that reality. He carefully avoided reading the newspaper the next few days, lest there be a report of this death, which might lead him to a sense of guilt for the story; though, there is a "conscience-keeper", laughter that bothers him, and his act of cowardice and self-interest.

The judge-penitent is now on a mission to help fellow guilty people justify the cry of guilt and silence the laughter. Interestingly, we sometimes seek freedom, not to do the right thing, but to do what our usual instincts drive us to. We seek freedom to be a law unto ourselves, autonomous, free to challenge the consequences that might follow. But then, clashes emerge among all entities in the group about who is right

and who is not. This existential conundrum raises the question - should the minority voices be given more importance, or is it the majority that wins? Should the intelligent in society be given the lead in this moral decision-making or should the common people decide? Is it the traditional or the woke? However, that debate cannot be settled as every camp fights for its moral victory.

This shows a lacuna in human experience that we could never logically arrive at a position of moral imperiousness - simply because we are all flawed humans with a mix of good and evil. This moral puzzle then pushes us to look for the transcendent, outside of human experience, to point us to a Moral Law that applies universally. In other words, the natural law signals a supernatural reference point.

The writer works with Life Focus Society



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Winner Vinesh

Gutsy wrestler has proved her mettle

AN Olympic gold medal was well within the grasp of Vinesh Phogat, or rather, of the entire success-starved nation. And then it just slipped out, breaking 1.4 billion hearts. Within hours, the much-anticipated ecstasy turned into agony — a painful instance of so near yet so far. But the tragic turn of events does not take anything away from Vinesh's astounding feat of coming this far, winning three bouts in a single day, including one against defending champion Yui Susaki. Medal or no medal, Vinesh has proved her mettle. When Abhinav Bindra, an Olympic gold medalist himself, says that 'you don't need a gold medal to be a true champion to people', you know — and so does everyone, for that matter — how good you are. You are a winner all the way.

Vinesh didn't have even a moment to rest or breathe easy after her semifinal victory. She and her support staff valiantly fought a tough battle to get her weight right for the all-important weigh-in. She didn't sleep all night, she starved — it was a cruel race against time, and she lost. In the end, it all boiled down to just 100-odd grams — barely one-fifth the weight of an Olympic gold medal.

Disqualified but not disgraced — that is Vinesh's awe-inspiring story in four words. Undated at the Paris Olympics, she can hold her head high, in stark contrast to Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson, who experienced the ignominy of being stripped of his 100m gold after failing a dope test at the 1988 Games. She is a role model in more ways than one. Her skills, stamina and strength are exemplary; even more so are her guts. Taking on a powerful politician and sexual predator for the sake of the female wrestling fraternity was an act of moral courage. At Jantar Mantra, she made it clear that her participation in the protest had one aim: to ensure that the future generation of grapplers wrestled safely and fearlessly. That fight is still on, and we know that she will not give up until justice is done. A big salute, Vinesh, to your never-say-die spirit both on the mat and off it.

Property tax relief

Indexation benefit back, but with cut-off date

THE government's decision to restore the indexation benefit for long-term capital gains (LTCG) on property sales marks a pragmatic reversal in response to public backlash. The Union Budget's proposal to eliminate the indexation benefit while reducing the LTCG tax rate to 12.5 per cent aimed to simplify the tax regime. However, it failed to account for the nuanced financial impacts on property owners, especially those with long-held assets. Indexation adjusts the purchase price of an asset to account for inflation, ensuring taxpayers are not disproportionately taxed on nominal gains. Without it, taxpayers could face substantial tax burdens, misrepresenting the real value of their gains.

The government's revised stance offers a choice: pay 20 per cent LTCG tax with the indexation benefit or 12.5 per cent without it, applicable to properties acquired before July 23, 2024. This flexibility not only addresses immediate financial concerns but also reflects a more thoughtful approach to tax policy, acknowledging the diverse economic realities faced by people. However, properties purchased after this cut-off date will only be eligible for the 12.5 per cent rate without indexation. There are fears that the new regime might increase secondary market sales as investors may not retain their properties for too long.

Ultimately, this rollback underscores the importance of nuanced policy-making that considers both economic principles and public sentiment. The restored indexation benefit is a welcome relief for many, reaffirming the government's ability to adapt and refine its fiscal policies in the face of legitimate public concerns.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAKHORE, FRIDAY, AUGUST 8, 1924

Military assistant surgeons

WE have said that if ever a resolution was brought forward in the Provincial Council which had everything to be said for it and nothing to be said against it from the Indian point of view, it was the resolution moved by Pandit Narayn Chand at Tuesday's meeting of the Council regarding military assistant surgeons (MAS). The resolution, for the best of which the reader must be referred to the report of the discussion published in these columns yesterday, was, in fact, a belated attempt to have a most serious grievance of one of the most efficient branches of the public service in India redressed. Incidentally, it was an attempt to have equal justice secured to His Majesty's Indian subjects in the matter of public employment, as far as the Medical Department is concerned, which was guaranteed to them in a royal proclamation more than 60 years ago. This was made abundantly clear in the speeches of the hon. members who spoke in favour of the resolution, particularly in those of the mover and Dr. Nihal Chand. The former gave no less than 10 reasons, all equally cogent and convincing, in support of his proposal. The most important of these were that although the MAS started with inferior academic equipment, went through a simpler and shorter course, and had actually lower qualifications and standard of medical training, although their diploma was inferior in quality and recognised value to the degree of civil assistant surgeons, who unlike the former, was respectable in the UK, and although the actual duties of the MAS were mostly administrative and clerical rather than professional, they were as a class treated preferentially in the matter of higher civil employment.

A catch-up flight in run-up to Gaganyaan

ISRO hopeful that the International Space Station experience will benefit India's grand mission

DINESH CH SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

THE Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has nominated one of its four newly trained astronauts, Shubhamu Shukla, to fly to the International Space Station (ISS). Shukla is in the first batch of four Indians trained in Bengaluru and Russia for India's maiden human space flight, Gaganyaan. While announcing the decision to send Shukla, the space agency used the word Gaganyaan for astronaut, suggesting a possible connection with the Gaganyaan mission. However, Shukla's flight to ISS is an altogether different activity, though ISRO says the experience gained from it would help in the Gaganyaan mission.

Ever since humans first landed on the Moon in 1969, most of the human space flights have been to orbiting space stations. Humans fly in spacecraft launched by powerful rockets, dock the spacecraft to a space station, remain there for a few days or weeks, and return to the Earth. The space station era began with the Soviet Salyut and American Skylab in the 1970s. Then came the larger Soviet station, Mir, and finally the ISS jointly built by America, Russia and Europe. China's Tiangong Space Station has been in the making for a decade now; it takes a long time to assemble a station in space, and India has announced its intention to build its space station by 2035.

To reach a station orbiting around Earth, one needs powerful rockets and robust spacecraft that can transport humans there and bring them back safely. For



FOURSCORE: (from left) Shubhamu Shukla, Prashanth Naik, Ajit Krishnan and Anagad Patil are the astronauts designated for the Gaganyaan mission. Shukla has been chosen to fly to the International Space Station, in

this, the Soviets developed the Soyuz spacecraft and the Americans the Space Shuttle for almost 50 years. The Shuttle could lift off vertically like a rocket, glide in space like a spacecraft and land horizontally on the earth like an aeroplane. After the Columbia disaster in 2003 — in which Kalpana Chawla perished — the shuttle programme faltered and was ended in 2011. For a few years after this, NASA used the services of the Russian Soyuz for sending supplies to the ISS and robbing the crew there.

For the long term, NASA supported American companies with funds and technology to help them build durable space transportation systems so that it could fully delegate the job of sending cargo and crew missions to ISS to certified private companies. This policy resulted in the emergence of private space players like SpaceX and United Launch Alliance (ULA). After several cargo missions using its Falcon 9 rockets to ISS since 2012, SpaceX launched its first crewed mission in 2020. ULA, too, made several cargo trips to the ISS using its Atlas V

To see an Indian on a space station four decades after Rakesh Sharma's space journey would be a moment of national pride.

rocket. It launched its first crewed module, Starliner, which transported Sunita Williams to ISS in June. It has, however, not been found fit for the return journey due to problems with its thrusters and continues to be docked with the ISS.

For Shukla's flight to ISS, ISRO has signed a contract with a private company, Aditya Space, which has been categorised by NASA as a 'full-service' mission provider to carry out end-to-end commercial astronaut missions. Aditya does not

have a rocket or spacecraft and depends on SpaceX for transportation to and from the ISS.

Since May 2021, Aditya has executed three commercial missions to ISS. The one with Shukla will be its fourth mission. It is unclear till now if Shukla is going to fly under a commercial agreement between ISRO and Aditya or under a bilateral deal (with or without service charges) with NASA. Rakesh Sharma's flight to the Salyut station in 1984 was a gesture of friendship from the Soviet Union. India did not have to pay for the ride or the common training. Shukla's successor was the Mir on which Russia hosted 104 cosmonauts and astronauts from 13 countries till it was deorbited in 2001, and many of them were paid rides.

India missed the ISS bus and did not participate in its assembly or send an Indian astronaut to the space station while it was taking shape in the 1990s and 2000s with the participation of leading space agencies. In the 1990s, the relations between ISRO and NASA were at a low ebb because of the cryogenic controversy and the restrictions imposed by the American

government due to fear of knowledge transfer. Second, ISRO was more focused on stabilising its operational satellite programmes and lacked additional resources to join an international venture.

By the time a human flight popped up on ISRO's agenda, the list of visitors to the ISS had considerably grown. In the past 25 years, 230 astronauts from 23 countries have been to ISS with some of them visiting the station two to four times. By instance, the ongoing visit of Sunita Williams is her third to ISS. The US and Russia account for 120 astronauts to ISS, while the rest come from Japan, Canada, Italy, France, Germany, Denmark, the UK, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, Brazil, Israel, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Malaysia, South Africa, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE. The list includes 13 'private visitors' or space tourists. Aditya's first mission to ISS included four private visitors.

Even when ISRO formally started working on the Gaganyaan mission in 2018, sending an Indian to the ISS was not on the cards. The four astronaut candidates were sent for training at the Yuri Gagarin Space Centre and agreements were signed with Russian agencies for developing other essentials needed for a human space flight. However, the launch deadline set by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — coinciding with the 75th anniversary of Independence in 2022 — was too short to be achieved. A year later, the ISS plan figured in the India-US joint statement during the Prime Minister's visit to America. It would appear the ISS trip of Shukla is not a necessary building block for Gaganyaan, but more of a catch-up step to gain real-time experience off space flight in preparation for Gaganyaan. To see an Indian on a space station four decades after Rakesh Sharma's space journey would indeed be a moment of national pride.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

To make discoveries, you have to be curious about why the universe is the way it is. — Isaac Asimov

The Vellichor trip down memory lane

USHA BANDE

VELlichor — the word sounded quite captivating and set me wondering if it could be a portmanteau word. Maybe a combination of the Tamil *vel* (silver) and the Hindi *chor* (thief). I thought...

Not quite convinced by my argument, I rushed to my good old friend of four decades — *Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary*. The word was not there, but the pathetic condition of the dictionary — with its rickety spine and yellowing pages — rapped something inside me, and a strange and undeniable sadness engulfed me. Instinctively, I closed the bulky dictionary and turned to Google.

Vellichor, a word coined by John Koenig, was included in his *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. Defined as 'a strange wistfulness you feel in an old bookstore', it is overwhelmingly 'infused with the passage of time' — of things sealed in the long past and the impossibility of revisiting; of a brooding nostalgia for our own past evoked by the smell of old books, the brittle pages and the faded print.

However, *vellichor* is not about sadness, nor is it about the stack section of the library evoking an eerie feeling of desolation. It is a powerful word that can sweep you back in time. It is about a spiritual longing, when our memory opens up the portals to an old world with a new view that can best be described as a 'Proustian moment', in which you make a sensory journey. When a particular scent magically conjures up a certain experience, time and place, you instinctively return to the past. It is an uneasy time travel triggered by the inscribed words lodged in your memory.

Human regret and hubris innate longing to return to the past have been beautifully explored in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, a charming, time-tripping novel by Japanese writer Toshikazu Kawai. It raises the age-old question: what would you change if you could travel back in time? But rectifying life choices is not possible. The catch is that nothing that happens in the past can change the present. Still, there is hope: the past may be out of our reach, but the future is in our hands.

Old books have a unique vibrancy; they are a repository of collective wisdom of humanity. Returning to them is a delight that transcends the act of reading and becomes an experience. The world of old stories, of characters you loved, poems you lived, maybe Wordsworth's *Daffodils* or Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, Jane Austen's *Emma* or Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* — that such book holds within its ageing pages rekindles your interest and you instinctively approach them with respect and wistfulness. An escape with memories!

Saul Bellow rightly opined, 'Everybody needs memories. They keep the world of insignificance from the door.'

Vinesh still a champion

The last-minute disqualification of Vinesh Phogat, who had just scripted history in the Olympics by becoming the first female Indian wrestler to enter the final, has come as a massive disappointment for not just her but for sports lovers across the country. The whole nation saw her rise to Olympic glory with much admiration. The world watched as she risked her career to take on Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the former Wrestling Federation of India chief accused of sexual harassment. Sadly, India's joy over her victory in the 50-kg freestyle semi-finals was short-lived. Nevertheless, she will be remembered as a source of inspiration for generations to come.

DIVY SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM

Heartbreak for India

In a shocking turn of events, Indian wrestling champion Vinesh Phogat, who had become the first female grappler from the country to make it to the gold medal bout in the Olympics on Tuesday night, was disqualified ahead of the women's 50-kg final for being overweight. The development is extremely unfortunate, especially in view of the hard work she had put in to create history. Her disqualification is not just a massive setback for Vinesh, but a huge heartbreak for the whole country.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Dilution of constitutional values

Apocryph of the editorial 'Preamble row', the million-dollar question is: why is the Preamble to the Constitution anathema to the BJP? After all, the preamble is a reflection of the core values that form the bedrock of the Indian Constitution. The Preamble reaffirms that India is a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic committed to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity for its people. Since the ruling dispensation cannot make short shrift of the words 'secular' and 'socialist', it probably thought of omitting the whole Preamble from school textbooks. We, the people of India, will not accept this dilution of the values enshrined in our Constitution.

PREM SINGH DAHYA, ROHTAK

NCERT at it again

The omission of the Preamble to the Constitution from NCERT textbooks is a matter of grave concern. It seems like an intentional insult to the Constitution. There is no justification for the controversial move. Notably, this is not the first time that the NCERT has come under fire. It has previously sparked controversy for excluding or pruning references to the Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots from its books. No single political party owns the Constitution; it is meant for the people.

WG COR JS MNHAS (RETD), MOHALI

The scourge of two-tier policing

The editorial 'Fair-right extremism' read more like a rant about anti-minority rioting. It made no mention of the UK's Muslim grooming gang members who sexually abuse children. Britain has been rocked by a number of jihadist attacks over the years. Though the British police have failed to rein in the Islamists behind such crimes, they are quick to crack down on those who criticise any act of violence committed by members of that minority community. Besides, there was no hue and cry when the BLM (Black Lives Matter) demonstrations or pro-Palestine protests turned violent. This kind of two-tier policing is dangerous.

AJAY TYAGI, MUMBAI

Heed the cries from the wild

Refer to the editorial 'Protect the voiceless', animals are crying out for help. The alarming surge in wildlife crime in north India is a stark reminder of the war being waged on our precious biodiversity. The fact that the region has witnessed a staggering 683 cases over the past five years should prompt the authorities concerned to take steps to tackle the menace. Poaching, forest fires, encroachments and smuggling of animal body parts are pushing our wildlife to the brink. The decline in cases in some states is proof that there is still hope. Global cooperation and a more stringent enforcement of norms are the need of the hour to stay ahead of poaching syndicates.

SARJUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

Vinesh ruled out by a hundred grams



ROHIT MAHAJAN
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

A mere hundred grams, a mill-stone around Vinesh Phogat's neck, weighed her down and sank her hopes in the Seine.

Vinesh was disqualified from the women's 50kg freestyle category on Wednesday morning for being 100 gm overweight. Missing out on a great shot at gold in the final against Sorah Hildebrandt of the US, Vinesh went down tumbling. Vinesh's disqualification smacks of the unprofessionalism of the worst order, and her case became the talk of the wrestling world: no one could remember if there had been such a case before an Olympics wrestling final.

Vinesh, who made the weight cut on the first day of the competition on Tuesday, could not make it on Wednesday morning, the third instance of her Olympics dreams ending in horror, after 2016 and 2021. When Vinesh weighed 100 gm too heavy on the gold medal day, there was

no escaping because the rules do not make an allowance for even 10 extra grams. This is crucial in combat sports such as wrestling, boxing, judo and taekwondo, in which fighters of the same size and weight must compete against each other.

The ground must not be unequal, to ensure that a bigger fighter is not pitted against a smaller athlete. A wrestler weighing 50kg, for instance, must not be pitted against a wrestler weighing 50kg — that would give the former a massive advantage in terms of strength and reach. Sport can be uncertain and sometimes a lighter fighter can actually overcome the deficit in strength and reach and defeat a bigger opponent; in elite sport, however, the bigger fighter invariably enjoys a great advantage. In elite events such as the Olympics and World Championships, the rules are very strict, written in stone — even just a few grammes over and a wrestler or boxer is thrown out.

As per the rules set by the United World Wrestling (UWW), wrestling's global governing body, the grapplers are weighed on the morning they are to fight. In larger events such as the Olympics or World Championships, combatants fight over two days. On the first morning, wrestlers have 30 minutes



IRONY: If Vinesh had got injured during her semifinal bout and been unable to compete in the final, she would have been awarded the silver medal. AP/IM

to make the cut in their weight category — they can jog, cycle, run furiously, do skipping and then come back to the weighing machine. This works when there are only a few grams to lose. On the second day, the day of the medal bouts, wrestlers have 15 minutes at the weigh-in to make the cut. During the weighing-in process, the wrestlers can mount the scales as many times as they want to check their weight.

Vinesh was making too many weight division switches to be counted among India's foremost medal hopes.

Day 1, having reduced food and water intake and skipped meals in the days leading to the event. This leaves them lacking energy and strength, and after the Day 1 weigh-in, they make up for it: They consume high-energy, high-protein food and drinks to gain strength; Vinesh, for instance, took in around 1.5 kg of food after the Day 1 weigh-in, as per the calculations and advice of her nutritionist.

During and after her three bouts, Vinesh was

given small amounts of water to prevent dehydration. At the end of the day's bouts, she was found to have gained close to 2kg. Vinesh's natural body weight is around 58kg, but she competes in the lower weight categories because that gives her an advantage. She has won her two World Championships bronze medals in the 50kg category, her two Asian Games medals — gold in 2018, bronze in 2014 — were won in the 51kg and 48kg categories. As wrestlers age, they tend to move up different weight categories. Vinesh, however, has been shedding weight.

In February, returning to competitive wrestling, she won the National Championships in the 50kg category class. The following month, she competed in two categories — 50kg and 53kg — at the selection trials for the Asian Championships and Asian Olympic qualifier. She lost in the 53kg category to an unranked fighter, Anju, but won the 50kg class. In April, Vinesh qualified for the Olympics by entering the Asian Olympic qualifier final. The young Anjum Panghal qualified for the Olympics in the 53kg. In the months leading to the Paris Olympics, Vinesh, clearly, was making too many weight division switches to be counted among India's

foremost hopes, but her win over Yui Susaki raised hopes of a medal.

Incidentally, if Vinesh had got injured during her semifinal bout and been unable to compete in the final, she would not have had to attend the weigh-in on Wednesday — she would have been awarded the silver medal. After Vinesh was disqualified, Indian Olympic Association president PT Usha said the Wrestling Federation of India had filed an appeal with the UWW to reconsider the decision to disqualify Vinesh.

The appeal fell on deaf ears, however, for the UWW rules are impossible to be relaxed for a competitor or a country, and there's no possibility of a relaxation of even 10 gm, let alone 100 gm. The UWW in fact, wishes to ensure that athletes compete in their natural weight categories and not lose weight in unnatural ways to be able to compete in lower categories — as Vinesh has done this year, moving from 55kg to 50kg, finally, 50kg for the Paris Olympics.

After qualifying for the 2024 Games in the 50kg class, Vinesh said in April that she would need to manage her weight better because she feared putting on weight as "my muscle mass is very high". In the event, Vinesh's worst fears came true in Paris.

This is not the Bangladesh we stood for in the line of fire



NAZIFA RAJDAN
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY STAR,
BANGLADESH

At 7 pm on August 5, 2024, Bangladesh was freed from an autocrat. It baffles me that I can finally use the word 'autocrat' to describe the fallen Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina because our law made sure we couldn't since 2018. My brother and I rushed to the streets, unable to contain our excitement. The atmosphere was electric. I had never seen so many people on the streets, waving flags. Families carried their children on their shoulders, chanting slogans of victory. Rickshaw pullers saluted students, who stood on rickshaws giving speeches about refusing to live under tyranny, goons, or chandabaz (extortionists).

We could breathe a sigh of relief. Hasina's flight from the country meant the end of enforced disappearances of students, journalists and activists; police raids on student protests and the brutality of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). Bangladesh was, for now, a country free of censorship. But our joy soon turned to horror as we walked

from Motijheel to Shahbagh. At Motijheel, crowds gathered in front of Sonali Bank, ripping off posters of Hasina. We cheered until someone suggested tearing down everything built under the Awami League regime. We dismissed it as extreme views surfacing due to newfound freedom.

As we walked towards Shahbagh, our smiles faded. People were carrying army officials on their shoulders, believing they had brought this freedom. They climbed onto armoured vehicles, raised flags and danced. Some in the crowd looked uncomfortable but shrugged it off, thinking it was all part of the celebration.

When we crossed Suhrawardy Uddyan, we saw a thick cloud of smoke. Inside, vandals had set large stages on fire, which had been set up for commemorating mourning day by the Awami League. A statue replicating Bangladesh's historic March 7 speech was also ablaze. We tried to stop the fires, but people gave us looks of disgust. We stumbled upon a crowd beating a BCL-affiliated student with rods. The mob claimed he had weapons. Some students tried to protect him, shouting for him to be handed over to the army. But we were called Chhatra League or Razakars accused of siding with the enemy. We had seen enough: people shot, maimed and killed during protests. It was ironic how we now took hits from a mob to



CAUTION: It is so much harder to protect freedom than to achieve it. AP/PA

save someone we were supposed to hate. The mob eventually outnumbered us, and the person was beaten to death. We couldn't verify his identity, fearing for our lives.

We asked Army officials at the Shahbagh intersection to intervene and clear the crowd, but they refused. We knew the anarchy we were witnessing was just the beginning. We hadn't yet heard of the communal violence on Hindu communities, temples being torched, and attacks on Awami League-affiliated members and their families, alongside policemen and their families.

At the TSC, we saw microbuses set on fire. Vandals warned people not to take videos or photos. Chains were stolen from the halls and lockers from Gono Bha-

ban, the Prime Minister's residence, were cheered as they brought in the chains.

At 5 pm, I walked from Shahbagh to The Daily Star building. On the way, men on bikes were looking and catcalling women. Mobs targeted TV news offices which hadn't covered the student protests due to pressure from the authorities. A witchhunt was underway, and I feared for my safety.

I felt numb witnessing the horror. What was the point of Abu Sayeed, Mir Mugdho, Rifhan Pagoo, and the deaths of over 200 others if this was the picture of freedom we painted in the first hours of independence? Are we truly free if we ignore the concerns of our minority communities? We are now so vulnerable and afraid that rational people

have started believing in endless disinformation.

If we find the hanging Hasina's undergarments on fans and displaying them in front of the media funny, then we are setting a dangerous precedent. This rhetoric could be used by religious bigots and radical groups to attack women's empowerment, arguing that empowering women leads to tyrants like Hasina. The politics of the AL regime could be used to justify their hidden agenda. As a nation, we need to be far more vigilant than we have been during these dark days of lawlessness.

I was horrified that the mob justified their vandalism by saying, "They did this to us, so we will do the same to them." No. Students did not sacrifice their lives for vigilante justice. They did it so people, regardless of background, have the right to speak up, claim justice and call out injustices.

The movement is called the 'Anti-Discrimination Movement' and we cannot let that rhetoric be politicised or diluted. Many have noticed how the BNP has bandwagoned on the student's right to justice as a movement they always supported.

I am proud that the student leaders I met have called out this violence and set up watch parties. They constantly distinguish that these acts of vandalism are not what we support. I hope they continue this stance. Because when I saw vandals pouncing with their motorbikes

on Manik Mia Avenue, it seemed we had just replaced the Chhatra League with the Chhatra Dal, allowing history to repeat itself.

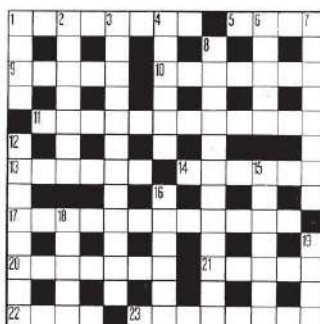
We are at a monumental time in Bangladesh's history to create change. We have an opportunity to redefine the Bangladesh we want without being deterred by the thought that "we will simply never see this in Bangladesh."

Civic society has the biggest role to play now. Amidst the vandalism, civic groups made human chains to stop vandals from destroying police stations, helped return stolen items from Gono Bhawan and malls, along with students, joined watch parties outside temples to protect them. This is the Bangladesh I dream of, my grandfather's dream of during the Liberation War and the countless other freedom fighters who took a bullet. This is the time to call out all injustices that hindered our society under an autocracy — not just politicians, but also businessmen who supported the Awami League and now pretend to support our students.

It is time for us to be vigilant on all fronts. It is so much harder to protect freedom than to achieve it. If nothing else, what this protest proved is that students have the power to take down an autocrat that everyone feared. We can again take down anyone who stands in the way of building a free Bangladesh for all. Our work has just begun.

What this protest proved is that students have the power to take down an autocrat that everyone feared.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Disposed to say little (8)
- Trudge (4)
- Before anything else (5)
- Pinnacle (7)
- In excellent condition (5,2,1,4)
- Wily (6)
- Carry to excess (6)
- Visionary, impractical (12)
- Co-conspirator (7)
- Thing exactly like another (5)
- Every one separately (4)
- Campaigner (8)

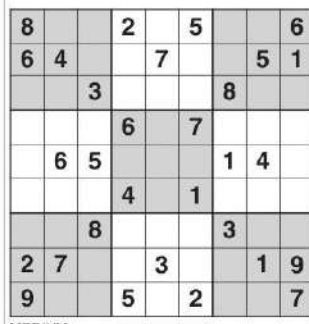
DOWN

- Wide-spread (4)
- Evenuate (4,3)
- Spirited interchange of views (3,3,6)
- A delicious drink (6)
- Inexact (5)
- Refuse to sanction (8)
- Be very significant (5,7)
- Deliberate malicious damage (8)
- Told (7)
- Intense dislike (6)
- Great disorder (5)
- Search (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 To speak of; 8 Large; 9 Pinnacle; 10 Fulfill; 11 Metre; 12 Anathema; 15 Elboreal; 18 Thanks; 20 Enfold; 21 Seaside; 22 Cross; 23 Hit-or-miss.
Down: 2 Opine; 3 Pundit; 4 Accurate; 5 Flout; 6 Proffer; 7 Tell tales; 14 Make peace; 13 All the go; 14 Chiffon; 16 Relish; 17 Hanson; 19 Kudos.

SU DO KU



MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

7	9	5	8	3	2	4	6	1
3	2	1	6	5	4	7	9	8
4	8	6	1	9	7	3	5	2
6	4	8	5	1	9	2	7	3
5	1	3	7	2	8	6	4	9
2	7	9	4	6	3	1	8	5
8	5	7	3	4	1	9	2	6
9	3	4	2	8	6	5	1	7
1	6	2	9	7	5	8	3	4

CALENDAR

AUGUST 8, 2024, THURSDAY	
Shukla Sarnat	16:45
Shravan Shukla	17
Shravan Parvati	24
Hijri	1440
Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 12:27 am	
Shra vada up to 12:39 pm	
Utharghami Naxshatra up to 11:54 pm	
Moon in Virgo sign	

FORECAST

CITY		MAX	MIN
Chandigarh		33	27
New Delhi		33	25
Amritsar		34	28
Batinda		34	27
Jalandhar		34	27
Ludhiana		33	26
Bhawal		31	27
Hisar		33	26
Sirsa		33	29
Dharampala		25	20
Monali		27	18
Shimla		23	16
Srinagar		30	20
Jammu		31	24
Kargil		34	20
Lah		30	14
Dehradun		32	24
Mussoorie		23	17