Fleeting relief

Food prices still bite even as fresh pressures could weigh on inflation

For the first time in five months, India's retail inflation slid below the 5% mark in March, to 4.85%. While it constituted only a marginal easing from the 5.1% recorded in February, this was the lowest pace of price rise recorded since May 2023. The average inflation of 5% clocked in the final quarter of 2023-24 is not just in line with Reserve Bank of India (RBI) projections but also the slowest in three years. For the full year gone by, consumer price rise averaged 5.4%, as the RBI had forecast – a four-year low. Core inflation, excluding energy and food prices, has been under the 4% mark for four straight months. QuantEco Research estimates that overall fuel inflation in India hit a four-year low of -2.7% in March, which was the seventh straight month of disinflation in the segment. No doubt, the ₹2 per litre cuts in petrol and diesel prices and the ₹100 drop in cylinder prices have helped, though the full impact of these pre-poll steps will be seen this month. Amid these pleasant portents, two critical problems persist – food bills remain problematically high, even as overall inflation is rising for rural consumers, already hit by a weak monsoon.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Food Price Index, has averaged an alarming 8% through 2023-24, and 8.5% in the January to March quarter. And while some government interventions have helped check a few items' prices and hopes of a normal monsoon this year could lift some pressure points, perhaps from July onwards, the ongoing heat waves across large parts of the country remain a threat to perishable supplies. Moreover, some key items are seeing deeply entrenched inflation trends – double-digit inflation has now been seen for five months in vegetables, 10 months in pulses and a whopping 22 months in spices. Cereals inflation picked up pace in March, breaking a seven-month moderating streak, while eggs, meat and fish are also seeing spikes. While the RBI expects inflation to cool to 4.5% this year, it is projected at 4.9% for the first quarter. A durable descent to its 4% target that has now been elusive for 54 months, remains tricky. For urban consumers, inflation eased tantalisingly close to the target in March at 4.14%, but it rose in rural India to 5.45% from 5.34% in January and February. While a prolonged phase of high prices is already hurting consumption, the resurgence in crude oil prices to a seven-month high of $90 a barrel this month, faltering hopes of interest rate cuts in the United States and the European Union, and strife-fuelled shipping cost spikes, pose fresh worries on the inflation front in the months to come.

Breach of convention

Ecuador should stay within the limits of international laws

Ecuador's raid on April 5 at the Mexico embassy in Quito is a serious violation of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations on which nations operate their missions in foreign lands. The raid was to arrest Jorge David Glas, a former Vice-President in the administration of leftist and former President Rafael Correa, who has been sentenced for corruption. Mr. Correa, now living in Belgium, has also been convicted for corruption. Mr. Glas and Mr. Correa say the cases against them are politically motivated. But for Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa, the cases against the former elites were part of his larger crusade against corruption. Tensions were high between the two countries after Mr. Glas took refuge in the Mexican embassy in Quito in December, a month after Mr. Noboa took office. Last week, Ecuador declared Mexico's Ambassador Raquel Serur Smeke as persona non grata after Mexico's leftist President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's comments that were critical of Ecuador's 2023 elections. Mexico also decided to grant asylum to Mr. Glas, which angered Ecuador. It termed the decision illegal as Mr. Glas was facing cases in the country and, soon after, sent armed police officers to the embassy to arrest him, triggering a major diplomatic crisis. Mexico, which says its sovereignty has been breached, has now moved the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands, demanding the expulsion of Ecuador from the UN.

The embassy raid comes at a time when President Noboa is facing increased criticism at home over rising gang violence. He came to power promising to tackle corruption and gang violence. Last year's presidential election was marred by deadly violence when presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated during the campaign in Quito. Mr. Noboa says he stays committed to fighting gangs and restoring order in Ecuador's cities, but his approval rating has sunk amid growing violence, especially in the coastal city of Guayaquil, which was overrun by gangs in January. The situation is so bad in Ecuador that during the Easter weekend, the country of 18 million people saw over 100 murders. Critics say Mr. Noboa is using the diplomatic crisis with Mexico to strengthen his political fortunes. But he has merely triggered a new crisis without addressing the actual one. Ecuadorians are set to vote in a referendum next week that would give the government increased security powers to fight gang violence. The government has to get its act together in the war against organised violence, but it should do that from within the limits of domestic and international laws. Going rogue inside the embassy of a neighbouring country in the name of fighting corruption is not going to help Ecuador in tackling the myriad challenges it is facing.

A manifesto where inclusivity takes centre stage

Zoya Hasan

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The publication of party manifestos is a big moment in a general election campaign. Political parties contesting elections announce their plans for running the country, setting out the policies they would deliver on, if they were to win. Manifestos contain a description of the party's world view and approach to governance and state policies. Even though manifestos do not usually decide election outcomes, they can sometimes feature prominently in the campaign, and bear the ability to shape political narratives, and influence how people vote.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) issued its manifesto, the 'Sankalp Patra', on April 14 just before April 19, the first phase of this potentially momentous general election in 2024. Perhaps it was issued this late because the party assumes that the election result is a foregone conclusion. Meanwhile, the Congress' Party manifesto, titled the 'Nyay Patra', was announced on April 5 and has already evoked much interest. The manifesto offers an agenda of progressive politics and policies against the backdrop of unprecedented inequalities and the BJP's majoritarian agenda. It defines an alternative vision, and proposes measures to 'reverse the damage' purportedly done by 10 years of BJP rule at the Centre.

Behind the 'idea of justice'

The Congress manifesto puts the idea of justice as the centrepiece of its philosophy. Constitutional values of equity, justice, dignity, and fundamental rights form the core of this document. It embodies many of the ingredients, processes, and commitments required to revitalise India's constitutional democracy.

Apart from India's high unemployment rate, the manifesto focuses on inflation, crony capitalism and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The major promises include providing a one year apprenticeship as a right to every diploma holder or graduate below the age of 25, raising the 50% on reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes and conducting a nation-wide socio-economic and caste census, providing a legal guarantee to minimum support price (MSP), and starting an urban employment guarantee programme. Many of the promises that the Congress is offering to voters mark a significant break from the past, including its own history and politics. But that is exactly what makes this an interesting document.

Two significant points of emphasis are contained in section VI entitled 'Defending the Constitution' and under it, the section, 'Reversing the Damage.' From promising to probe the electoral bonds scheme and the PM Cares Fund, to rejecting the concept of one nation-one election, to reviving the Planning Commission, several sections of the manifesto promise to undo key policy initiatives of the BJP government, if the Congress party comes to power.

Debates about the credibility of manifesto promises and the expenditure of commitments are common in election campaigns. But there is little discussion of this. Instead, attention has been diverted to the Prime Minister likening the Congress manifesto to the Muslim League. The Prime Minister wasted no time in dismissing it as a 'bundle of lies', saying 'every page reeks of divisive thoughts'.

In a public rally in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, he said two things. He said the manifesto has the imprint of the Muslim League of the pre-independence period and, therefore, is geared to dividing India. Although the statements are devoid of fact and reasoning, the Muslim League was dragged into this to reinforce the current strategy of religious polarisation and somehow tie the main Opposition party in India to Pakistan. Voters can legitimately ask how promising a higher minimum wage for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) workers or the right to apprenticeship or the right to health with cashless insurance of up to ₹25 lakh, reeks of divisiveness. However, apart from polarising the election, the statement was simply meant to stop any discussions on policy issues and on the performance of the government.

The thrust in the Congress party's manifesto for 2024 is on equity and justice being the prime movers in the battle of ideologies

A pursuit to reinvent the party

The egalitarian pursuit, as promised or envisaged in the Congress manifesto, is a push towards reinventing the party, which after suffering two devastating defeats, in 2014 and 2019, has been unable to devise a way of denting the popularity of the Prime Minister and the BJP in the Hindi heartland. The manifesto has drawn upon the broad-based discussions during the Congress's Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo NyayYatra. Both these campaigns made attempts to reinvent the Congress ideologically and politically and managed to enthuse the party cadres. But its impact on national elections remains to be seen.

The thrust on equity and justice as the prime movers in this battle of ideologies sets it apart from the Congress party's previous manifestos. More suggestively, the egalitarian push is at odds with the politics and policies of both the landlord-dominated erstwhile Muslim League and the corporate dominated present-day BJP, which has undoubtedly garnered the support of subaltern castes and classes, but which remains at its core a conservative majoritarian party. Also, we must not forget that the Congress and Muslim League were bitter rivals during the anti-colonial struggle. It was the BJP's ideological progenitors who entered into tactical alliances with the Muslim League to form governments in Sindh, Punjab and Bengal in colonial India, as they sought to take advantage of the Congress boycott after the Quit India movement in the 1940s. Therefore, the point about the Muslim League's stamp on the manifesto is a non-starter. Nor should we be assessing its relevance against the Congress party's own record of governance.

Surveys and issues that matter

It is more important to place the policies and paradigm shift in the context of BJP's record of governance in the last 10 years, and not the flawed record of previous Congress governments. This would help to pin down the ruling party, which is not fighting the 2024 election on the basis of its successes or record. It is either talking of the past or the future (Viksit Bharat in 2047/100 years after Independence), but not the present, even as there is mounting evidence of inequality which has increased dramatically in the last decade, along with heightened levels of corruption, unemployment, inflation, and gaps in access to education and health care. The extent to which these issues matter to the people has been highlighted by the recent surveys by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) published in *The Hindu* last week.

The Congress manifesto is essentially a welfarist document, but the wide-ranging welfare schemes are different from those of the central government under BJP rule. The Congress's welfare schemes are based on a rights framework or constitutionally enforceable guarantees which are quite different from the welfare measures of the BJP government which operates in the form of a largesse. Apart from this, the manifesto also offers a vision of inclusivity and safeguarding democracy and freedom for all. This is significant because many commentators have lamented the absence of a vision in the manifesto.

The Congress manifesto offers a semblance of hope in the gathering darkness. However, the rider still remains in the party's ability to take it to the masses, to publicise it and turn it into a tool of mass mobilisation and for the revival of the party. That is the litmus test. But if implemented, it could heal social relations and replenish India's economy, society, and democracy.

Urbanisation, no liberating force for Dalits

Fahad Zuberi

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A quick look at the nameplates in India's neighbourhoods will show you that caste is the primary language of spatiality in Indian cities. Despite such failings, B.R. Ambedkar rejected village life and encouraged Dalits to move to the city. Ambedkar said that an Indian village is "the working plant of the Hindu social order" and argued that it is the ideal place to understand caste. Gandhi, however, saw the Indian village as a self-reliant, equitable and a just non-violent order, and argued for the decentralisation of power to the villages through Gram Swaraj. In strong opposition, Ambedkar believed that the idealisation of Indian village life emerged either from the colonial romanticisation of the rural population or from the desire of Hindus to retain caste domination.

In the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar opposed the idea that villages should be recognised as autonomous administrative units and felt relieved that the Assembly rejected the idea. "For the untouchables, there could not have been a bigger calamity," he wrote.

Urbanisation and Ambedkar's belief

In the process of urbanisation, Ambedkar saw an opportunity for Dalit liberation. He believed that the systems of caste oppression that thrive in Indian villages become weaker in cities. These included segregation of Dalits into ghettos, restrictions on economic activities, and denial of land ownership. Jyotirao Phule had also admired city life for being liberal and enabling him to earn a living. At the core of the liberating power of cities, for Ambedkar and Phule, was the opportunity to become anonymous. Cities, in principle, offer an opportunity to become a stranger among a sea of strangers and transition from a caste-based order to a class-based order. One defined not by genealogy but by accumulation of resources or capital.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that Ambedkar had seen the ways in which caste adapts to urbanisation. In *Waiting for a Visa*, Ambedkar reflects on his struggle to find a house in Baroda.

While modern urbanisation was fuelled by a skill-based transition to economy, i.e., industrialisation, the dominance of caste over skill had also become clear to Ambedkar when even skilled Dalits were not allowed to enter the weaving sections of textile mills. Despite these experiences, Ambedkar saw urbanisation as a liberating force. However, after a century of Ambedkar's struggles with renting a house in Baroda, caste remains the spatial logic of Indian cities.

The Indian city has failed the aspirations and expectations that the Dalit liberation movement had placed in urbanisation

Language of 'purity-pollution'

Caste translates into a city's spatiality through the language of 'purity-pollution'. A consumer survey in 2021 vrevealed that eating non-vegetarian food is the biggest deal-breaker in finding rental housing in India. Writing about segregation policies under the Peshwas in the Maratha kingdom, Gopal Guru explains this phenomenon. Guru says that the ghetto is not merely a space but also forms the constitution of the body of the ghetto dweller. The language of purity-pollution that identifies the *savarna* space as 'pure' and one that can be polluted by the Dalit body, extends to the logic of the city. Here, the ghetto dweller carries the ghetto on their body when they step out into the city. In the language of caste, the space of the ghetto – characterised by filth and dirt – becomes mutually reinforcing on the body of the Dalit – characterised by meat-eating and other "unacceptable" traits.

More recently, the language of caste has been imposed on public spaces of the city by various governments. In March 2017, the Uttar Pradesh government, for example, issued regulations for meat shops that included, for example, a ban on selling meat near religious places and black paint or curtains in the facade of the shop to hide the sight of meat from pedestrians. In 2021, several municipal corporations in Gujarat banned the sale of meat-based street food on the city's main roads citing "religious sentiments". Through these Brahminical regulations, the State has characterised meat as the impurity that could pollute a public space – both secular and religious – or even a pedestrian's sight.

A crippling segregation

Urban governance policies and housing crises have also sustained caste-based segregation. Scholars such as Raphael Susewind, Sheba Tejani and Christophe Jaffrelot have shown that Muslims and Dalits face the most crippling segregation in Indian cities.

A large-scale study also found that public services and access to municipal infrastructure such as clean drinking water are the worst in Dalit and Muslim ghettos. Research in sacrifice zones – regions marked for severe environmental pollution such as landfills – shows that such areas are overwhelmingly inhabited by Dalits and Muslims. A recent report by the Housing and Land Rights Network on forced evictions in India also shows that Dalits and Muslims are the most impacted by slum demolition drives.

Through lived experience and extensive research, we can see that the Indian city has failed the aspirations and expectations that the Dalit liberation movement had placed in urbanisation. While transition to city life might have weakened some structures of caste oppression, they have morphed through language, state sanction and policy, and have evolved to allow caste to thrive in Indian cities. The Indian city has fallen short of the potential and promise that Ambedkar saw in urbanisation. Even after a century of urban development, Dalits remain, to use Ambedkar's words, "the children of India's ghettos".

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Growing conflict

The world is witness to two wars — Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine Gaza. Sadly, no lessons have been learnt, with war clouds now casting a shadow over Iran and Israel. A world which talks about peace and prosperity seems to be totally helpless in defusing the stained relationships between nations. The future of Indians hired to work on Israeli construction sites is a plan that is short sighted. Recruitment for employment in a war zone is a bad idea. Poor workers pay a huge price during such turbulent times.

Balasubramaniam Pavani,
Secunderabad

The world seems to be on a short fuse. The recent tension between Iran and Israel is one that must be avoided. International communities should intervene. The world is already affected in various ways by the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts.

A.S. Thirumalai,
Chennai

While the proxy war between Iran and Israel over the years had global ramifications, an eye-to-eye confrontation may subvert regional stability in West Asia and have an adverse effect. The war in Ukraine and Israel's retaliation of the deadly strike of Hamas have already disrupted supply chains and logistics. In a globalised world, no country is insulated from global turmoil.

M. Rishidev,
Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

Manifesto, its worth

People, as such, do not attach much importance to the manifestos of political parties. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the same parties do not attach importance to their manifesto once the election is over! For instance, in one manifesto, there is an assurance of lowering the price of petrol and diesel. What prevented the party from reducing it all along? Also, a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council is not a burning issue for most Indians. There has been no utterance on the *quid pro quo* exposed by the electoral bonds but there is much noise about dealing with corruption firmly.

A.G. Rajmohan,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

The southern focus

It is amusing that the bigwigs in the BJP, which has been trying hard to recast India into a monolithic culture, have all of a sudden discovered a new-found love for Tamil and Tamil culture. Going by the overwhelming use of Hindi in Parliament and the grotesque Hindi names given to central government programmes, which are totally unintelligible in the south, a view has gained ground that for the BJP, the languages and cultures south of the Vindhyas hardly matter. If the BJP really cares for India's diverse culture and languages, it should foreground federal principles in governance.

Manohar Alembath,
Kannur, Kerala

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

Decoding the judgment on Jim Corbett

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In its ruling in March, the Supreme Court brought to light the unholy nexus of politicians, forest officials, and local contractors responsible for the felling of 6,000 trees in the Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand. This state of affairs underlines one fact clearly: despite conservation goals receiving priority through policies and laws including the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Project Tiger, and the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, the state's main interest remains increasing revenue. The illegal destruction of trees in Jim Corbett can be seen in contravention of the 1983 Supreme Court judgment in *Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra vs. State of Uttar Pradesh*, which said that "economic growth cannot be achieved at the cost of environmental destruction and people's right to healthy environment."

The judgment

National and State forest authorities have leaned on ecotourism to simultaneously attain conservation goals, enhance revenue, and improve the livelihoods of local people. In its recent judgment, instead of treating eco-tourism as a panacea for conservation and revenue generation, the Supreme Court said that the approach must be of eco-centrism and not anthropocentrism. The court directed the banning of tiger safaris in core areas and the constitution of a committee to explore the feasibility of permitting tiger safaris in peripheral areas in not just Jim Corbett, but across India. It also disagreed with the 2019 guidelines of the National Tiger Conservation Authority permitting a tiger safari on the lines of a zoo in a national park. The court stressed that tigers should be sourced from the same landscape as where the safari is being conducted and not outside the tiger reserve.

According to British environmentalist Norman Myers, the precautionary principle is becoming an established principle for policymakers tackling environmental problems. The principle says "where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent such environmental degradation." On banning safaris in core areas, the Court invoked this principle to ensure that there is least damage to the environment. Myers had said, "In salient respects, the principle applies to biodiversity more than any other environmental problem. This is because the mass extinction gathering force will, if it proceeds unchecked, not only eliminate half or more species but will leave the biosphere impoverished for at least 5 million years." The International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species monitors 1,212 animal species in India. In 2021, it found that 12% of them are endangered. According to a report of the Centre for Science and Environment in 2021, India has lost 90% of the area under its four biodiversity hotspots. The precautionary principle therefore applies not only in the case of tigers, but also other species, especially endangered ones.

What the court missed

However, the Court's decision to assess the damage done to the green cover of Jim Corbett so as to identify the cost of restoration and recover the same from the errant individuals and officers appears to be a mirage in the absence of a well-defined methodology. Recovering the cost of restoration does not amount to necessarily recovering the loss of the ability of the environment to provide goods and services. As per the European Liability Directive 2004, conservation status of natural habitat means the "sum of influences acting on a natural habitat and its typical species that may affect its long-term natural distribution, structure, and functions as well as the long-term survival of its typical species." In India, the framework of valuation which predated the *T.N. Godavarman* case (1996) was aimed at replacing lost natural forest with compensatory plantations. The two choices which are supported legally and institutionally and serve as the background for the valuation of forest land in India are now compensatory afforestation levy and net present value (NPV). The levy is essentially a form of replacement cost, designed to replace the forest land which was lost as a result of diversion of forest towards non-forestry use. Since the levy is found to be insufficient in terms of making good the loss, the Court introduced the NPV in 2002 as an additional payment obligation. But both these methodologies do not rightly account for the correlation between the removal of trees and the harm caused to other environmental goods and services.

In the context of the growing degradation of biodiversity hotspots and the support to revenue-generating eco-tourism, a valuation method which is based on ecosystem services (food, water, and services regulating the climate and floods, etc.) is a must. The system refers to the benefits people obtain from natural ecosystems in contrast with man-made structures. The Court could have set a precedent by saying that ecosystem services are more important and generate more revenue than eco-tourism or raised the need of putting in place a precise law and policy relating to ecosystem services. The reasoning provided by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in *Costa Rica v. Nicaragua* (2018) could have been used to understand the methodologies in evaluating damage to the environment. The ICJ asserted that damage to the environment, and the consequent loss of the ability of the environment to provide goods and services, is compensable.

> The Court's decision to assess the damage done to the green cover of Jim Corbett so as to identify the cost of restoration and recover same appears to be a mirage in the absence of a well-defined methodology

An offer, an uproar, and a rejection

The Congress was wise in rejecting the SDPI's offer in Kerala

STATE OF PLAY

Biju Govind
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On April 1, the president of the Kerala unit of the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), Muvattupuzha Ashraf Moulvi, held a press conference and offered support to the Congress in the State in the Lok Sabha elections. The SDPI is the political arm of the proscribed Popular Front of India (PFI).

Congress leaders were guarded in their response. The convener of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), M.M. Hassan, stressed that the party would hold discussions on whether or not to accept the support offered. The Leader of the Opposition, V.D. Satheesan, clarified that the UDF had not held any discussions or reached any understanding with the SDPI. Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala pointed out that in a democratic setup, individuals, not parties, voted during elections and the party would not refuse votes from anyone. He, too, said that the Congress had not had any discussions with the SDPI.

As expected, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) saw in the dithering an opportunity to attack the Congress. BJP State chief K. Surendran questioned Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who is seeking re-election from Wayanad, to clarify his stance on the party's endorsement of the SDPI. Mr. Surendran, who is also a candidate from Wayanad, alleged that the PFI was involved in the killings of Hindus and Christians and was implicated in several violent incidents. By aligning with an outfit that is trying to "disintegrate the nation," the Congress was betraying citizens, he said.

The State secretary of the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist), M.V. Govindan, also criticised the Congress in a similar vein. He said that the Congress had a history of forming the CoLeBi (an acronym for Congress-League-BJP alliance) and was now prepared to receive support from another controversial political element. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan stressed that the statements of Congress leaders revealed a clear deal between the Congress and the SDPI.

The controversy also played out at the national level, with Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting Anurag Singh Thakur lashing out at the Congress.

Four days after the SDPI's press conference, recognising the potential backlash from both Hindus and Christians, the Congress leadership rejected the offer of support from the SDPI. Mr. Satheesan stressed that the Congress saw both majority and minority communalism as two sides of the same coin. Citizens vote as individuals and the UDF hoped to get their endorsement on the merit of its manifesto and political agenda, he said.

Whatever be the Congress's stand, UDF candidates perceive the SDPI's votes as crucial in a tight contest, not only in the Malabar region but also in some constituencies in south Kerala. The SDPI holds some influence in pockets including Ponnani, Malappuram, Vadakara, and Kannur. In the 2014 parliamentary polls, it contested 20 seats and garnered 1.7% of the votes polled. The party also finished second in two Assembly segments – Malappuram and Vengara – in the Malappuram Lok Sabha constituency. But in the 2019 polls, the party contested only 10 seats, securing 0.4% of the vote share.

Before the announcement of the Lok Sabha elections, the SDPI organised a procession with the theme 'Reclaiming the country' and raised issues such as protection of constitutional values, conduct of caste census, withdrawal of anti-people laws, conservation of federalist principles, correction of anti-farmer policies, and a solution to the unemployment problem. However, it refrained from fielding candidates, possibly due to scrutiny following the ban on the PFI under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in September 2022. Though the party espouses the cause of Muslims, its political approach has been vehemently criticised by mainstream Muslim organisations.

Had the Congress leadership remained silent or quietly accepted the offer of the SDPI, they would have faced an electoral setback in Kerala. The party did not allow the controversy to fester to give ammunition to the BJP and the CPI(M) for long. By keenly observing reactions and making a quick decision, it stopped its rivals from hijacking the political agenda at both at the State and national level. But the jury is still out on whether the damage-control exercise will help it reap electoral dividends.

Fertility levels drop below one in many Asian nations

Couples choosing to not have children, citizens opting to remain single, and spiralling costs to raise children may all have contributed to the dip

DATA POINT

Jasmin Nihalani

Many countries in East and Southeast Asia are in the middle of a population crisis, with fewer births every year and record-low fertility rates. In March this year, several hospitals in China stopped offering newborn delivery services due to declining demand, Reuters reported. In fact, with the fertility rates in South Korea hitting rock bottom, the city of Seongnam, the fourth largest in the country, resorted to hosting mass blind dates hoping that the falling birth rates would reverse.

This was not always the case. Between 1950 and 1970, fertility rates in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries ranged from 3.5 to 7.5. The total fertility rate (TFR) is the average number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime. A TFR of 2.1 (the 'replacement level') is required to ensure that the population size remains stable.

Currently, in four countries – South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan – the fertility rates are lower than one. This means that while the majority of women in these countries have only one child, many are also not choosing to have children, pulling down the average below one. For instance, in South Korea, the TFR slid to a record low of 0.72 in 2023, while in Hong Kong, the TFR was 0.701 in 2022. Both these countries currently have among the lowest fertility rates in the world. **Chart 1** shows the TFR in six countries, including China and Japan, over a period of time.

In the six countries considered, not only is the TFR significantly lower than 2.1, it has seen a drastic reduction over time. This is evident when the TFR of these countries is compared with that of Ukraine, Finland, Italy, and Spain – countries which also have among the lowest TFRs in the world currently (**Chart 2**). For instance, in a span of 50 years, China reduced its TFR from 6.51 (1968) to 1.16 (2021) through various policies, while Spain's TFR came down gradually from 2.87 to 1.28. India's TFR also witnessed a drop from over 5.7 to 2.03 in the same period, though not as sharp as that of China's.

The sharp fall in China's TFR is attributable largely to policies its government adopted to control population growth. South Korea's slogan in the 1980s, "Even two children per family are too many for our crowded country", and Singapore's slogan for its two-child policy, "The more you have, the less they get – two is enough", are examples of strict family planning measures.

The drastic drop in fertility rate can also be attributed to women now having more opportunities to build a career, dropping marriage rates, the spiralling cost of raising a child, and income lost when a pregnant woman's career is interrupted, according to the think tank, East-West Centre.

Poor fertility rates lead to an imbalance in the population, with older people forming a larger share. As of 2023, a third of the population was aged over 65 in Japan and by the early 2030s, the share of people aged over 65 will increase to 30% in South Korea and Hong Kong. **Chart 3** shows the year when about 5%, 15%, and 30% of a country's population was or will be aged over 65. While countries took many years to reach the 15% mark from 5%, they are estimated to reach the 30% mark in a relatively quicker manner, indicating the rapid ageing of the population.

Chart 4 lists the financial support and other expensive programmes that governments have introduced to incentivise childbirths in select countries. South Korea, for instance, has spent $211 billion to increase fertility rates since 2006. But the fertility curves of these countries haven't reversed yet.

And then it was less than one

The data were sourced from national statistical organisations, World Population Prospects, and World Bank

Fertility crisis: A pedestrian crossing a street with a child in Tokyo. AP

Chart 1: The chart shows the total fertility rate in six countries over 50 years from 1950

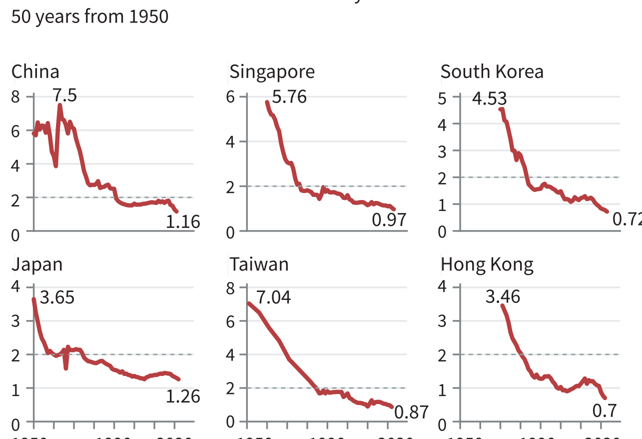

Chart 2: The chart compares the TFR of the six countries mentioned above and India with Ukraine, Finland, Italy and Spain (countries which also have among the lowest TFRs)

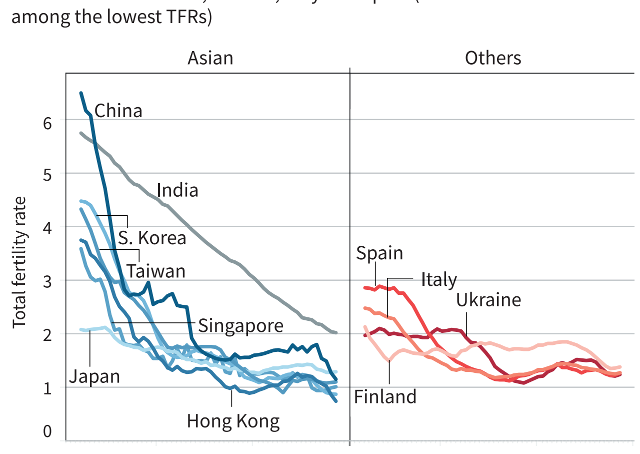

Chart 3: The year when about 5% (■), 15% (■) and 30% (■) of a country's population had aged or will be ageing

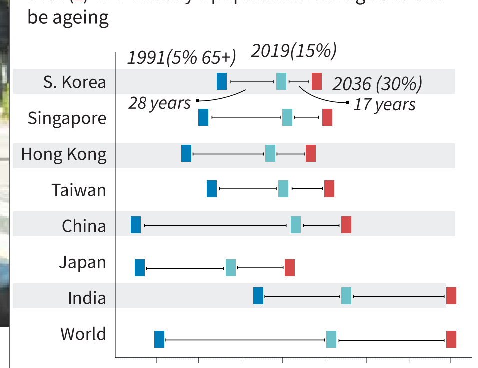

Chart 4: The chart lists the financial support and other programmes to incentivise childbirths

South Korea	
1 million won /month	For parents with a baby <1 year
500,000 won /month	For parents with children between 1 and 2
2 million won	Cash bonus for each child born
3 million won	Cash bonus for second child or more children
5 million won	For giving birth to twins
	Hourly child care services at daycare centers
Hong Kong	
HKD 20,000	For each baby born to a parent who is a permanent resident of Hong Kong
	Priority subsidised housing
	Increase in childcare centres and allowances
Singapore	
	Baby bonus cash gift
SGD 11,000	For first and second child
SGD 13,000	For third, fourth child and subsequent children
	Special savings account
	Govt. paid maternity & paternity leave
Japan	
15,000 yen	Per month allowance until the child is aged 2
10,000 yen	Per child from age 3 through high school age
30,000 yen	For the third child and subsequent children through high school age

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 15, 1974

Big-scale fighting between Syrian and Israeli troops

Damascus, April 14: Syrian forces to-day foiled an Israeli attack on Syrian positions on Mount Hermon and air defence batteries shot down three Israeli warplanes, a Syrian military communique said.

Israeli losses in to-day's fighting, which started at 5-15 a.m. (8-45 IST), were estimated at 50 troops killed or wounded according to the communqiue. Including the three planes shot down to-day, Syria had brought down seven Israeli warplanes since the last October Arab-Israeli war, the communique said.

According to the communique, fighting was still continuing five hours later between Syrian and Israeli forces both on Mount Hermon and at several places on the Golan Heights front.

According to military sources in Damascus, the Syrians have seized new positions previously held by the Israelis in Mount Hermon. The Israelis, the sources said, were trying to drive the Syrians out of those positions and recapture them.

Military sources in Tel Aviv said that Israeli soldiers discovered the Syrian force just before dawn to-day and a fierce battle began at around 4-15 local (07-45 IST).

Israeli forces claimed to-day to have beaten off another Syrian attempt to occupy key northern ridges, providing excellent strategic and observation posts, on the 2,500 metre high snow-capped Mount Hermon at the northern end of the Golan Front.

The fighting for the ridges, involving Israeli fighter planes as well as Syrian commando units backed by artillery, is seen here as marking a definitive end to the uneasy Golan Front truce imposed by the United Nations Security Council on October 24.

An official spokesman announced to-day that an Israeli army unit last night wiped out a Syrian unit, believed here to have been a company of about 30 men, which took up positions high on the mountain.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 15, 1924

Pirates in China

Hongkong, April 14: The combined meeting of China coast officers and marine engineers guilds has decided to suspend the Hongkong Kingmoon Service until naval escorts are provided against attacks of pirates.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The decrease in automobile exports from India in FY24

5.5 in percentage. Automobile exports from India declined to 45 lakh units in FY24 due to the monetary crisis in various overseas markets, according to the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers. Overall exports stood at 47.6 lakh units in FY23. PTI

The renewable energy capacity added by India in FY24

18 gigawatt (GW). India added a record renewable energy (RE) capacity in 2023-24, over 21% higher than the 15.27 GW a year earlier. But, experts say that 50 GW of RE capacity must be added annually to reach the 2030 target of 500 GW renewable energy. PTI

The amount infused in equities by FPIs in the month of April

13,000 in ₹ crore. Foreign portfolio investors have infused this amount in first two weeks of the month owing to a resilient domestic economy with promising growth prospects. PTI

The rising inflation rate in Pakistan according to the ADB

25 in percentage. With a high inflation rate and its economy growing at the fourth lowest pace of 1.9% in the region, Pakistan has the highest cost of living in all of Asia, according to a new Asian Development Bank (ADB) report. PTI

The number of drones and missiles launched by Iran on Israel

320 Israel claims that Iran fired 170 drones, more than 30 cruise missiles and more than 120 ballistic missiles, of which several reached Israeli territory, causing minor damage to an air base. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Fixing India's VVPAT-based audit of EVMs

While the Supreme Court has been indulgent towards the ECI due to its plenipotentiary role in the conduct of elections under Article 324 of the Constitution, it must compel the ECI to make public how it has defined the population, and most importantly, its decision rule in the event of a mismatch

FULL CONTEXT

K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has attracted criticism for reducing the Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) based audit of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) to an exercise in tokenism and for its lack of transparency in the matter. The uniform sample size of "five EVMs per Assembly constituency" prescribed by it for all Assembly constituencies and States does not conform to the fundamental principles of statistical sampling and leads to high margins of error.

At the same time, the ECI's critics are also guilty of demanding arbitrary, non-statistical sample sizes like "25 per cent samples" and "50 per cent samples" for VVPAT-based audit of EVMs, under the mistaken impression that a "bigger percentage" guarantees greater accuracy of results. Some are now demanding a 100% manual count of all VVPAT voter slips.

Using statistical sampling

The VVPAT-based audit of EVMs is a simple problem of statistical quality control. It is very similar to the "lot acceptance sampling technique" that is widely used in industry and trade. If the number of defectives found in a randomly drawn statistical sample is less than or equal to a specified acceptance number, the lot (or 'population') is accepted; otherwise, the lot is rejected.

Here a 'defective EVM' is defined as one with a mismatch between the EVM count and the VVPAT's manual count of voter slips due to EVM malfunction or EVM manipulation. Unlike industry and trade where a few defectives in the sample may be tolerated, in the context of elections, the acceptance number will have to be 'zero defective EVM'. In other words, even if there is a single instance of mismatch between the EVM count and VVPAT manual count in the randomly drawn sample of EVMs, the 'population' of EVMs from which the sample was drawn should be 'rejected'. In this case, 'rejection' means non-acceptance of the EVM counts for that 'population' and doing manual counting of VVPAT slips for all the remaining EVMs of that 'population'. In such a scenario, the election result should be declared only on the basis of the VVPAT count.

Thus, VVPAT-based audit of EVMs involves three essential elements – (a) a clear definition of the 'population' of EVMs from which the statistical sample would be drawn. It could be all the EVMs deployed in an Assembly constituency, a Parliamentary constituency, a State as a whole, India as a whole, a region (or group of districts) within a State, or any other. The population size (N) could vary widely depending on how we define the 'population'; (b) determination of a statistically correct and administratively viable sample size (n) of EVMs whose VVPAT slips will be hand counted; (c) application of the 'decision rule', viz., in the event of a mismatch between the EVM count and the VVPAT count in the chosen sample of 'n' EVMs, the hand counting of VVPAT slips will have to be done for all the remaining (N-n) EVMs forming part of that 'population'.

However, the ECI has not specified the 'population' to which its sample size relates. It has not explained how it arrived at its sample size. It has maintained silence about the 'next steps' in the event of a mismatch between the EVM count and the VVPAT count in the chosen sample, and it has glossed over reported cases of mismatch. A system of VVPAT-based audit of EVMs in which these three vital issues have been left vague or unaddressed is categorically unacceptable.

Why ECI's sample size is erroneous

The hypergeometric distribution model should form the basis of the sampling plan for the VVPAT-based audit of EVMs because it is an exact fit. In the discussion that follows, we assume the percentage of defective EVMs in the population (P) to be 1%, and calculate sample sizes, for various population sizes, for 99% probability of detecting at least one defective EVM. We also compute the probability that the ECI-prescribed sample size of "five EVMs per Assembly constituency" will fail to detect a defective EVM for different population sizes. The great merit of the hypergeometric distribution model is that the sample size is the greatest when P is very close to zero (which is what the ECI claims it is), and it becomes lesser as P increases.

As seen from Table 1, when the population size (N) of EVMs is 100, the sample size (n) required is 99, that is it is nearly as big as the population size. As N increases, n also increases but at a much slower rate and 'hits a plateau' beyond some point so that further increases in population size have no effect on the sample size.

As seen from Table 2, if we define the EVMs deployed in an Assembly constituency or Parliamentary constituency as the 'population', then in view of the smaller population sizes (N), the sample sizes (n) required are rather big. Hence, both these choices for 'population' are administratively unviable. As seen from Table 3, if we define the EVMs deployed in a State as a whole or India as a whole as the 'population', then in view of the bigger population sizes (N), the sample sizes (n) required are very small. But the workload involved in hand counting the VVPAT slips for all the remaining (N-n) EVMs of the population, in the event of a mismatch, is very large and administratively unviable for India as a whole and for all States except the smaller States. The ECI glosses over this crucial point when it claims that the ISI, Kolkata had recommended a sample size of only 479 EVMs for India as a whole which works out to one EVM per Assembly constituency.

What next?

We can use the 'plateau effect' of sample sizes to divide the bigger States into 'regions' (an integral number of districts) with EVM population sizes of about 5,000 each. We treat "EVMs deployed in the region" as the 'population'. On average, there would be about 20 Assembly constituencies in a region. The sample size required is 438 and the average number of EVMs per Assembly constituency whose VVPAT slips are to be hand counted is 22. For example, U.P with 1,50,000 EVMs can be divided into 30 regions with roughly 5,000 EVMs each. In the event of a defective EVM turning up, the hand counting of VVPAT slips of the remaining EVMs will confined to the region. This option is statistically robust and administratively viable.

Over the years, the Supreme Court has been indulgent towards the ECI due to its plenipotentiary role in the conduct of elections under Article 324 of the Constitution of India. But the Supreme Court cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the ECI making a mockery of the VVPAT-based audit of EVMs thereby defeating the very purpose of introducing the VVPAT. It must compel the ECI to make public how it has defined the population, how it has arrived at its sample size, and most importantly, its decision rule in the event of a mismatch. Only then, the Supreme Court's order of 2013 on VVPAT would be implemented faithfully in letter and spirit.

The writer is a former IAS officer and former Vice Chancellor of the Indian Maritime University, Chennai

Towards a new audit methodology

The hypergeometric distribution model should form the basis of the sampling plan for the VVPAT-based audit of EVMs because it is an exact fit

TABLE 1

Population size (N)	Sample size (n)	% of n to N
100	99	99
1,000	368	36.8
10,000	448	4.48
1,00,000	458	0.46
10,00,000	459	0.05

Electronic Voting Machines kept at a strong room at the Motilal Nehru Government Polytechnic College at Lawspet in Puducherry on April 11.

TABLE 2

Population boundary	Population size (N) (number of EVMs)	Sample size (n) for the specified population	Probability that the ECI prescribed sample size of "five EVMs per Assembly constituency" will fail to detect a defective EVM
Assembly constituency	≈ 20 to 300	20 to 235	95%
Parliamentary constituency	≈ 40 to 2,800	40 to 423 (≈ 6 to 60 per Assembly constituency)	70%

TABLE 3

Population boundary	Population size (N) (number of EVMs)	Sample size (n) for the specified population	Average no. of EVMs per Assembly constituency whose VVPAT slips are to be hand counted for this sample Size	Probability that the ECI prescribed sample size of "five EVMs per Assembly constituency" will fail to detect a defective EVM
A State as a whole				
Sikkim	589	315	10	14.8%
Nagaland	2,194	413	7	3.9%
Assam	24,890	455	4	0.2%
Rajasthan	51,796	457	3	0%
Maharashtra	91,329	458	2	0%
U.P	1,50,000	458	2	0%
India as a whole	**≈10,50,000**	**459**	**1**	**0%**

THE GIST

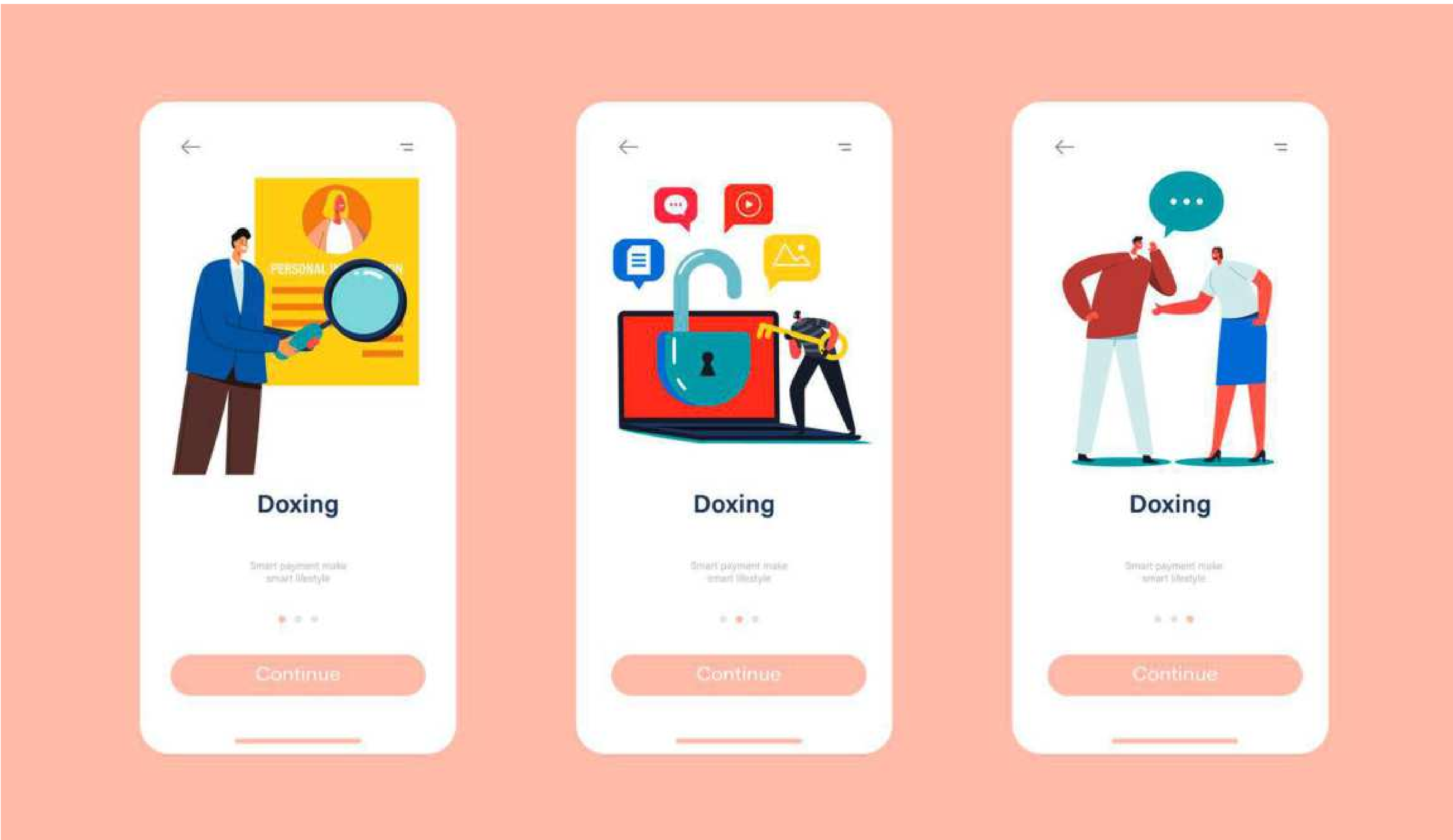
The Election Commission of India has attracted criticism for reducing the Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) based audit of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) to an exercise in tokenism and for its lack of transparency in the matter.

The VVPAT-based audit of EVMs is a simple problem of statistical quality control.

We can use the 'plateau effect' of sample sizes to divide the bigger States into 'regions' with EVM population sizes of about 5,000 each. We treat "EVMs deployed in the region" as the 'population'. On average, there would be about 20 Assembly constituencies in a region. The sample size required is 438 and the number of EVMs per constituency whose VVPAT slips are to be hand counted is 22.

Election fever: Poll officials work on EVMs at a distribution center in Coimbatore on April 11. AFP

CACHE



ISTOCKPHOTO

What is doxxing and what measures can you take if it happens to you?

The act of digitally publicising a person's private details is called doxxing. It allows abusers and criminals who are thousands of miles away to target victims by putting their private details online for others to exploit

Sahana Venugopal

A woman in mid-February reached out to the Mumbai Police through X (formerly Twitter) to report a man who had shared a video of her dancing at an event and compared her performance to sex work. The woman clarified that the video was re-posted without her consent and requested the man multiple times to take down the video, but he refused to do so. Many others began to share the video as well, and joined in to harass the woman, who locked her X account. Though the video was later disabled by X on copyright grounds, the man – a verified X user with a blue tick – continued to defend his actions.

The act of digitally publicising a person's private details is called doxxing, or doxing. Doxxers generally publicise highly personal data such as other people's home addresses, phone numbers, private email IDs, medical conditions, government documents, social security numbers, live locations, insurance information, private employment details, etc. Such information is usually obtained through illegal methods such as hacking or theft. However, publicising private or semi-public content that an individual did not intend to share for public consumption can also result in doxxing and harassment.

The intent behind doxxing

For example, an ordinary person smoking or sipping whiskey at a house party might consent to their video being shared on their friend's Instagram account, but they may not want that same clip to be publicly re-posted on X or YouTube, with their employers tagged. While the user who circulates an already public image or video may be legally in the clear, their intentions can be malicious and may endanger others.

"We also factor in the intent of the person sharing the information. For example, if we believe that someone is sharing information with an abusive intent, or to harass or encourage others to harass another person, we will take action," stated X in its 'private information and media policy' page.

Doxxing does not end with bringing the perpetrator to justice. These users often share details that easily allow others worldwide to launch their own attacks against the victim, making it harder for the police to take action against all those who are responsible. Furthermore, doxxing is a direct attack on a person's physical, digital, and emotional security. A person who has been doxxed may have to flee their physical location, remain calm for the sake of young family members, clarify the situation with their employers, secure their leaked finances, file a report with the police, upgrade their internet security, be on the lookout for stalkers, and deal with a barrage of violent threats – all at once. Doxxing can also expose the people who live or work near the victim, increasing the affected person's chances of being evicted or fired.

What to do when doxxed

Mishi Choudhary, a technology lawyer and the founder of SFLC.in, advised people who have been doxxed to keep an incident log containing evidence of what has taken place, including the relevant platforms and all those who were involved in the harassment. This can later be shown to law enforcement authorities. "Report the accounts to all platforms on which you have been doxxed as it's against the policies of most social media platforms and they will be quick to take action," Choudhary advised, adding that users should also change all their passwords and turn on two-factor authentication to ensure their security. People who have been doxxed in India can report what happened through the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, Choudhary said, and stressed that one has a legal right to file an FIR. This is where the incident log becomes useful.

Platforms such as Meta are aware of the need to protect users who have been doxxed, as the company's oversight board in February 2022 concluded that Facebook and Instagram should have stricter rules concerning incidents where data such as home addresses are leaked online. "Once this information has been shared, the harms that can result, such as doxing, are difficult to remedy. Harms resulting from doxing disproportionately affect groups such as women, children and LGBTQIA+ people, and can include emotional distress, loss of employment and even physical harm or death," noted Meta's oversight board in its findings. Google also has tools in place to assist people who have been doxxed. The company allows internet users to submit removal requests that it then reviews for further action. Remember that YouTube is owned by Google, so one can directly report any content posted there as well. X has an in-app reporting mechanism for private information, and a grievance officer whose job is to take action based on such reports. Reddit also provides a complaint forum.

Recently, messaging platform Discord updated its community policies by separating doxxing and harassment guidelines. The change is set to go into effect in April. "Previously, doxxing was combined with our harassment guideline. However, we consider these distinct harm types, so we separated them to better reflect how we organise our policies," said the new guidelines on the platform support page.

However, since social media companies operating within the country are bound by India's IT Rules, submitting a cybercrime complaint is one way to make sure the platform is forced to take action quickly.

That being said, victims of doxxing do not have to leave social media forever. "I always tell people to be generally careful in what they are sharing so they can avoid such a situation but if you have been doxxed, once you feel mentally ready, you can go back," Choudhary said. At the same time, users also need to make sure that their Personally Identifiable Information (PII) has been removed and that their accounts are secure, she noted. "Have a self care plan. Recruit friends, family and a support structure," Choudhary suggested. "Without support, it gets harder to do it alone. Women are targeted for several reasons and we must not feel weakened or ashamed."

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

On April 15, 1912, RMS Titanic went down after hitting an iceberg. A quiz on the 'unsinkable' luxury liner

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
After leaving Southampton, England, the 269m long ship made two stops before disaster, literally, struck. Name the ports that it called on?

QUESTION 2
After the liner went down fully around 2.20 a.m., the survivors were picked up around 3.30 a.m. by a ship that had rushed towards it after answering the distress signals sent around 12.15 a.m. Name the ship.

QUESTION 3
J. Bruce Ismay was one of the survivors of the tragedy. Who was he in the context of the ship and why was he vilified and publicly shunned?

QUESTION 4
Name the novel, written by Morgan Robertson 14 years before the incident, which eerily predicted a similar disaster.

QUESTION 5
Though there were 2,224 passengers and crew, the lifeboats had a total capacity to take on how many passengers (to the nearest round figure)?

QUESTION 6
According to Titanic scholars, what is the significance of the words '"Hard astarboard! Stand by the engines!"

QUESTION 7
Name the famous explorer who discovered the wreck of the Titanic in 1985.

Visual question:
Name this organisation (whose name has been masked) founded in the aftermath of the tragedy.

Questions and Answers to the April 12 edition of the daily quiz: 1. The meal before the beginning of the fast during Ramzan. **Ans: Suhoor/Sehri**
2. The day on which the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations of the Quran. **Ans: 27th day**
3. Prophet Muhammad was born here. **Ans: Mecca**
4. In which month of the Islamic calendar is Ramadan. **Ans: Ninth month**
5. The first prayer of the day. **Ans: Fajr**
Visual: The name by which the traditional lantern used during Ramadan is called. **Ans: Fanoos**
Early Birds: Jyot Prakash Gulati| Daksh| Mahmood Lebbai| Debarati Kar| Muhammed Shahid

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

She is a go-getter when it comes to work

You seem to be dragging your feet when it comes to making difficult choices for the team

S. Upendran

"I heard there are several vacancies in your company. Are you applying for any of them?"

"I already have. So has Sujatha."

"I hope the two of you haven't applied for the same post. Sujatha is a real go-getter. You don't stand a chance..."

"Go-getter? Is a go-getter someone who gets things?"

"A go-getter is an ambitious individual who is determined to be successful. This rather enterprising individual, in order to achieve his goals, takes matters into his own hands, instead of waiting for things to happen."

"In other words, a go-getter takes the initiative. Acts before others do."

"Sometimes, very aggressively. This individual is full of energy, exudes a great deal of confidence, and is good at dealing with problems."

"Sujatha, as you rightly pointed out, is a go-getter."

"Are the two of you competing for the same job? If so, what..."

"As far as I know, up to date, she hasn't applied for the posts that I have."

"You don't say 'up to date' when you mean 'till now'. It's better to say, 'to date'. To date, Sujatha hasn't applied for any of the posts I have'."

"To date, there has been no news about the missing plane."

"That's a good example. There are many people who prefer to use 'until now' instead of 'to date'. For example, 'Until now, we haven't received any complaints from our customers'."

"How about this example? To date, we haven't had any problem with the car."

"That's a good example. I'm happy that you and Sujatha haven't applied for the same post."

"So am I! I would have had no chance against her."

"So, how are things, otherwise? Have you finally managed to get some time off in order to visit your parents? "

"I know. But things have been crazy at work. Will talk to my boss this week..."

"That's what you said last week. It seems to me you're not keen on making a trip to Chennai. You've been dragging your feet quite a bit. I don't understand..."

"Dragging my feet? What are you talking about? I never walk slowly..."

"You always walk briskly. That's true! When you accuse someone of 'dragging their feet' regarding something, what you're saying is that they're deliberately delaying doing things in order to..."

"Let me guess! They're slowing things down because they really don't want to do it. They're very reluctant."

"Excellent! That's one of the meanings of the informal expression 'drag one's feet'. Several big companies have been dragging their feet over the issue of promoting women to senior positions."

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Word of the day

Galore:
in great numbers; existing in abundance

Synonym: abounding

Usage: *The grounds were filled with daffodils galore.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/galorepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /gəlɔː/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

thehindubusinessline.
MONDAY - APRIL 15, 2024

Storm warning

Rising oil, commodity prices can derail rate cut hopes

Iran's missile offensive on Israel over the weekend, in retaliation to attacks on its own embassy in Syria, has stoked the embers in the Middle East. While it is as yet unclear if this will escalate into a wider conflict, disruptions in shipments through the Strait of Hormuz look quite likely. This can add new legs to the recent rally in global crude oil prices, which after slumping on recession worries through 2023, have rallied over 25 per cent this year to over $90 a barrel last week.

It was only last week that the OPEC decided to keep its output cuts in place until June, after projecting improved global demand growth of 2.25 million barrels per day through 2024. The industrial metals complex — mainly copper, nickel, zinc and silver — has been upbeat in the last few weeks too, after positive March PMI (Purchasing Managers Index) data from Eurozone and China. Gold is ruling at a lifetime high too, though for a different reason. Wary of a snowballing US debt crisis, central banks led by China have been shoring up their gold reserves to stealthily diversify from the dollar. All this has resulted in the Reuters-CRB Commodity Index rising 18 per cent this year, ruling at levels last seen when the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted in 2022.

The cocktail of factors driving the commodity rally make it difficult to gauge if this is a structural reversal or a short-term move. But the spike, even if it lasts a few months, will have significant economic implications for India. For one, it can put paid to expectations of a reversal in policy rates from the second half of this year. In recent monetary policy meetings, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has said that it would like to bring the CPI (Consumer Price Index) inflation print down to 4 per cent on a durable basis. In its latest policy meeting, RBI made a benign inflation forecast of 4.5 per cent for FY25. But resurgent commodity prices could threaten this forecast. Should inflation remain elevated, RBI may also be reluctant to ease up on domestic liquidity and prefer to stay with its 'withdrawal of accommodation' stance. Two, a shift in the global inflation outlook can moderate capital flows into India's stock and bond markets. Emerging markets including India have been attracting copious portfolio flows since last November, when US treasury yields cooled off to 4 per cent levels on Fed rate cut hopes. US yields are now back to 4.5 per cent, with Fed rate cut expectations being hastily recalibrated. A persistent spike in energy prices can reverse hard-won gains in India's current account deficit and the rupee.

Finally, geopolitical tensions and commodity prices can interrupt India's stock market rally. Given that Indian companies are net importers of industrial metals and feedstock, the prospect of higher input costs will require the market to tone down its expectations for a 15 per cent earnings growth from Nifty companies in FY25. But this may not be such a bad thing, as current valuations and earnings estimates appear a tad too optimistic.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

When fans behave unsportingly

Anjana PV

There is no doubt that a strong and solid fan base will always be a great pillar of strength for any sports team. For sports aspirants, it would be a dream to play in front of cheering fans. However, recent events surrounding Mumbai Indians at the IPL have been a paradox of sorts in fan behaviour.

Instead of rallying behind their team, Mumbai Indians fans have resorted to booing and jeering when their newly appointed captain, Hardik Pandya, steps onto the field. This kind of behaviour began after the decision to replace Rohit Sharma with Pandya as captain was taken.

The discontentment of fans has spilled over to social media, which has even led to a loss of one million followers from Mumbai Indians' official Instagram handle.

Rohit Sharma's legacy as one of the greatest captains in Mumbai Indians' history is undeniable. He led the team to five titles and earned adoration from fans worldwide. The uproar against Pandya has gone to such an extent that officials had to request the crowd to calm down.

Recently, Virat Kohli, representing Royal Challengers Bengaluru, had to ask the crowd to stop booing Pandya.

Cricket holds a special place in the hearts of fans in our country, evoking deep emotions and support.

However, it's essential for fans to realise that expressing disappointment shouldn't come at the expense of a player's morale. While disagreements between management and fans are inevitable, protest should not involve methods that demoralise players or undermine the team's spirit. However, it must be said that fans by and large remain loyal and supportive even in times of friction.

LINE & LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

The poverty of Indian economic discourse

We defend bad policy outcomes or score debating points with selective data. There is excessive focus on the very short term

Economics and the Indian economy have loomed large in my life for nearly six decades. In our very first class in 1967, the professor, a very erudite and learned man, opened his lecture with the following unforgettable words: "India will soon be a land of idiots."

He was referring to the huge decline in food availability after the two massive droughts of 1965 and 1966 and the impact on nutrition. Today, despite the gigantic improvement in food availability, nutrition remains an bigger problem.

More than half the population has IQ levels of just around 90. These people can't be very useful contributors to the economy because they will consume more than they can produce.

If agriculture and labour are a problem, so is technology intensive manufacturing. Its share in GDP has fallen from around a quarter in 1980 to about 15 per cent now. What the British managed between 1757 and 1947 we have managed between 1947 and 2017 — slow deindustrialisation. I wonder what DR Gadgil, who wrote the book on the deindustrialisation of India, would have said.

Likewise, India's share in global trade was around three per cent in 1947. It's now just about one per cent. Not just that. We don't like to be a trading economy.

We can go on about these declines but the message must be clear: our governments have made a mess because not only have they tried to intervene too much, they have also done it badly via very bad policies.

I should add that towards the end the professor said India needed to focus on capital, not labour. The opposite has happened. As the saying goes, the path to hell is paved with good intentions.

ANALYTICAL BABBLE

However, unlike the economic discourse before Independence and for 25 years after it when it focused on analytical issues, for the last 50 years it's all been about defensiveness by one side and uniformed criticism by the other. Politics is the reason.

So we don't analyse any more. We either defend bad policy outcomes or score debating points with the help of selective data. Data has become an analgesic.

The result is a confusing babble arising from an excessive focus on the very short term. Thus, long term issues like nutrition, on the one hand and capital scarcity on the other, don't figure in the debate except in passing.

The main reason for this is that public policy economists have started taking political sides. The old neutrality is almost gone.

This problem started when the first Indira Gandhi government of 1969-71 was entirely dependent on the Communist party. The chief economic adviser was a Marxist who went on to become the finance minister of West Bengal when the CPM came to power there.

It's become worse with every passing year since the early 1970s. Today, the statistical debating skills of economists matter more than their analytical skills.

> **The pervasive infestation of left wing political ideas** has meant that our economics is entirely focused on distribution.

And we have seen an enormously increased amount of this kind of thing in the last 10 years. The focus has shifted from the deeper structural issues to quarterly, half-yearly, annual data, base years, measurement techniques and, in general, splitting hair.

This, incidentally, actually places the government at an advantage. It can treat data with disdain or use discretion, whichever is convenient at the moment. We have seen this also since 2014.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying data doesn't matter. It does. But it's not the only thing that matters. There is more to economic analysis than just data mining and number crunching. That any computer and its programme can do.

THE EXTRA MILE

The irony about the politicisation of economic analysis is that it lacks an analytical framework. This contrasts sharply with political and legal analyses. Both draw their strength from the framework provided by the Constitution and certain principles of human rights and dignity.

But what does our economic analysis draw upon now? The pervasive infestation of left wing political ideas has meant that our economics is entirely focused on distribution. That means tax and spend. Nothing more.

Is that all there is to having an analytical framework? What about growth? Why is it not an analytical priority? This was not the case till 1967. We had a clear framework in the second and third Five Year Plans.

This political obsession with 'welfare' has placed the least productive sections of society at the centre-stage of our economic thinking and pushed out the most productive ones, who then have to participate from the wings as the private Indian corporate sector does.

This might be good politically, socially and morally but it relegates capital to the fringes of our economic analysis which should be about efficiency of capital use. Indeed, show me one economy that has done this and prospered.

There aren't any, not even China. Even Karl Marx called his magnum opus *Das Kapital*.

Changes to the Indo-Mauritius tax treaty examined

Now, benefit under the DTAA will not be granted to an item of income if tax evasion is one of the principal purposes

bl. explainer

Shishir Sinha

What are double tax avoidance treaties? Why are tax authorities not happy with these?

From the name itself, it is cleared that Double Tax Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) aims to ensure that a foreign investor need not pay tax twice i.e., in the country of origin and the country where it is investing.

Also, it prescribes payment of tax in any of two countries where tax rate is low. Such a treaty is signed to encourage investors.

However, such a treaty has another consequence. This encourages investors to route their money through a country where tax rate is very low or even zero. Such a country, called a tax haven, provides tax residency to foreign investors. Because of such a certificate, tax authorities in India cannot collect tax. This also leads to litigations.

When was the Indo-Mauritius DTAA first signed and what benefits did it give to those investing into India from Mauritius?

The treaty was first signed on August 24, 1982. Mauritius was initially the preferred channel for foreign portfolio and foreign direct investors due to the tax advantage that accrued due to the DTAA between two countries.

The agreement laid down that capital gains tax had to be paid in the country where the foreign investor was based. Since the rate of capital gains tax in Mauritius was zero, investors from this country paid no capital gains tax.

How was this treaty watered down after 2017?

It was decided that in the case of shares purchased after April 1, 2017, capital gains arising from an investment in an Indian company will be taxed in India. With the double tax avoidance treaty with Singapore being linked to the agreement with Mauritius, investments from Singapore have also been brought into the Indian tax net.

What is the change to the Indo-Mauritius tax treaty made this year?

India and Mauritius signed a protocol dated March 7, 2024, to amend the tax treaty. It prescribes a change in the preamble where the expression 'encouragement of mutual trade and investment' has been removed.

It has been said that both countries

INVESTMENT FLOW. On the decline

are intending to eliminate double taxation with respect to taxes covered by this convention without, however, 'creating opportunities' for non-taxation or reduced taxation through tax evasion or avoidance (including through treaty shopping arrangements aimed at obtaining reliefs provided in this convention for the indirect benefit of third jurisdiction).

A specific provision for PPT (Principal Purpose Test) has been added and to apply this, a new article has been added to the treaty which says 'a benefit under this convention shall not be granted in respect of an item of income if it is reasonable to conclude that obtaining that benefit was one of the principal purposes.'

How will this impact FPI or FDI investments into India?

Post 2016, investment inflows from Mauritius have already come down. Cumulative FDI worth $161 billion came from Mauritius to India in the two decades from 2000-2022 (26 per cent of total FDI inflows into India), thanks largely to the DTAA.

Since the signing of the DTAC (Double Taxation Avoidance Convention) amendment in 2016, FDI inflows from Mauritius have dropped from $15.72 billion in 2016-17 to $6.13 billion in 2022-23, with Mauritius becoming India's third largest source of FDI.

Now, there is apprehension that not only future inflows but even investment made could be affected. Experts say the application of the PPT to grandfathered investments remains ambiguous. Meanwhile, to curb all such application, the Finance Ministry has said that concerns/queries are premature since the Protocol is yet to be ratified and notified under Section 90 of the Income-tax Act, 1961. As and when the Protocol comes into force, queries, if any, will be addressed, wherever necessary.

BELOW THE LINE

Indian toy story

You must give it to the BJP for aiming high. After overseeing and enabling a turnaround of sorts in the fortunes of the domestic toy industry, it has now in its manifesto promised to transform Bharat into a global hub for toy manufacturing. Going by this Modi Guarantee (as all promises in the manifesto are), don't be surprised if India comes out triumphant on this goal, said an industry observer.

The BJP's manifesto has sent a clear message not only to domestic stakeholders but also to our neighbour who already enjoys a global standing in toy manufacturing and exports.

Wise advice

The one question mutual fund CEOs do not like to be asked is "*kya lena chahiye*" (loosely translated as what shares to buy). When confronted with a similar question in a forum of investors, Kotak MF chief Nilesh Shah, batted the bouncer without a wink.

"Nowadays we have come to a level where my cousins are saying buy it today. You will not get an opportunity tomorrow. And it actually goes up. So I am at the receiving end. I am sure the audience has made far more money than my funds. So I will take their advice."

Name games in politics

In the corridors of power, where every detail matters, a simple mix-up of names thwarted a significant political rendezvous. The much-anticipated meeting between Delhi's jailed Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Punjab's Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Maan was abruptly cancelled.

The reason? A bureaucratic blunder listed the visitor as 'B. Maan', leading to a cascade of confusion. This incident amusingly echoes Shakespeare's musings — what indeed is in a name, and can brevity sometimes muddle more than clarify? In the world of politics, it appears, both are true.

Economic enigma

In the intricate ballet of financial and commodity markets, a curious spectacle has emerged: US stocks, bonds, gold, global crude oil, and the US dollar are all ascending simultaneously, defying conventional economic wisdom.

This rare alignment sparks debate among financial elites — could this surge be attributed to superior US labour productivity setting a global benchmark?

Or are we witnessing a unique anomaly where traditional market correlations have temporarily unravelled? As analysts pore over data, the financial community remains captivated by this unfolding economic mystery.

Bharat everywhere

If there is one aspect of the BJP manifesto that has caught the attention of several hacks, it is the same old Bharat vs India debate. The entire BJP manifesto (Sankalp Patra) has used 'Bharat' (rather than India) and how BJP plans to take 'Bharat' to greater heights in every field in the next five years if voted to power.

The icing on the cake is Modi's Guarantee that Viksit Bharat will be an inclusive Bharat; also that Bharat will be the third largest economic power in the next five years and Bharat will be made a global manufacturing hub.

Our Bureaus

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Reforming GST

It should be a priority after the elections

One of the most significant reforms of the last decade has been the implementation of goods and services tax (GST). However, due to a variety of reasons, its performance has been underwhelming compared to the initial expectations, and the economy has not benefited to the extent envisaged. Tax collection increased in recent years, and there is scope for significant improvement. Although the GST Council drives GST-related decisions, the next Union government, irrespective of political composition, must initiate pending reforms. GST 2.0 must not only aim to increase tax collection but also improve the overall indirect tax administration, enhancing the ease of doing business in the country.

Overall gross GST collection in 2023-24 improved by 11.7 per cent to ₹20.18 trillion. The collection, based on the second advance estimate of gross domestic product (GDP), was 6.86 per cent of GDP. Net of refunds, the collection amounted to 6.13 per cent of GDP, which is an improvement over the previous year. Revenue collection, however, must be evaluated based on taxes included in GST. General government revenue collection from taxes subsumed into GST amounted to 6.3 per cent of GDP in 2016-17. The present performance would have appeared more disappointing had cess collection been discontinued in accordance with the original design of GST. The cess was collected to compensate states for revenue shortfall at a predetermined growth rate in the first five years of implementation. However, the collection of cess continued after five years to repay the debt incurred to compensate states during the pandemic. Net of refunds and cess, GST collection drops well below 6 per cent of GDP.

There are several reasons — including premature rate reduction for political reasons — why the GST system has underperformed. The multiplicity of rates also created plenty of confusion, and duties were inverted in many cases, which affected revenue over the years. Issues related to information technology and compliance have been addressed to a large extent, but they cannot compensate for basic design flaws in the system. A Reserve Bank of India estimate in September 2019, after multiple rate adjustments, showed that the effective weighted average rate declined to 11.6 per cent compared to 14.4 per cent at the inception of GST.

The priority for the next government thus should be to nudge the GST Council to adjust to the revenue-neutral rate. This should be achieved simultaneously with rationalising slabs. Most goods and services should be brought under a single rate. Only a select few essential items may be subject to lower rates, while "sin goods" could be taxed at a higher rate. The Council should also find ways to bring petroleum products under GST. Another issue that the GST Council would have to consider, irrespective of other reforms, is the treatment of cess. While the imposition of cess has been extended till March 2026, analysts believe the debt raised to pay compensation will be repaid sooner. One view is that the cess can be subsumed into GST rates. However, this will not be appropriate and will go fundamentally against the initial promise of GST. While there is indeed a strong case for increasing GST revenue, it should be achieved by addressing the basic design flaws in the system. Taxing certain items at exorbitant rates would be contrary to the basic idea of GST.

The Sino-US thaw

Yellen visit moves the needle

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen last week wrapped up a four-day visit to China on a note of cautious goodwill signalling progress in relations following a summit between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in California in November last year. It is unclear whether Ms Yellen's visit, which followed a phone chat between Messrs Xi and Biden the week before, will yield concrete policy actions immediately, though her down-to-earth style, enthusiasm for Chinese food, and dexterity with chopsticks earned her generous praise from the state-controlled media. But the timing of the visit, her second in nine months, is significant. The Biden administration is nearing the completion of a review of whether to renew duties imposed in 2018 by Donald Trump on Chinese imports worth billions of dollars. The US has also restricted China's access to advanced semiconductor and other technology, saying it could be used for military purposes. At the same time, the slowing Chinese economy has prompted a rethink in Beijing. Late last month, US business leaders attending the annual China Development Forum met Mr Xi as part of the Chinese administration's efforts to boost foreign investment.

In meetings with Chinese officials Ms Yellen bluntly highlighted the key unfair trade practices that exercise the US: China's overcapacity in key industries, mainly electric vehicles and solar panels. The US' unwillingness to accept underpriced Chinese goods was the leitmotif of meetings with Vice-Premier He Lifeng in Guangzhou. Importantly, given the complexity and divergent views of the issues involved, the two countries agreed to hold more frequent exchanges on more balanced economic growth. One immediate outcome is an agreement to start exchanges to combat money laundering, though the date and venue are yet to be fixed. The optics of Ms Yellen's China visit marked a shift in tone in US-China relations after the tensions caused by former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022, and the shooting down by American jets of a Chinese balloon that traversed US territory in early 2023. But, as Ms Yellen admitted, it would take many more months to reach agreement on all issues. For instance, the issue of overcapacity is unlikely to be resolved soon.

Reflecting the Chinese position, Premier Li Qiang was quoted in the Chinese daily *Xinhua* as saying the development of the green energy industry in China would play a key role in combating climate change. He urged Ms Yellen not to politicise the issue but ensure instead that the US follow basic market-economy norms of fair competition. Equally, Ms Yellen's expressions of disapproval of China's role in supporting military procurement for Russia in its war against Ukraine appear to have fallen on stony ground. The end of Ms Yellen's visit coincided with a visit by Russia's foreign minister to discuss strengthening strategic cooperation. The perceptible thaw demands close attention from India, whose relations with the US appear to have hit a rough patch. In January this year, India had to postpone plans to host the Quad summit, the centrepiece of this relationship. A new date for the summit is yet to be set. With impending elections in both nations, the state of play is unlikely to change anytime soon.

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

Paths to a political business cycle

Is there such a thing in India?

How does our thinking about macroeconomics change in an election year? Public choice theory is the idea that the state is made up of individuals that maximise their self-interest. Elections are an important consideration for politicians. The idea of the "political business cycle" envisages certain kinds of policy action prior to and after elections, which create impulses upon the macroeconomy. Our ability to understand these phenomena helps us better interpret economic conditions and developments.

SNAKES & LADDERS

AJAY SHAH

The biggest levers of macroeconomics, fiscal and monetary policy, are the first port of call in thinking about the political business cycle. In advanced economies, patterns of this nature have been discerned. In the old days, central banks would tend to cut rates prior to elections, as they believed voters could be fooled with a brief upsurge in economic activity, and there was a time lag before the inflation showed up. Similarly, there are incentives to spend more prior to an election.

The opportunities for such behaviour are restricted by markets and by institutional development. In advanced economies, the government fears the wrath of the bond market. Large deficits are immediately punished with higher interest rates, which hampers the entire economy. Through this, the temptation for such behaviour is controlled. On monetary policy, the political business cycle was one element of the rationale for putting an end to the old style monetary policy, where there was a "mystique" of central banking, where central bank staff had the discretionary powers to do as they pleased. To the extent that there is inflation targeting, backed by a properly structured monetary policy committee, this concern is solved.

These issues play out differently in developing countries. Institutional quality is weaker, so there is a greater threat that economic-policy decisions will be made with an eye on re-election. But there are a different set of constraints. Under conditions of financial repression, fiscal policy does not care about how the bond market thinks. But fiscal policy has little room to manoeuvre, in good times or bad. When faced with the pandemic, advanced economies were able to mount massive fiscal responses because they had the commensurate fiscal flexibility. Given the difficulties of fiscal policy strategy, developing countries have limited fiscal policy flexibility, whether faced with a pandemic or with an election.

Most countries now have the formal apparatus of inflation targeting, but in many developing countries, this institutional apparatus is not yet well established and the central bank staff has some power to think about election objectives. But they are torn between four methods to support the ruling party. Is it best to stabilise foreign investors by sticking to the inflation target? Is it better to impress voters (who may have a money illusion) by driving down inflation? Is it better to have soft interest rates and a depreciated exchange rate that will support export demand? Or is it best to have high interest rates, and an appreciated exchange rate, which will support machismo? There is no unambiguous answer.

Here is one pathway which could potentially become an election-related impulse upon the macroeconomy. In the world of infrastructure construction, when a project with 1,000 workers starts up, this is expansionary, and when the project completes, these 1,000 workers lose their jobs. Ordinarily, the start and end of project construction are random events. Every now and then, an old project completes (which is contractionary) and a new project starts up (which is expansionary). These events take place at random, and overall have a negligible net effect upon the macroeconomy.

But consider the possibility of a political business cycle in project completion. Suppose many projects complete in the one year prior to elections. In this case, the flurry of project completions would go with the loss of livelihood for a large number of construction workers. This would be contractionary.

If such behaviour is present, it could be a pathway through which a political business cycle could arise. If this is the case, the year of the election and the one following it would be relatively weak on demand owing to this bunching of project completions.

A second pathway to a political business cycle could lie in economic policy uncertainty. There are many industries where support from the Indian state is important to a business plan or an investment project. Changes in the ruling configuration, including changes of Cabinet ministers and senior officials, could generate a shift in policy or a shift in behaviour towards private persons. If a certain proportion of firms feel their industry or firm is exposed to such risk, then there would be a go-slow approach to investment in the period before the elections. This could give a second pathway for a political business cycle. Bagow and Altaf, 2022, examine the Lok Sabha elections of 2009, 2014, and 2019, and support this idea.

Neither of these two causal pathways (non-random placement of investment project completion, and firms/industries that face policy uncertainty) impacts upon the entire economy. But even if these issues matter to only 10 or 20 per cent of the economy, they can add up to an economically significant business cycle impulse. These direct effects would play out into the economy through multiplier effects (e.g. the construction worker who loses her job buys fewer biscuits or clothes).

Mainstream economics literature on political business cycles emphasises the big tools of monetary and fiscal policy. These ideas do not readily port to Indian conditions. The existing literature has some interesting ideas in political business cycles such as loan waivers (Mahambare, et al., 2022). In this article, we wonder whether an old idea (political uncertainty) and a new one (non-random completion of infrastructure projects) could matter. Each of these ideas impacts upon macroeconomic conditions with a different set of dates relative to the election date. Understanding them, and taking a stand on each of these conjectures, will help us form a view about Indian macroeconomics in 2024.

The writer is a researcher at XKDR Forum

The increasing profitability of apiculture

With over half the honey produced in India finding markets abroad, beekeeping (apiculture) has emerged as a lucrative export-oriented allied activity of agriculture. For nearly two decades, growth in honey exports has constantly outpaced the rise in production. India is now the world's sixth-largest supplier of this natural sweetener to the global bazaar. The scope for further boosting exports is substantial, but that would require locating new markets abroad and revamping the honey sector's entire domestic value chain, from production to processing, packaging, branding, transportation, and marketing. At present, the bulk of the exports, nearly 80 per cent, land up in the United States alone, with only small quantities going to other countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Morocco, and Canada. New destinations can easily be found in regions like the European Union and Southeast Asia. Attention needs to be paid also to curbing rampant adulteration of honey with sugar syrup, which mars the reputation of Indian honey in both domestic and export markets. Besides, beekeeping, confined now primarily to states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Punjab, Bihar, and Maharashtra, also needs to be expanded to other areas, especially the northeastern region, which abounds in flowering plants.

FARM VIEW

SURINDER SUD

Interestingly, while India's honey output has increased since 2005-06 by nearly 240 per cent, exports have bounced by over 260 per cent. The trend of exports growing faster than domestic output seems to have intensified in recent years. The government data indicates that while indigenous production has risen between 2018-19 and 2022-23 by 72 per cent — from 77,000 tonnes to 133,000 tonnes — exports have surged by 86 per cent — from 43,000 tonnes to about 80,000 tonnes.

The demand for honey has steadily been soaring the world over, thanks largely to the growing awareness of its health benefits and as a healthier alternative to sugar. Its use in the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries is also growing rapidly. Honey consumption received a major shot in the arm during the pandemic because of its immunity-boosting trait. It also has anti-bacterial properties and contains hydrogen peroxide, which is deemed an effective sanitiser. In Ayurveda, natural honey is widely used for the treatment of numerous ailments, including cough, phlegm, asthma, hiccups, eye infections, diabetes, obesity, worm infestation, vomiting, and diarrhoea, apart from its external application to alleviate skin troubles.

With the induction of modern technologies and the emergence of a new class of migratory bee farmers, who move their bee colonies from place to place in pursuit of flowering plants and cross-pollinated crops requiring vector pollinators for seed setting, the profitability of apiculture is steadily burgeoning. Honeybees, actually, have a symbiotic relationship with agricultural and, more particularly, horticultural crops. While bees source their much-needed feed — pollens and nectar — from flowers, flowering plants, on the other hand, benefit from the bees' role as carriers and disseminators of pollen from one flower to another for fertilisation. In fact, honeybees are deemed to be the key pollinators for about 16 per cent of the world's 250,000 important flowering plant species. More significantly, about one-third of the human diet is believed to be derived from the products of bee pollination. Studies carried out by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) indicate that pollination through honeybees raises the seed production of radish by 22-100 per cent, and that of cabbage and cucumber by up to 400 per cent. It also improves the quality of the produce. Thus, the economic contribution of honeybees as vector-pollinators, in many cases, turns out to be higher than the value of the honey and its high-priced by-products which the bees generate. Most of these by-products, including royal jelly, bee wax, bee pollen, propolis, and bee venom enjoy good demand in the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call in 2017 for ushering in a honey-based "sweet revolution" in the country, on the lines of the Green Revolution or the White Revolution, proved a major turning point in the expansion of the honey sector. The launching of the National Beekeeping and Honey Mission, and a National Bee Board, hastened the technological modernisation of this sector and a perceptible rise in the productivity of bee hives. These bodies have also been instrumental, directly or indirectly, in the emergence of a network of integrated beekeeping development centres, beekeepers' collectives and cooperative societies, and various kinds of farmers' producer organisations and startups engaged in different activities connected with beekeeping, and processing and marketing of its products. The ICAR is also running an all-India coordinated research project on honeybees and pollinators for undertaking situation-specific research and development work in different agro-ecological regions of the country. These efforts need to be intensified to boost honey output and enable beekeeping to play its due role in doubling the farmers' income.

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Climate change is making us paranoid and angry

BOOK REVIEW

NATHANIEL RICH

We know, often with abject precision, what climate change is doing to our coasts, rainforests, wildfires and hurricanes; our immigration patterns, crop yields and insurance premiums. But what is it doing to our brains?

This question, for Clayton Page Aldern, is not rhetorical but bleakly literal. Aldern is a Rhodes Scholar who, in defiance of career counselors everywhere, abandoned a promising career in the field of neuroscience to become a journalist. He traces his conversion to a pair of reports showing a correlation between climate change and increased violent conflict. "It wasn't just that a warmer world would hurt us," writes Aldern, "it was that a warmer world would make us hurt one another."

Most of the violence cited in those reports derives from the effect of higher temperatures on natural resources and weather disasters. A report from the Pentagon describes, for instance, how drought and reduced agricultural yields helped prime the Syrian civil war, and how Hurricane Sandy necessitated the mass mobilisation of the US military. But it is also true that heat makes people irritable. How much more anger — how many more shootings, road-rage accidents, sporting-event brawls, declarations of war — is stimulated by a warming of one-and-a-half degrees Celsius? How about two degrees, or three? Warmer temperatures also tend to make us more cruel, depressed and dumb.

The weight of the *Weight of Nature* falls heavily on the prospect, which draw from a survey of experimental findings so terrifying that they elicit the prose equivalent of nervous laughter; many of them, as Aldern writes in reference to the prospect of global-warming-induced mass dementia, are "almost comically apocalyptic."

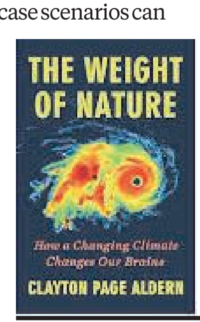
Neurodegenerative diseases will affect some 14 million more people annually by 2050. As landscapes reconfigure and cultural practices vanish, the mind becomes less able to retain information, which Aldern translates as: "Climate change causes amnesia."

In hotter climates, a high school student's chance of graduating on time decreases by a percentage point for every extra degree Fahrenheit on the day of a final exam. On warmer days immigration judges more frequently rule against asylum applicants. When it's hotter than 100 degrees, one third of drivers honk more often, and for longer. Heat exposure during early pregnancy is associated with a higher risk of conditions like schizophrenia and anorexia.

Dolphins appear to be getting Alzheimer's disease. Mountaintop removal makes Appalachians depressed. In Greenland, mercury, a neurotoxin, is leaking from melting permafrost "like some kind of cartoonish sludge zombie." Florida will soon be swarmed by rabid vampire bats.

Some of the revelations in this "Pandora's box of horrors" raise practical questions. If students are 10 per cent more likely to fail an exam taken on a 90-degree day, should the test scores of children in southern climates be rounded up accordingly? If higher temperatures lead to outbursts of violence, should a hot day be considered a mitigating factor when determining the guilt of a defendant? Should parents be warned against raising children in tropical zones?

Like any kind of intoxication, indulgence in worst-case scenarios can induce a hangover. Since many of these findings are predicated on extrapolations, Aldern, the former scientist, is careful to include qualifications. "It's important not to overreach here," he writes, directly after quoting *Crime and Punishment* to demonstrate the influence of heat on murderous rage. "Don't pay attention to the actual values," he writes, after relaying an economist's prediction that, between 2010 and 2099, climate change will cause an additional 22,000 murders, 2.2 million cases of larceny and 180,000 cases of rape. In summary: "I know doomsday alarmism is tiresome. But you should still be concerned."



THE WEIGHT OF NATURE: How a Changing Climate Changes Our Brains
Author: Clayton Page Aldern
Publisher: Dutton
Pages: 320
Price: $30

It is impossible to submit to this barrage and not be concerned. Any person who dares to stare down the behemoth of climate change cannot escape its mind-altering influence. How does one respond, intellectually or emotionally, to an unravelling that seems both unobservably slow and teeth-chatteringly rapid; to the unthinking and indiscriminate slaughter of billions of creatures; to the ineptitude of our politics and the psychopathic venality of our industries; to the assignation of the most vulnerable among us to the gravest suffering; to the wilful destruction of a civilisation? The scale of the physical transformation alone overwhelms the mind.

Aldern asserts that he has not written a book about climate anxiety — or climate communication or neurophilosophy or politics — but one about "direct interventions of environmental change on the brain." Nevertheless, as he puts it elsewhere, "bank shots still count in billiards." Regardless of whether you live in a wildfire zone or a hurricane alley, or swim in warm ponds, his central insights hold, and deserve emphasis. Aldern is the rare writer who dares to ask how climate change has already changed us.

"It is the job of your brain to model the world as it is," writes Aldern. "And the world is mutating." We are mutating with it. We are becoming more suspicious, paranoid, anxious, depressive, distracted, nihilistic, angry. Not all of us, and not all the time. Some respond, as Aldern instructs his readers to do, with greater empathy, resilience, collective action and pipeline sabotage.

But that is just another kind of mutation: an antibody response. This great transformation is already deforming our inner lives in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. Climate change isn't only here, writes Aldern. It is inside us. And it is spreading.

The reviewer is the author, most recently, of Second Nature: Scenes From a World Remade

The Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

Spectre of war rises in West Asia

World can't afford to be roiled by more conflicts. Israel and Iran must roll back their aggression

Israel's war on Gaza is on the brink of expanding beyond the confines of the Palestinian homeland. In retaliation to Tel Aviv's killing of two Iranian generals in Damascus on April 1, Tehran launched drones and missiles into Israel early Sunday. The United States (US), Israel's foremost ally, has claimed "nearly all" the drones were taken down. The world needs to pull back quickly from an escalation of the conflict. Tehran has said it has achieved its objective and has no intention to carry out more attacks if Israel does not retaliate to Sunday's missile-drone firings, which it explained as a response to Tel Aviv's Damascus killings. All will depend on how Tel Aviv acts now; its allies, including the US, have told Israel to hold its hand.

The extended war in Gaza — 35,000 plus casualties in over six months with thousands of homes flattened — was bad enough. It has forced additional costs on global trade with sea routes in West Asia coming under fire. Moscow's war on Kyiv has already imposed a significant cost on the global economy; an expanded war in West Asia could tip the economy over a precipice since it could force oil prices to skyrocket. There is an urgent need for all parties to halt hostilities.

The Hamas terror attack was unacceptable, but Tel Aviv has not served its interests by unleashing its military might on the hapless civilians of Gaza. Its targeting of Iranian officials in neighbouring countries, on the ground that Tehran is the sponsor of Hamas, is a blatant violation of national borders and international law. The actions of both countries have roiled West Asia, which Delhi considers to be its extended neighbourhood. The region is crucial to the country's energy security and houses millions of Indian workers.

Ideally, the United Nations (UN) ought to take the lead. But, even as the UN has called for an emergency meeting, the current state of conflicts reveals its toothless character. Israel ignores international censure, and is backed by the US, which uses its veto to secure its ally's interests. Russia and China do the same to safeguard their interests. What the world is witnessing in West Asia and Ukraine is the failure of the old "rules-based" order in protecting the interests of all the people. Palestinians are a people without a nation, though the US had underwritten the promise of nationhood for Palestine in the Oslo Accords (1993). The immediate need is for all hostilities to cease.

Inflation cooling, but there are risks ahead

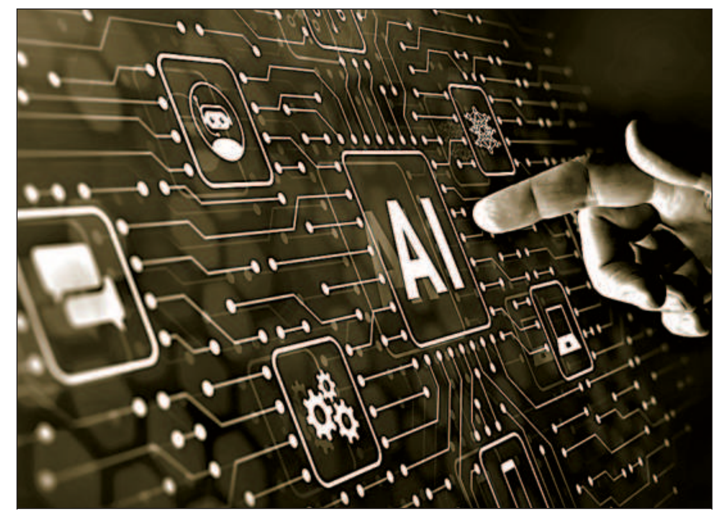
At 4.9% in March compared to 5.1% in February, the retail inflation elephant, to use RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's analysis, continues to walk towards the forest. The core inflation print — the non-food non-fuel part of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket — is among the lowest it has ever been. That these numbers are accompanied by a strong growth momentum suggests that overheating is the least of the Indian economy's concerns, and there could very well be a situation where an upward revision of the potential growth rate is merited.

This is as good as it gets for an economy. And yet, there are reasons for concern. Food inflation, as this newspaper argued improvising on Das's analogy, is the rogue elephant in the herd of (inflation) elephants. Prices of cereals, pulses and vegetables continue to rise at worrying rates. Making matters worse, monetary policy doesn't even have a weapon in its arsenal to bring down food prices. It is this asymmetry between policy objectives and instruments that has forced RBI to retain its hawkish tone and delay interest rate cuts.

The situation might get worse from here. The escalation in conflict between Iran and Israel could seriously disrupt commodity markets, especially for crude oil. Brent crude prices have already climbed by more than $5 per barrel over the last month. Unlike food markets, the government will have much less leeway on price control if oil markets get a shock. This is what makes inflation management tricky. It's a battle policymakers are more likely to lose because of climate or geopolitical shocks than textbook demand-supply imbalances.

Riding global winds to build India's future

Till recently, the country was playing catch-up on technology. With the impetus from the Centre's schemes, it is set to lead in emerging technology areas



We have our eyes set on the future. The AI Mission, the Quantum Mission, and the Semiconductor Mission are all geared towards this SHUTTERSTOCK

Amitabh Kant

The two big opportunities we have today are the permeation of digital technologies and the green transition. Digital technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), Big Data, quantum computing, among others, are sector-agnostic and will give rise to new business models and use-cases. Digital technologies hold the promise of increasing productivity and efficiency. A just energy transition can help create new jobs, preserve our ecosystems, and save us from the worst climate-crisis effects.

And India stands poised to capitalise on these trends. India's approach to technology has been to leverage tech to narrow inequalities, rather than widen them. We have seen this in the case of our digital public infrastructure, which helped us make decades' worth of progress in financial inclusion in just a few years. Or how it helped us roll out more than two billion doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. The government is also actively looking at futuristic technologies that can be leveraged in government programmes and schemes.

We have our eyes set on the future. For instance, we have the India AI Mission, with ₹10,372 crore allocated, or the National Quantum Mission, with ₹6,000 crore allocated. Semiconductors today are essential to the economic security of a country. The India Semiconductor Mission with outlays of ₹76,000 crore, is a huge step in this direction. These missions will enable India to technologically leapfrog and play an integral role in accelerating the pace of our economic growth to become a $35-trillion economy in the Amrit Kaal, as envisaged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In the past, we have seen how geopolitical events have led to sustained spikes in energy prices, particularly oil and gas. India being an oil-dependent country, has seen spikes in inflation, current account deficits, and fiscal deficits (when prices were controlled) when oil prices rise. Furthermore, India's crude oil imports stood at ~$160 billion in FY23, accounting for 22% of our import bill. Periods of rising oil prices not only lead to inflation but also lead to volatility in the value of the rupee.

We have made significant strides in increasing the mix of renewables in our installed capacity in power, and by 2030, this mix will rise even further. However, different strategies were required to address emissions from the industrial and transport sectors. Furthermore, economic security was also high on the agenda. With geopolitical events dictating the price of energy, our strategy had to ensure the resilience of our economy to such shocks.

It is in this context that India launched the Green Hydrogen Mission with an outlay of ₹19,744 crore. Green hydrogen (GH2) has the potential to address emissions from both the industrial and transport sectors, while also enhancing India's economic security, putting us on the path of energy independence.

Our strategy to decarbonise the transport sector is realistic and pragmatic – we recognise the role various technologies will have to play. Apart from GH2, we are also positioning India as a hub for electric vehicles (EVs). Whether it is the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for advanced chemistry cell (ACC) batteries with an outlay of ₹18,000 crore, or PLI for Advanced Automotive Technology, with an outlay of ₹25,938 crore, the entire EV ecosystem is being addressed. Recently, the manufacturing of electric four-wheelers has also been boosted, with global manufacturers incentivised to set up local manufacturing. The experience in aggregating demand to drive down prices (as in the case of LEDs) was also adapted for public transport. Under the Gross Cost Contract model, discovered prices of electric buses were found to be lower than those of diesel buses. Based on the success of the early models, the PM eBus Sewa scheme has been rolled out with the allocation of ₹57,613 crore; 10,000 electric buses are targeted to be rolled out in 169 cities, with adequate payment security mechanisms. Taken together, these moves will make India a global champion in the adoption of EVs and EV manufacturing, serving not just domestic, but also global markets.

Strong foundations have been set for India to technologically leapfrog. To make this a reality, we are devising strategies to boost our research and development (R&D) expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Currently, our expenditure is behind countries that are ahead on the technological curve. And in these countries, most of the R&D expenditure comes from the private sector, with the government playing an enabling role. So, it is the private sector that must take the lead. Corporates and startups must partner with academic and research institutes to drive the R&D agenda. Recognising the need for long-term funding, ₹1 lakh crore for R&D was announced in the interim budget. India's startups, corporates, and research institutes must come together to leverage these funds. While this addresses the funding gap, we must continue to work to bridge the manpower gap. First, we must improve educational outcomes at the school level in mission mode. Ensuring curricula that are up to date, and designed in consultation with industry is another area. Making research a more attractive career option through better pay in progression in government jobs is one avenue. Raising PhD stipends in public universities is another. Attracting global scientists to India or tapping into our diaspora are further avenues to pursue.

On technology, India has, till recently, played catch-up. However, we are now poised to capitalise on the global shifts and emerge as a technological leader. Strong foundations have been set. Backed by strong political will, there is every reason to believe that we will succeed.

The author is India's G20 Sherpa, and former CEO, NITI Aayog. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar

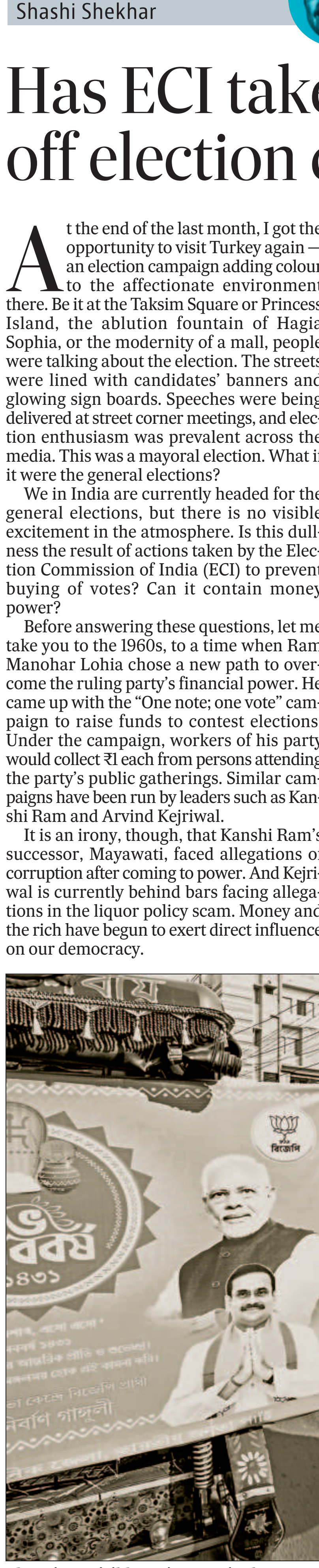
Has ECI taken the colour off election campaigns?

At the end of the last month, I got the opportunity to visit Turkey again — an election campaign adding colour to the affectionate environment there. Be it at the Taksim Square or Princess Island, the ablution fountain of Hagia Sophia, or the modernity of a mall, people were talking about the election. The streets were lined with candidates' banners and glowing sign boards. Speeches were being delivered at street corner meetings, and election enthusiasm was prevalent across the media. This was a mayoral election. What if it were the general elections?

We in India are currently headed for the general elections, but there is no visible excitement in the atmosphere. Is this dullness the result of actions taken by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to prevent buying of votes? Can it contain money power?

Before answering these questions, let me take you to the 1960s, to a time when Ram Manohar Lohia chose a new path to overcome the ruling party's financial power. He came up with the "One note; one vote" campaign to raise funds to contest elections. Under the campaign, workers of his party would collect ₹1 each from persons attending the party's public gatherings. Similar campaigns have been run by leaders such as Kanshi Ram and Arvind Kejriwal.

It is an irony, though, that Kanshi Ram's successor, Mayawati, faced allegations of corruption after coming to power. And Kejriwal is currently behind bars facing allegations in the liquor policy scam. Money and the rich have begun to exert direct influence on our democracy.



There is no visible excitement in the atmosphere over the upcoming polls AP

This is why money and muscle power gained influence in politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Political bigwigs across parties began cultivating the company of criminals. These criminals were euphemistically named *bahubali*.

A number of such *bahubalis* began to climb the power ladder from *gram panchayats* to the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Data analysed by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) showed that about 29% of members of the country's 17th Lok Sabha were charged with very serious offences, while 18% of Rajya Sabha members faced such charges. Another analysis by ADR in June 2023 showed that in the legislatures of 28 states and two Union Territories, almost 28% of the legislators had a criminal past.

Politicians have also grown wealthier. The ADR analysis showed that 12% of Rajya Sabha members currently have assets worth more than ₹100 crore, whereas about 48% Lok Sabha members elected five years ago had assets worth more than ₹5 crore. Notably, our country's per capita daily income remains stuck at ₹464.

The connotation is clear: The common Indian is now limited to being a voter. For many of them, the temptation of money, combined with caste, religion, region, and sect, serves as a lifeline. It is hardly surprising that the amount of money and liquor seized by the Election Commission has increased dramatically over the last decade. ECI seized ₹190 crore in the 2009 general elections; in 2019, it seized more than ₹841 crore, a record high. Similarly, in 2019, 18.6 million litres of liquor were seized, compared with 16 million litres in 2014.

In our country, where one election or the other is held every few months, politicians and parties are pushed to spend money in a variety of ways. A top leader told me that during elections, a candidate needs at least two vehicles and a corresponding number of personnel to campaign in one block. In a Lok Sabha election, at least 50 cars must be deployed directly and indirectly. Besides, each block has an office where workers rest and food has to be arranged for them. On the night before the polls, lakhs of rupees are spent providing "meals and drinks" to people from village to village. Lakhs of rupees are spent at one's own or any other major leader's election meeting.

Another worthy stated that formerly, the task was done solely through booklets, banners, and posters. Posters and banners have been banned now, but people must be deployed to remain active on social media for the entire five-year period, not only to glorify their leader but also to keep attacking rivals. In light of this, an election expenditure cap is ineffective. Politics is an expensive business.

This raises a couple of questions: Why would big traders or business houses that make election donations not expect any profit in return? What causes the world's largest democracy to seem frightened when confronted with this issue?

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

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Despite attacks on our support for brown and Black small businesses, we're investing in them as key ways to build generational wealth in communities.

HT

e-Bus goals call for an urban-transport reset

The Prime Minister e-Bus Sewa Scheme which aims to put 10,000 electric buses on city routes across the country will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a key goal set by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi at the 2021 Glasgow climate summit. The Centre wants to replace 800,000 diesel buses — a third of the number running the country — in the next eight-10 years. There were 6,745 registered electric buses across the country on January 11, 2024. Any change in the mode of urban transport in India is a huge task and needs a clear plan. The following approaches need to be kept in mind.

First, greater efficiency in city bus services is possible if it is handed over to private operators. This will curtail government spending on bus services and cut the losses suffered by the state-run transport corporations.

OP Agarwal

Pawan Mulukutla

Second, a structured bus service must be created in smaller cities that lack one today.

Third, the number of electric vehicles in the country must be increased, and bus services in urban and semi-urban areas must shift to electric buses entirely.

Fourth, mobility in cities must be made more competitive, and be better placed to take the national economy to $30-trillion by 2047. Providing an efficient city bus service is an important part of the strategy to make cities catalysts of economic growth.

Fifth, the switch to electricity-run city transport services would help meet the climate goals promised by the PM at the Glasgow climate summit.

Sixth, costs of urban transport systems can be reduced by improving the economies of scale by procuring electric buses from manufacturers in large numbers.

Each of these approaches poses significant challenges. First, state transport authorities must shift from being operators of buses to being regulators. It is not easy because the change requires a different set of skills. It would make a large segment of the staff of the road transport corporation redundant; a policy re-skill them and redeploy them would be needed. In some cases, a generous voluntary retirement package would be necessary. This is a politically sensitive issue.

Second, cities without local-government-run bus services and, thereby, no transport authority, will need local transport authorities to play the role of the regulator.

Third, private bus operators running unstructured bus services in smaller cities and between cities need to create structured service. This needs new skills. Programmes to build this capacity must be designed.

Fourth, the operation of electric buses is quite different from running diesel-run buses because the charging time of the former is long, and mid-day recharging has to be planned meticulously. The refill time of diesel buses was short.

Fifth, if the electric bus operations are to be run efficiently, it will be necessary to create an information-technology (IT)-based monitoring system. Two levels of information flow will be needed— one at the operational level, and the second at the management level. Operational level information must be transmitted to the management level to keep the operations smooth. The IT-based monitoring system with standard protocols for data collection and management should be in place across the country.

Sixth, the electricity load must be managed well. The recharging process should not result in outages due to grid overload because that would lead to a breakdown of the system. The grid should be equipped to withstand the overload.

Clearly, aggressive capacity building programmes will be needed to equip private-sector operators as well as public-sector regulators. While the private operators will need to better understand complex skills like bus and crew scheduling, public-sector agencies (regulators) will need to better understand the complexities of demand estimation, route and network design, procurement, and monitoring. The staff of the state transport corporations who had been offered voluntary retirement packages should be enabled in forming cooperatives and bidding for operating bus routes. The government will do well to start systematically working on each of these.

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EDITOR: KUNAL PRADHAN

OUR VIEW

REUTERS

Is our economy a force to reckon with globally?

Large emerging market economies like India's have caught up with the advanced world in generating economic spillovers, says IMF. The G20 must aim to work more closely together

The G7 may need to move over for a new group on the block: Emerging market economies (EMEs). As the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) April *World Economic Outlook* puts it, "The global economy is increasingly influenced by the Group of Twenty's large emerging markets. Over the past two decades, these economies have become much more integrated with global markets and are generating larger economic 'spillovers' to the rest of the world." Even in a world where we have all come to accept that change is the only constant and got accustomed to the IMF recanting its position on 'truths' like capital account convertibility as a must and the need for fiscal austerity, regardless of the context in which such policies are sought to be imposed, the Fund's statement is a revelation. It throws new light on what has long been accepted as a given in the global context. Namely, that spillovers are only one-way: from advanced to emerging markets; not the other way round. So, while the 2008 global financial crisis that had its origin in the US impacted countries the world over, crises like the East Asian crisis of 1997 or Latin American crisis of the 1980s impacted mainly other EMEs—typically, in the vicinity of the country at the centre of the problem. The LatAm crisis was largely confined to Latin America, while the East Asian crisis affected the 'Asian Tigers,' with advanced economies either unaffected or marginally affected.

We are talking here not only of crises, which have spillovers by their very nature, but also of domestic macro policies pursued by large economies. The legacy of the Bretton Woods conference established the US dollar as the international reserve currency. The resultant 'exorbitant privilege' of the US dollar means that the world's largest economy can easily finance huge deficits because its government bonds are readily bought by other countries. Worse, any change in US policy has spillover effects on the rest of the world, as evidenced by the 'taper tantrum' of 2013, when a spike in US Treasury yields after the Federal Reserve said it would slow its pace of bond buying had a harsh ripple-to-near-tsunami effect on emerging-economy currencies. The Indian rupee, for example, depreciated from ₹55.80 to the dollar on 24 May to ₹65.24 by 6 September 2013, even as the Reserve Bank of India sold a net $14 billion from June to September on trying to keep its decline orderly. "Growth spillovers from domestic shocks in G20 emerging markets have increased over the past two decades," says the *WEO*, "and are now comparable to those from advanced economies." As we would expect, the largest EME spillovers are from China. These explain just as much of the variation in emerging-market output as those from the US. It is well known that China's rise has spelt a shift in heft within the G20. But here's the surprise: Other G20 emerging markets—such as India, Brazil, Russia and Mexico—also play an important role in the economic performance of their neighbours.

We could think of this new normal as sweet revenge for all the decades when EMEs were at the receiving end. But that would be self-defeating. In a globalized world, we sink or swim together. Spillovers are inevitable. And while it might be naïve to think that any country will frame policy keeping global rather than domestic fundamentals in mind, we must aim to work together to minimize the downside of spillovers.

THEIR VIEW

India's East Asia outreach shows its centrality to regional stability

New Delhi is trying to deepen ties to confront common threats but in-group differences pose hurdles

HARSH V. PANT
is professor of international relations, King's College London, and vice president for studies at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar's three-nation tour to Southeast Asia last month amid an election cycle in India underscores the critical role this region plays in New Delhi's aspiration to emerge as a critical anchor in the Indo-Pacific. India's relationship with Southeast Asia is marked by historical, cultural and economic ties that have evolved over centuries, shaping the diplomatic landscape of the region. Geopolitically, India's 'Look East' policy, initiated in the early 1990s and later reconfigured as the 'Act East' policy, demonstrates its commitment to deepening engagement with the region.

Yet, as a recent survey published by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute reveals, it is a long road ahead for India in the region, with only 0.4% of those surveyed naming India as the country with the most political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia. This despite the fact that historically, New Delhi's cultural influence extended to Southeast Asia through trade routes, religious exchanges and the spread of Indian civilization.

India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia has also grown significantly. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is India's fourth-largest trading partner. Initiatives like the India-Asean Free Trade Agreement have facilitated trade liberalization and economic cooperation. Additionally, India's participation in regional forums like the East Asia Summit and Asean Regional Forum help its outreach.

In this age of the Indo-Pacific, the strategic convergence between India and Southeast Asia has evolved dramatically shaped by common concerns regarding maritime security, terrorism and the changing balance of power. India's strategic partnerships with countries like Vietnam and the Philippines have deepened security cooperation, particularly in areas such as counter-terrorism, defence technology and maritime surveillance. Moreover, India's Act East policy emphasizes connectivity projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, to promote economic development.

The emergence of a strategic dimension in India's outreach to the East is a relatively recent phenomenon. Launched in 2014, the Act East policy has sought to give a more proactive focus to Indian engagements in East and Southeast Asia by deepening economic integration, expanding strategic partnerships and fostering cultural and people-to-people ties. By doing so, India seeks to play a more prominent role in shaping the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the region while advancing its own national interests and goals.

India's Indo-Pacific policy has at its heart the notion of Asean centrality, which reflects its recognition of the region's pivotal role in shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture and its commitment to deepening ties with Southeast Asia. Yet, the divisions within Asean are becoming starker and the challenges facing a once-dynamic regional grouping growing. Asean's inability to forge a coherent response to the Chinese belligerence in South China Sea can no longer be ignored.

During his visit to Manila last month, Jaishankar had stated that prosperity in the region is "best served by staunch adherence to a rules-based order," highlighting the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as a foundational aspect of this approach. He said that "all parties must adhere to [UNCLOS] in its entirety, both in letter and in spirit" and reiterated "India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty." Tensions have been brewing between China and the Philippines as Chinese forces have been trying to dislodge the Philippines from the Second Thomas Shoal. Against this backdrop, Manila's attempt to incorporate India in its strategic calculus for issues of traditional security and defence is striking in contrast to how relations were in the past—often limited to areas of low politics.

India's engagement with the South China Sea (SCS) issue is primarily driven by its strategic interests in maritime security, freedom of navigation and regional stability. While India is not a claimant state in the SCS dispute, it has significant stakes in the region due to its growing economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi has consistently advocated the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea in accordance with international law, particularly UNCLOS, underlining the importance of upholding the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS, given its significance as a crucial maritime trade route connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific. India's focus has remained on framing the debate in normative terms by focusing on enhancing maritime cooperation, promoting connectivity and building partnerships with like-minded nations to ensure regional stability and security in the Indo-Pacific.

India remains constrained by the inability of regional stakeholders to come to a cohesive understanding on the issue. Yet, it cannot remain immune to all the turbulence that is growing in the region. New Delhi's Southeast Asia outreach is also contingent on the choices of regional players.

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CONTINUED CRITICISM

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A TALE OF TWO RISING GIANTS

JUST A THOUGHT

> You can't hate old people, because if you are not an old person, you will become an old person, or die while trying to do so.
>
> LEMONY SNICKET

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

The elderly men who run the world should give us hope

MANU JOSEPH

is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

The world seems tired of elderly men, but the feeling is not mutual. Many countries are run by old men, large corporations too, and also most housing societies, it would seem on most days. Some people appear to hold contempt for ageing men for not receding into irrelevance quietly. This is odd, because being old is the future of all, and what some of them have demonstrated is that ageing need not be the same as dying.

What must be going on in the head of US President Joe Biden as he prepares to run for office again at the age of 81? 'Without me, the wrong kind of people will run America. I am the answer'? No other American presidential candidate has been this old. When a special counsel appointed by Biden's own administration said that he is "a well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory..." he was enraged.

Donald Trump has been mocking Biden's age in more cruel ways. But Trump himself is 77.

How is it that people often sneer at the elderly who do not quit, especially men, yet they manage to control so much of the world?

The world appears jealous of the young, it has too many opinions about the young. People reward the old for denying the success of their peers. But their endurance does not interest me so much as their desire for power and respect. Desire is life.

All around me, I see elderly folks who have meekly receded into retirement and they struggle to fill their days. Some appear to feign concern for a wounded delivery agent, just for the chance to talk; they plot trips to hospitals purely for entertainment; former captains of industry are seen today picking fights with house helps and drivers.

But could this be what the world wants from the old? What else do people expect from their ageing parents? Don't do anything interesting that might make you fall? Be with other elderly people, don't get involved in too many things, assume that the lives of other people are more important and more precious? Be alive and dead at once? It's convenient for us to imagine that all the old want to do is withdraw into a forest, and that they don't do it only because there are not many forests around anymore. But is this what you would like to be when you are old?

The elderly are the only real outcaste left. I can say that even for a country like India. A lot of caste strife is misunderstood as oppression. Indians do practise caste, but on most days, it is more classification than discrimination. Yet, there is a group of people who often get looked down upon for no reason other than their age.

> **The world seems jealous of the young but we should learn the secrets of how the old thrive**

One of the great old men of our times is Clint Eastwood. At 93, he is in the middle of directing his next film. On his persistence with life, he has said, "I try to get up and be productive, and don't let the old man in."

Most successful old men were healthy young men who were either genetically lucky, or who trained their bodies to get lucky.

As a Malayalee, I know how common and easy it can be for the elderly to be healthy. Health and fitness at two different things. Fitness is tough and of no importance to most people. But it is truly within the reach of most people to age with enough health to keep working, and to long for something, and come in the way of the undeserving young who think they have the first right to the new world just because they were born later.

Longing is healthy in the old. But there is a longing that is often considered taboo for old men—sex. It is possible that old men do not lose interest in it, and I really hope they don't, but what may interest them sexually attracts social reproach. Because it is the instinct of the world to protect young women from old men. "If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species?" J.M. Coetzee writes in *Disgrace*, "Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species."

A way of the world is that it moves mountains to help young women escape from under the weight of old men, but easily surrenders everything else to patriarchs.

It may appear that I am a fan of elderly men, but I am not.

Even as a kid, I never fully believed that the old had some great wisdom in them. In fact, I thought most of them were just kids in ageing bodies. Even so, the natural right of the young to replace the old is plain absurd because the smartness of the young is more overrated than the wisdom of the old.

Most people in their twenties know very little. And a 30-year-old is usually only a 20-year-old who has learnt how to pretend he knows something. People in their forties are infected with a sense of doom and failure, as if they already are in the infancy of old age. In their fifties, a lot of people have already given up. So why sneer at some ambitious old men who thrive? We must instead learn from them how they endure.

Elderly men protect themselves by ignoring the most lethal wisdom that has influenced the world—that adaptation is survival. They survive by not changing, by not 'adjusting' to the demands their external environment. That is why Max Planck said, "...truth doesn't triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light but rather because its opponents eventually die..."

GUEST VIEW

Nonsense and bad regulations still pervade the banking system

The Basel 3 Endgame rules are an example of regulatory obfuscation that enables banks to take big risks at public expense

ANAT R. ADMATI
is professor of finance and economics at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

REUTERS

In December, the CEOs of the eight largest banks in the US participated in a three-hour posturing session before the Senate Banking Committee. It was a disheartening display that showcased the toxic blend of politics and asinine rhetoric that often characterizes discussions about banking.

Much of the hearing focused on proposed bank regulations known as the 'Basel 3 Endgame.' Claiming to "translate" the potential implications of this complex topic "for the average American," Republican Senator Tim Scott stated that the proposed rules would lead to "fewer dollars to lend to Americans." Bankers and several senators, including Scott, argued that by keeping a portion of the banks' money "on the sidelines," these regulations would prevent poor people from achieving the American Dream.

But these threats often originate from falsehoods, such as Scott's suggestion that capital is something banks cannot use. In reality, as Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown noted, "Absolutely nothing in these rules would stop banks from making loans." Instead, they would simply require banks to rely more on their own equity and less on borrowing to finance loans and investments. As the late US Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker famously observed, there is a lot of "bullshit" in the debate about capital requirements.

Prudent banks insist on borrowers having "skin in the game" when they lend, yet vehemently oppose regulations aimed at reducing their dangerous reliance on borrowing. Banks' aversion to equity funding and addiction to borrowing enables them to shift costs and risks to others, ultimately benefiting at public expense. They often get away with it by keeping politicians and the public confused.

Shortly after the 2007-09 financial crisis, I realized that crucial policy decisions were being influenced by nonsensical analysis, impenetrable jargon, fallacious and misleading arguments, and inappropriate uses of mathematical models. As a result, opportunities to improve the banking system were constantly overlooked. By sowing confusion and leveraging their influence over politicians, regulators, lawyers and economists, bankers have corrupted the mechanisms by which rules are formulated and enforced.

The 133,000-word 'Basel 3 Endgame' adjusts a complex system of 'risk weights' by trying to calibrate the rules. Banks have weaponized the complexity of the proposed rules, threatening to reject certain loans. In fact, with the debt subsidies we all provide them, they will take risks, chase outsize returns and endanger us.

Over the past 14 years, I have consistently challenged the fallacies, irrelevant facts and myths propagated by numerous bankers, policymakers, and economists. In November 2010, I helped organize a letter by 20 banking and finance scholars warning that the proposed Basel 3 reforms were grossly inadequate. I also debunked JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon's misleading claims about the Basel 3 rules in an open letter to the JPMorgan Chase board of directors and criticized Dimon for implying that what benefits large banks automatically benefits America.

Recognizing the importance of countering bankers' obfuscation, the German economist Martin Hellwig and I published the book *The Bankers' New Clothes: What's Wrong with Banking and What to Do about It* in 2013. Our goal was to expose how and why banks are so needlessly dangerous and to propose ways to change the system that merely required political will. But the symbiotic relationship between banks, governments and parts of the media and academia ultimately prevailed. As Democratic Senator Richard Durbin said in 2009, banks "own" Capitol Hill.

More than a decade later, JPMorgan Chase has grown much larger, its deposits having more than doubled from $1.1 trillion in December 2011 to nearly $2.5 trillion in December 2023, far outstripping its reported loans, which rose from $700 billion in 2011 to $1.3 trillion in 2023. The bank's reported assets of about $3.4 trillion, stacked as dollar bills, would extend almost as far as the moon.

While the runs on Silicon Valley Bank and First Republic Bank in the spring of 2023 reflected legitimate concerns regarding their asset values and solvency, flawed accounting rules and Fed support continue to obscure the fragility of other banks. The persistence of bailouts is costly for society and encourages a culture of recklessness, both in the US and abroad.

The March 2023 collapse of Credit Suisse is a prime example of the disruption caused by the failure of financial institutions that operate across multiple jurisdictions. It is doubtful that maintaining such large institutions is justifiable, given the costs and risks they pose to our societies. Moreover, the preferential treatment of banks has fostered widespread disregard for rules, encouraging criminal behaviour that often goes unpunished.

Political forces and misinformation continue to distort policy decisions. In a new and expanded edition of our book, Hellwig and I explore the severe governance issues that plague the banking sector and undermine our democracies. One notable example is the $13 billion settlement JPMorgan Chase agreed to in late 2013 to avoid a trial that would have revealed damning details of fraud committed by the bank's employees under Dimon's leadership.

While Dimon correctly asserts that banking rules are excessively complex, he also vehemently opposes simpler regulations. But by designing and implementing such rules effectively, policymakers could reduce the need for costlier regulations and yield significant social benefits at virtually no cost.

If banks are unattractive to equity investors, it may be due to their perceived opacity, or because banking has become too dependent on debt subsidies, which would be lost if financial institutions used equity funding. Blanket subsidies to profit-maximizing banks, however, make little sense. Instead, public funds should be directed toward deserving causes and those most in need of support.

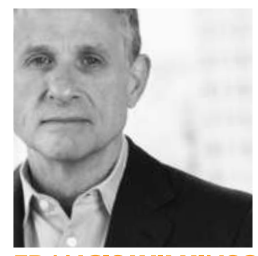
The inability of our democracies to resist the influence of powerful corporations and their leaders is alarming, given that this ongoing failure fuels legitimate discontent with our economic, political, and legal systems. Deception (possibly self-deception) is prevalent not only in banking but across numerous other industries as well.

Based on misleading and disingenuous threats, banks have lobbied furiously and mobilized citizens and politicians to object to the proposed rules. On 16 January 2024, the deadline for public comments, I submitted my reaction to the Basel 3 Endgame proposal, as well as another related and misguided one. I attached a document debunking 44 flawed claims, which my co-author and I continue to revise as we identify more such claims. In the politics of banking, I fear that wilful blindness to truth is likely to prevent better rules.

MINT CURATOR

Biden seems certain to pay for Gaza but can yet cut his losses

Without damage control, his war stance may hit his poll prospects



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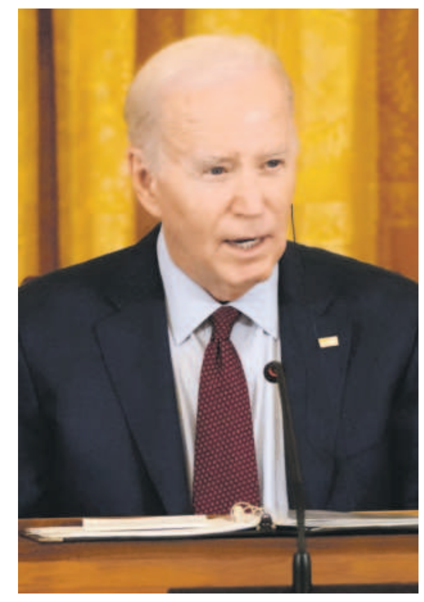

Biden should focus on the human rights that he has often batted for

AP

"I think what he's doing is a mistake," US President Joe Biden said [last week] of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mismanagement of the war in Gaza. "I don't agree with his approach," he said [before Iran's weekend strikes on Israel]. Mistakes *were* made. One of them was Biden's previously unqualified support of Netanyahu, whose pursuit of Hamas in Gaza now looks an awful lot like ethnic cleansing. Global outrage over Hamas's barbaric 7 October attack in Israel has been supplanted by global outrage at indiscriminate Israeli bombing, civilian deaths and widespread destruction in Gaza.

The destruction has spread to Biden's political chances. Cease-fire proponents are waging protest votes against Biden in primary states. Protestors are a recurring feature of Biden public events. Many young Americans in particular are appalled that the US has been providing munitions for the bombardment of Gaza. Biden seems likely to pay a political price in November. "I think a lot of this damage is, frankly, irreparable," said Matt Duss, executive vice president of the Center for International Policy and a former foreign policy adviser to Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

Sanders has called Gaza "one of the worst humanitarian disasters that we have seen in a very, very long time" and argues that "Israel should not be getting another nickel in military aid until these policies are fundamentally changed." Though Sanders holds the Democratic Party's left flank, his views are not fringe. In an online survey of US adults conducted by YouGov 27 February to 1 March, 52% agreed that the US should halt arms shipments to Israel until it ends its military offensive in Gaza. Support for that position among 2020 Biden supporters is more lopsided, at 62% to 14%.

Gauging the intensity of those views is difficult, but some erstwhile Biden supporters are clearly livid. Plans for a White House *iftar* dinner during Ramadan ran into opposition from Muslim leaders furious, as one said , at Biden for "enabling the Israeli military to starve and slaughter the Palestinian people in Gaza."

For Muslims and others angry at Biden's support of Israel, the political cost-benefit analysis is stark. If they sit out the election and Biden loses in November, [a man known for trying to deny US visas to people from Muslim countries] will move back into the White House. That would be a bitter result. Yet if politics were the sum of hyper-rational cost-benefit analyses, the world would be a vastly different place.

Complicating matters is that Netanyahu and Biden have diametrically opposed interests. While Biden wants peace, rebuilding and a plan for a shared Palestinian-Israeli future, Netanyahu appears to want none of that. He benefits from crisis, which keeps his shaky coalition together and Netanyahu out of the dock on corruption charges. Netanyahu also knows that Trump would not pester him about dead Palestinian children. And it's Netanyahu, not Biden, who is steering the Gaza war.

Biden has received political cover for a retreat from Israel from Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer of New York, which is home to about one-fifth of America's Jewish population, and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, another stalwart supporter of Israel. But a retreat from Biden's Netanyahu embrace might have its own political costs.

So far, all the pressure on Biden has come from those seeking an end to the violence. If Biden attempts to stop the flow of weapons to Israel, however, he will face attacks from Republicans. On Wednesday, House Speaker Mike Johnson called Biden "an anti-Israel president." If Hamas, Hezbollah, or another ally of Iran were to launch a deadly attack during a pause in weapons shipments, GOP hysteria would reach the stratosphere and Biden would have a new and different Gaza problem.

Much is made of the substantial risk that Biden runs with Muslim voters in Michigan. That risk is real. But more than 100,000 Jews also live in Michigan. Pennsylvania, another swing state, which Biden carried in 2020 by 80,555 votes, is home to about 300,000 Jewish adults, according to a Brandeis University study. Support among Biden backers for halting arms shipments to Israel may be lopsided, but it's not universal: Recall that 14% of Biden supporters in the YouGov poll supported continuing weapons shipments.

How Gaza [and Iran-Israel hostilities] will sway votes is unknown. Biden "does have an issue on his right and to his left," Duss said. But while the most politically beneficial path may be obscure, the commitment to human rights and international law that Biden has expressed in other contexts might provide a surer map. It's too late for Biden to escape political damage from Gaza. But not too late to admit that he, too, made a mistake.

GUEST VIEW

Intellectual property finance: An opportunity knocks

SHUCHI AGRAWAL

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Intellectual Property (IP) financing is an outstanding financial innovation as it allows IP holders to monetize intangible IP assets to secure immediate access to capital. There are several methods of securing such finance: through licensing, collateralization, securitization and sale. IP financing is especially beneficial for upcoming research and development (R&D)-intensive business ventures, which have historically been denied funding by traditional banks as they lack hard assets to serve as collateral. Therefore, IP financing enhances the ease of accessing credit markets for creators and allows them to recover R&D costs quickly, which in turn fuels innovation and economic growth. The growth in popularity of IP financing is following the trend of an increase in intangible asset-dominated companies. For instance, physical assets only account for about 4% and 6% of Amazon and Apple's net worth, respectively. India is the third-largest startup hub globally and increased recognition of IP financing will make it easier for Indian startups to obtain capital and help spur the country's progress. At present, India holds the fifth position in trademark registrations and is sixth in patent registrations globally. The utilization of these assets to obtain financing could help the economy attract considerable capital. Indeed, the 161st Report of the Rajya Sabha Parliamentary Committee on Intellectual Property has opined that Indian laws need to enable greater acceptance of IP as collateral. Earlier, the National IPR Policy had also aimed at facilitating the securitization of IP and its use as collateral through enabling legislation.

Nevertheless, the very nature of intangible assets presents unique challenges in using it to secure funds. First, many financial institutions lack the in-house competence and models needed to grasp the value of IP assets. It is difficult to measure the realizable value of IP assets in the event of a default. Furthermore, the lack of a well-established secondary market for IP makes it difficult to conduct price discovery.

Second, the lack of a secondary market also impedes the disposal of such assets when required. The success of IP financing hinges on the existence of processes and channels to liquidate assets. However, the lack of mechanisms to dispose of an asset in case of default may lead to greater volatility in the value of the asset. For instance, Kingfisher Airlines had used its trademarks as collateral to gain loans from a consortium of banks. However, once its performance began to deteriorate, the value of the trademarks also plummeted, as found by two failed auctions for them, and its lenders suffered heavy losses.

Third, the development of IP financing demands legal certainty and effective management of IP assets. Companies need to be better equipped at harnessing the monetary potential of their IP assets and investors need to overcome the lack of familiarity and expertise. Additionally, it is important for regulators to foster an encouraging environment to aid the development of this field. At present, Basel III requirements do not recognize intangible assets such as IP to be suitable collateral that may be used to justify banks maintaining a lower amount of capital to guard against risks. This makes IP-backed loans unattractive. Revising such banking regulations could help lift the appeal of IP-backed loans.

> **We should put in place a policy framework for this emerging field that can aid the evolution of our economy**

Nevertheless, many countries have been devising systems and schemes to support the IP financing industry. For instance, Singapore has declared that it plans to establish a set of intangible asset valuation guidelines to increase information transparency and standardize the valuation process. The International Valuation Standards Council has also issued guidance on the valuation of intangible assets (IVS 210). In Jamaica, multiple workshops were organized to train IP valuers in advanced valuation methodologies. In addition, companies such as Aon PLC are trying to develop a natural language processing system to determine the value of IP assets. The ability to correctly value IP assets will also enable market participants to hedge against the various risks of this emerging market. The need to mitigate risks posed by IP financing has also led to the creation of an insurance market covering IP assets, which is expected to result in lower interest rates and bigger loan amounts. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has also recommended that development banks and governments should consider sharing the risks of IP financing with investors and lenders by participating in risk-sharing mechanisms or offering support to IP risk insurance.

In conclusion, it must be re-emphasized that traditional funding provided by commercial banks based on the supply-chain model is failing to meet the demands of a fast-evolving market. IP financing is an impending revolution in the field of finance, and developing countries such as India must make the most of this opportunity at the very onset. Given the comparative novelty of this concept, there is some hesitance on the part of regulators and investors to participate in it. However, there are several measures that are already being taken by various countries to streamline the process and enhance transparency as well as accountability. India must also consider implementing similar policy changes to allow for improved IP asset valuation methodologies and risk management through risk sharing or supporting insurance coverage for such assets. It would favour India's economic evolution.

WORDLY WISE

FILMMAKING... IS A GAME YOU SHOULD PLAY WITH ALL YOUR CARDS, AND ALL YOUR DICE, AND WHATEVER ELSE YOU'VE GOT. — FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE ASIAN EDGE

Important political and military markers are being laid down by US and China in Asia. Delhi will have an important role to play

US PRESIDENT JOE Biden's summits with the leaders of Japan and the Philippines last week at the White House, and China's strong reaction, suggest that some important new political and military markers are being laid down in Asia. Compared to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza — where Iran's aerial strikes on Israel have escalated tensions — a conflict in Asia between China, on the one hand, and the US and its allies in the region on the other, would perhaps be more consequential. Today, the US and China are the world's foremost economic and military powers, and a direct confrontation between them in Asia, the world's most dynamic region, could arguably shake the world to its core. India, which has been locked in a prolonged military standoff with China in the high Himalayas over the last four years and in an expanding strategic partnership with the US, will inevitably be affected by any military confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Equally important, Delhi, unlike in the past, will have an important role in shaping the new and edgy Asian dynamic.

One of the significant outcomes of Washington's summits last week is the transformation of Japan from a passive and pacifist nation into a potential military powerhouse in Asia. Since the Second World War, Japan has stood in the military shadow of the US as a protectorate. In Washington, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has signed off on agreements to integrate the military command structures of the two countries and contribute actively — with a growing defence budget, a more powerful missile arsenal, and the joint development and production of weapons with the US — in deterring Chinese military coercion and promoting a rules-based Indo-Pacific order. In the first-ever trilateral summit with the US and the Philippines, Kishida agreed to join hands with Biden in defending the territorial sovereignty of the Philippines, which has been under relentless pressure from the PLA in the South China Sea. Biden and Kishida also outlined an agenda of economic cooperation with Manila — especially in infrastructure development — as an alternative to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

China, unsurprisingly, has warned the US against "bloc politics" in Asia and the attempt to create a "mini Nato" in the east. Beijing is, of course, trying to counter American efforts at isolating it in Asia. In the last few days, it hosted the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, received the former president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou, and welcomed the leaders of Vietnam and the president-elect of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto. Beijing is determined to defeat the region's economic decoupling from China and a consolidation of its neighbours into a countervailing coalition backed by the US. Some in Delhi believe Beijing may be ready for a fresh outreach to prevent India from getting closer to the US and boosting an Asian coalition against China. Delhi has long nurtured these illusions, only to be disappointed every time. Seeing real progress on restoring peace and tranquillity on the border, disturbed rudely by the PLA in the summer of 2020, must remain a precondition before any Indian exploration of a political reset with China.

INDIA TO CANNES

Nomination of an Indian film after 30 years is a moment to examine how homegrown talent can be nurtured better

THIRTY YEARS AFTER Malayalam filmmaker Shaji N Karun's *Swaham* competed for the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival, an Indian film has once again made it to the competition section of the event. Come May, Payal Kapadia's debut feature film *All We Imagine As Light* will be competing against entries from filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, Yorgos Lanthimos, Paul Schrader and Paolo Sorrentino. While this is a moment of celebration for Indian cinema, it is also an opportunity to introspect on why it has taken three decades for a film from one of the world's top film-producing nations to once again make it to this eminent stage.

India's limited presence at Cannes is especially troubling considering the strong showing it had made in the early years of the festival. In 1946, during the first edition of Cannes as a full-fledged festival, the Grand Prix (as the Palme d'Or was known before 1955) went to Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* — the only Indian production to have been thus honoured till date. In subsequent decades, films by V Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, M S Sathyu, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Karun were nominated. The 30-year interval between the nomination of *Swaham* and today points to a system that seems unable to nurture the kind of cinema in which commercial concerns do not overwhelm the demands of art. In a healthy ecosystem, alongside films that are conceived and produced keeping in mind the box office, there is also space for cinema as pure art. For the latter to grow in an increasingly competitive and dynamic global market, additional support, especially from the state, is needed, in the form of grants and subsidies. Also badly needed is backing in promotion and distribution. A good model is the European Union's Creative Europe MEDIA programme, which provides support to film professionals through training; helps with distribution of audiovisual content across Europe and the world; gives support to festivals, markets and theatres and helps set up audience development projects. The results are evident: Fourteen of the films supported by the programme were at Cannes last year, including *Anatomy of a Fall* which also won the Palme d'Or. Even something as simple as offering subtitling support — for example, the European Commission's initiative to "increase circulation of European works", including on global streaming platforms — can help connect filmmakers with new audiences.

In 2021, Kapadia's *A Night of Knowing Nothing* won the prize for best documentary at Cannes, while Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* won it the following year. There is enough evidence of the wealth of film talent in India. Structured support would go a long way towards helping it meet the demands of art as well as commerce.

FREEZE FRAME E P UNNY

Food for reform

Next government must focus on raising productivity in agriculture, facilitating adoption of new technologies

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

ASHOK GULATI, RITIKA JUNEJA AND PURVI THANGARAJ

AS THE ELECTION campaign in India hits fever pitch despite rising temperatures, most pollsters are predicting a continuation of the incumbent government. Interestingly, the Narendra Modi government has already asked various ministries to prepare plans that they would like to announce in the first 100 days of their third term. The ministries are contacting various experts to help them frame the right policy framework that is in sync with the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

Here are some of our suggestions for the agri-food space. They are based on our interactions with experts during the four-day forum organised by the Asian Development Bank on food security in the wake of climate change. Learning from the experiences of other countries is always useful.

First, we need to see this as a food systems transformation. Agriculture has to produce not only more food, fibre and even fuel (biofuels), but it has to do so with fewer resources. India's population is likely to go to about 1.6 billion by 2047. So, there are more mouths to feed. With gradually rising incomes, people will demand more and better food. Efficiency in the use of land, water, labour, and inputs like fertilisers and farm machinery is going to be critical. In other words, we must aim to raise our total factor productivity. This can be done only by putting in more resources in agri-R&D, innovations and extension.

Second, the production system is being threatened by extreme weather events triggered by global warming. The last April to March temperature has already hit the Laxman Rekha of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Last year's El Nino effect led to agri-GDP growth dropping from 4.7 per cent in 2022-23 to just 0.7 per cent in 2023-24 (as per the second advance estimate). This poses a high risk, which then triggers knee-jerk reactions to ban exports, putting stock limits on traders, and unloading government stocks below their economic costs with a view to contain food inflation. The real solution lies in investing resources to create climate-resilient (smart) agriculture. This would mean more investments in seeds that are heat and flood-resistant, and more investment in water resources not just in augmenting their supplies but also ensuring water is being used more wisely. "More crop per drop" should not be just a slogan but a reality. Drips, sprinklers, and protected cultivation as part of precision agriculture will have to be adopted at a much larger scale than today.

> Our malnutrition numbers, especially for children below the age of 5, are horrifying. With stunting today at 35 per cent, how would they make an efficient labour force for Bharat@2047? For this to improve, besides sanitation, women's education and immunisation, we also need to fortify our staples with micro-nutrients. The government has made a beginning with zinc-rich rice and wheat, but why is it shying away from golden rice with beta carotene (Vitamin A rich), when Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US have declared it safe, and even Bangladesh and Philippines have allowed its trials?

Given that almost 78 per cent of India's freshwater is used for agriculture, we must learn to use every drop of water wisely, else cities will starve for water. Bengaluru's water crisis is just a trailer. More is yet to come.

Third, we must realise that by 2047, more than two-thirds of India will be living in urban areas — up from about 36 per cent today. Migration from rural to urban areas in search of higher productivity jobs is a natural process that cannot, and should not, be wished away. The implication of this is that much of the food will have to be moved from the hinterlands to urban areas. This would require a massive logistics revolution, from transporting to stocking to processing and organised retailing. This would open doors for large-scale investments, primarily by the private sector. The new government will have to facilitate this transformation by changing laws that are suitable for Bharat@2047. Many of our laws are those we inherited from the British in 1947. A fresh set of rules that are more market-aligned would be the need of the hour to build efficient value chains. Else, we are afraid, our post-harvest losses will mount.

Fourth, in this food systems transformation, while all players from the seed industry to farm machinery to processing and retailing are scaling up, farming is still fragmenting into smaller and smaller holdings. The challenge is to ensure that these smallholders are brought together, through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) or cooperatives (as was done in the milk sector, a la AMUL), to create a scale that is demanded by processors, organised retailers, and exporters. This institutional innovation is the key to inclusive Bharat.

Fifth, on the consumption front, we need to move beyond simple food security to nutritional security. Our malnutrition numbers, especially for children below the age of 5, are horrifying. With stunting today at 35 per cent, how would they make an efficient labour force for Bharat@2047? For this to improve, besides sanitation, women's education and immunisation, we also need to fortify our staples with micro-nutrients. The government has made a beginning with zinc-rich rice and wheat, but why is it shying away from golden rice with beta carotene (Vitamin A rich), when Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US have declared it safe, and even Bangladesh and Philippines have allowed its trials? Rice is our first crop, and most of those children who are malnourished today consume a lot of rice. This needs to be fortified with high nutrition.

Sixth, all this cannot be done by the government. Public-private partnerships are the way to go. The private sector can build efficient value chains and also produce seeds that are climate-resilient and more nutritious. The government has to provide a conducive policy framework. When the government can devise PLI-type schemes for industry, why not for food systems transformation for tomorrow?

Lastly, nothing much will move unless farmers' incomes improve. For that, we need to "re-purpose" our subsidy regimes, be it fertilisers or food. A minimum of 25 to 30 per cent of the Rs 4 trillion subsidy on food and fertilisers can be saved if we move from the price-subsidy approach to direct income transfers for beneficiaries. These savings can be ploughed back into food systems for higher resilience and better nutrition.

Can the next government do it? Only time will tell.

The writers are distinguished professor, fellow and research associate at ICRIER respectively. Views are personal

FROM ASSERTION TO ASPIRATION

Honouring Ambedkar's legacy means moving beyond Congress-style tokenism

GURU PRAKASH

BHAGWAN DAS, AUTHOR of *In Pursuit of Ambedkar*, wrote: "The newspaper used to publish a lot of things about Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Azad, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jinnah but hardly a thing about the untouchable communities. I used to wonder, 'Who is our leader?' I asked Abba this, and he replied, 'Umeedkar, the one who brings hope,' which is how Abba saw Babasaheb Ambedkar."

In the life of a nation, there are times when there is a need for collective introspection on the past and to strategise on the future. As a school student, I often wondered about the objectives behind organising events to commemorate stalwarts on their birth and death anniversaries. Now, somewhat more evolved, socially and intellectually, things have started making sense at multiple levels. Ambedkar's anniversary since our childhood has ignited curiosity and enthusiasm in equal measure. In a poll conducted jointly in 2012, Ambedkar was voted the "greatest Indian", outshining leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Patel.

April holds a special place in the Dalit imagination as it offers occasions like the birth anniversaries of Babu Jagjivan Ram, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar as platforms to deliberate on their visions and the progress towards them. Ambedkar, in particular, was considered a polarising figure for decades after his death.

He was not only instrumental in the drafting of the Constitution but also the force behind institutions like the RBI and political parties catering to the depressed classes. His legacy was politicised by the Congress party. Those who follow Ambedkarite politics still wonder why it took more than decades after his death for him to get the Bharat Ratna. Ambedkar argued that "Congress does not truly represent the Untouchables" and that the party's purported support for their interests is "nothing more than mere tactics".

> Till recently Congress party was the ruling dispensation in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh apart from Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and now Telangana. Rahul Gandhi in his speeches mentioned the inclusion of SC, ST and OBC secretaries in the government – not one secretary in the government in Congress-ruled states came from these communities. The political leadership has to realise the shift in the Dalit consciousness: Politics can no longer be about sharing a meal for a photo-op. It must be about respect and recognition.

Time magazine has declared 2024 as the year of elections and the world is keenly watching the political developments in the largest democracy. Democracy has provided political equality to the voiceless and the socially marginalised for whom Ambedkar remains a source of inspiration. Dalit politics has witnessed a fundamental transformation in the decades after independence. From the issues around separate electorates to representation in Parliament and state assemblies, the universe of Dalit politics has widened from the phase of assertion to the one of aspiration.

Many are now increasingly questioning the Congress style of Dalit politics where symbolism is the hallmark. There are reasons behind the failure of the social justice plank of Rahul Gandhi. The party may advocate a caste census and representation for political leverage but its practices say otherwise.

Till recently Congress party was the ruling dispensation in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh apart from Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and now Telangana. Rahul Gandhi in his speeches mentioned the inclusion of SC, ST and OBC secretaries in the government — not one secretary in the government in Congress-ruled states came from these communities. The political leadership has to realise the shift in the Dalit consciousness: Politics can no longer be about sharing a meal for a photo-op. It must be about respect and recognition.

Prakash Ambedkar's exit from the Maha Vikas Agadi (MVA) is an indication of this shift. That even Ambedkar's grandson had reason to complain about fair treatment in the state where his ideas flourished is a comment on our political establishment.

Parties with their origins in social justice movements are losing relevance as particular families, not marginalised communities, are the priority for them. From Jammu Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, social justice has now become a project for personal aggrandisement.

Noted intellectuals have observed a trend where reserved constituencies are also becoming fiefdoms of the feudal classes by fielding dummy candidates from the SC communities as Nehru once did. Ambedkar condemned this practice.

Congress and the political establishment must realise that that era is long gone. Dalits now want to become stakeholders and a part of the dispensation not only in Parliament but also in media, universities, think tanks, the judiciary and as entrepreneurs. This would be a true tribute to the legacy of BR Ambedkar.

The writer is assistant professor at Patna University and adviser to the Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry and national spokesperson, BJP

INDIAN EXPRESS

Bhindranwale's man shot near Temple

12 more inducted into HP ministry

Adik alleges plot to defame him

Ershad, parties have power transfer talks

Rajasthan against Bhakra canal closure

GENTLEMAN

APRIL 15, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

SHOOTING IN PUNJAB

THREE PERSONS, INCLUDING a top extremist and a Nirankari leader, were killed as terrorists stepped up their activity in Punjab in the last 24 hours. (However, according to UNI, two more persons were killed in the state.) Surinder Singh Sodhi, a proclaimed offender and the right hand man of the militant Sikh leader J S Bhindranwale, was shot dead in Sindhi Hotel opposite the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.

'EXAGGERATED' CLAIMS

THE CONGRESS (I) high command is expected to take a final decision on the fate of the Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ramrao Adik after party president Mrs Indira Gandhi seeks his personal explanation about the alleged misbehaviour abroad. Adik, who rushed to the Capital as soon as he arrived in Bombay after his ill-famed foreign trip, said that what appeared about him in the press was exaggerated.

POWER TRANSFER TALKS

THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT and the 15-party opposition alliance resuming their talks discussed the modalities for transfer of power to an elected government. The two sides held their first round of talks on April 11. President Ershad led the government side at the two-and-a-half hour talks at his official residence while the 15- party alliance was headed by Hasina Wajed, president of Bangladesh Awami League.

BHAKRA CANAL ISSUE

THE RAJASTHAN GOVERNMENT has not agreed to the closure of the Bhakra canal as desired by the Punjab government to divert the canal waters to the Ropar thermal plant for cooling. The first unit of 210 MW of this plant is nearing completion and Rajasthan's refusal will delay the commissioning of the plant. Punjab governor B D Pande had a talk over the telephone with Union cabinet secretary Krishna Swami.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

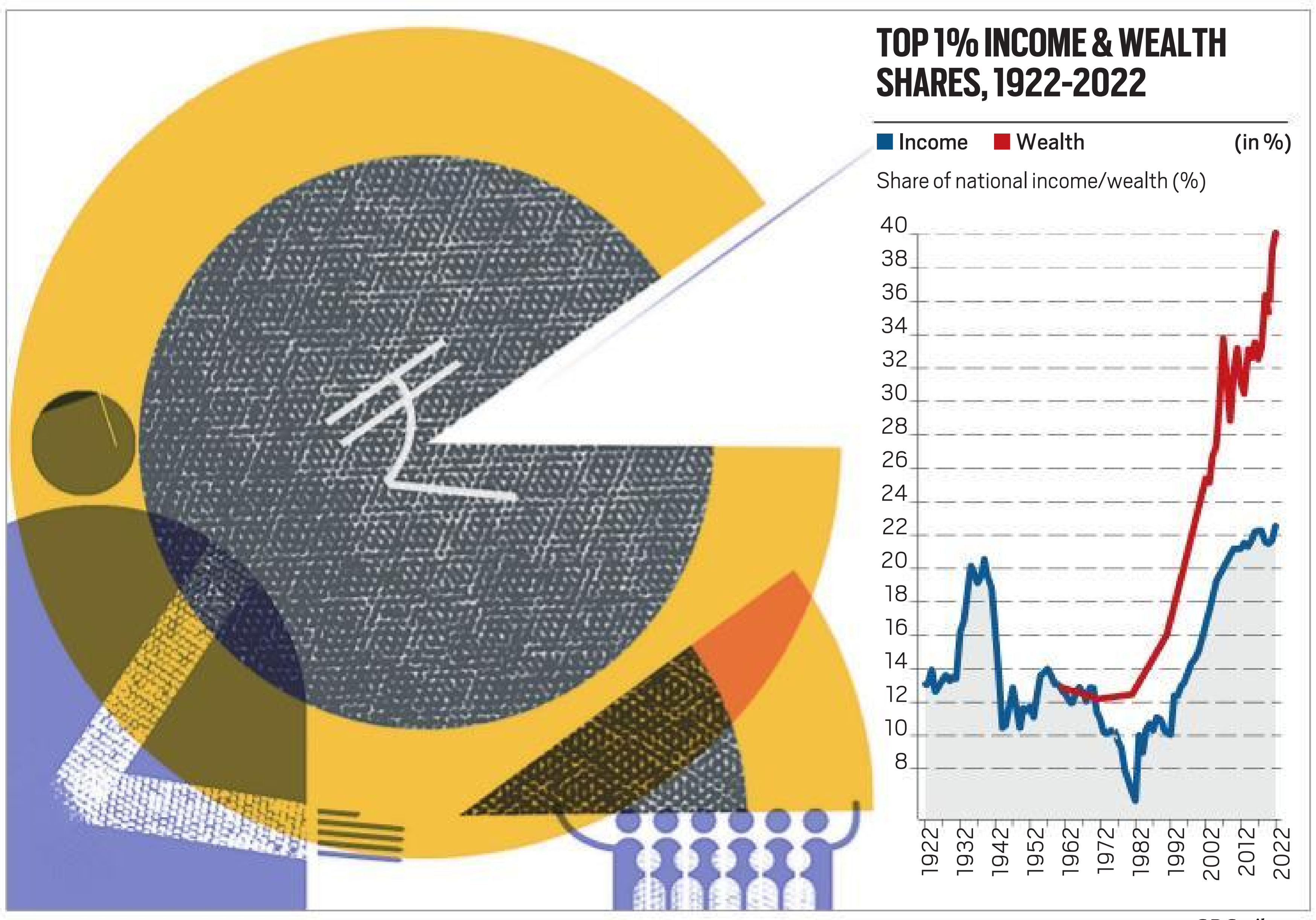
"Nepali students will continue to be cheated unless the government comes up with sensitisation campaigns about the good, bad and ugly of international education. The Canada imbroglio should be a lesson for the Nepal government and the students alike about making informed choices." — THE KATHMANDU POST

Inequality denial starter kit

Misleading analyses of poverty, complacency from policymakers and elites, will only exacerbate India's ballooning inequality crisis

NITIN BHARTI, LUCAS CHANCEL, THOMAS PIKETTY, AND ANMOL SOMANCHI

"...obstinate ignorance is usually a manifestation of underlying political motives." — Michal Kalecki, 'Political Aspects of Full Employment', *The Political Quarterly*, 1943.



C R Sasikumar

IN A RECENT working paper, we document long-run trends of income and wealth inequality in India. We find that inequality declined post-Independence, began rising in the 1980s and has skyrocketed since the 2000s. Between 2014-15 and 2022-23, the rise of top-end inequality has been particularly pronounced in terms of wealth concentration. India's top 1 per cent shares are now at their highest historical levels, making the Billionaire Raj more unequal than the British colonial Raj and squarely placing India among the most unequal countries in the world. We firmly stand by these findings. Nonetheless, given the complexities in inequality measurement, we welcome constructive debate on ways to improve our series, particularly for the last decade when data quality has significantly deteriorated, as amply highlighted in our paper.

On March 27, two articles simultaneously appeared, questioning our results. One was co-authored by the Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) to the Government of India (V Anantha Nageswaran and Deeksha Supyaal Bisht, 'Ten reasons why Piketty's paper gets it wrong on inequality in India', *Livemint*, March 27) and the other by a former part-time member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (Surjit S Bhalla and Karan Bhasin, 'The devil is in the footnote', *IE*, March 27). After carefully reviewing both articles, we found little constructive criticism, but plenty of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. This is perhaps not surprising — it is hard to be both judge and jury when working closely with a government. These articles are better read as textbook cases of inequality denial in action — the authors pick one element irrelevant to our inequality estimates and twist it out of context to cast doubt over robust results. By the time the air is cleared, the damage is already done.

Let us unpack how "inequality denialism" operates in this case.

Bhalla and Bhasin's (BB) critique is largely built around footnote 36 (page 24) in our paper that highlights the tentative nature of minor findings. Nageswaran and Bisht (NB) also refer to the same footnote as a "QED moment". Now, this "gotcha" drama would have been worth some money if the footnote had absolutely any relevance to the core of the debate — our inequality estimates. Alas, it does not, whatsoever.

It only pertains to our claim that the Indian tax system might be regressive when viewed from the lens of net wealth (rather than incomes); that is, the tax liability as a fraction of net wealth might be falling as one gets wealthier. BB and NB pick this footnote about the tax system and spin a false impression that it somehow applies to our inequality estimates — it does not.

After wasting many precious words misconstruing our footnote, BB move on to comparing our estimate of the top 1 per cent income share with two earlier papers — Abhijit Banerjee and Thomas Piketty (2005; BP) and Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty (2019; CP).

We could certainly dive into the weeds, as two of us already have ('The opaque 1%', IE, February 3, 2018), except that BB seem to have made an elementary error. They state that "... the 1999 estimate of the top 1 per cent has been inflated to read 21 per cent". After a forensic investigation, we fail to find where BB got this figure from. In our recent paper (Appendix Table B.1) as well as in CP, the top 1 per cent income share for 1999 is reported as 14.7 per cent. Therefore, BB's claim that we "... get a ladder increase in inequality estimates for many years earlier with each update", is simply false. Our best guess is that they have carelessly misread the bottom 50 per cent share in 1999 (20.7 per cent) as the top 1 per cent share. No wonder they find nonsensical growth rates. Case dismissed.

A final word: The striking similarities between their botched critique of rising inequality and their error-ridden and misleading analysis of poverty are hard to miss.

Despite privileged access to all sorts of administrative data, the CEA has done little to shed light on economic inequality. When a serious academic attempt has been made, the least one could expect of him is the "tedium of ploughing through 85 pages". NB's article is high on polemics but fails to deliver any substantive critique. For instance, how is multidimensional poverty relevant to income and wealth inequality? Similarly, to counter our claim that the tax system might be regressive when viewed from the lens of net wealth, NB cite two very interesting papers showing that the tax system is progressive in terms of incomes (which we never denied in the first place), while conveniently ignoring Ram Singh's (2022; CDE-DSE working paper no. 331) novel work that came to the same conclusion as us. NB are certainly right in saying that improved tax compliance could spuriously increase income inequality in our series, but did they skip page 33 in the paper (section 7.5) where we explicitly address this concern?

Quoting data from PRICE's ICE360 survey, NB state that our paper "...by singularly focusing on the top 1 per cent top misses India's emerging middle class". This is a strange accusation since we carefully study the full distributions of income and wealth, not just the top 1 per cent. We even specifically highlight depressed growth rates in the middle of the distribution (page 28). Be that as it may, NB also seem blissfully oblivious to the fact that we too utilise PRICE's ICE360 survey as an alternative to NSSO's PLFS. What do we find? Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, the bottom 50 per cent income share fell sharply from 14.4 per cent to a shocking 9.8 per cent, contrasted with a marginal increase in our benchmark PLFS-based series (Appendix Figure B.3). The CEA cannot have the cake and eat it too — we let him have his pick. We would have liked to address his other concerns too but are now out of space.

One could certainly quibble with our methodology and estimates, but to those willing to objectively engage with reality, India's vulgar inequalities are staring back at us from all directions. Inequality denialism is, of course, not unique to India, as we have seen at close quarters in the US and elsewhere. Worryingly, however, this sort of complacency from policymakers and the elites will only exacerbate India's already ballooning inequality crisis.

> After carefully reviewing both articles, we found little constructive criticism, but plenty of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. This is perhaps not surprising — it is hard to be both judge and jury when working closely with a government. These articles are better read as textbook cases of inequality denial in action — the authors pick one element irrelevant to our inequality estimates and twist it out of context to cast doubt over robust results. By the time the air is cleared, the damage is already done.

The authors are affiliated to the World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics

Babasaheb & the new Dalit cinema

Many movies, TV, web series and documentaries look at the life and vision of B R Ambedkar. This is a much-needed widening of the frame

HARISH S WANKHEDE

WHEN B R Ambedkar first arrived on the national political scene, a vast section of India's population was condemned as "untouchable" and was forced to engage in hazardous and undignified occupations. They were denied basic human entitlements. Ambedkar held the nationalist leadership accountable for neglecting these social ills. He argued that freedom from British imperialism will have little value if caste-based hierarchies and inequalities remain unresolved. His uncompromising attitude towards the cause of emancipation of the "untouchable" castes, his contribution in making the Constitution a manifesto for the welfare of the socially marginalised groups and his vision to elevate these groups to an aspirational political class have established his stature as a revolutionary icon of modern India.

Since Independence, popular culture has neglected Ambedkar. Popular Hindi cinema — known for its progressive and nationalist values — kept its distance from anti-caste movements, issues of untouchability and caste divisions or looking into Ambedkar's persona as an inspirational figure. Despite the fact that since the 1980s and the arrival of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, there was an influential Ambedkarite political force, mainstream Hindi cinema barely recognised the importance of such political change.

It is only in the last decade, especially with the arrival of artists, filmmakers and technicians from the Dalit-Bahujan social background, that there has been a noticeable increase in Ambedkar's representation on screen. A nascent but significant genre of "Dalit cinema" is evolving.

It was in regional cinema, especially Tamil and Marathi films, that Ambedkar appeared as an aspirational figure first. Director Pa Ranjith in films like *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018) used Ambedkar's images to promote a robust and self-confident Dalit hero that fights against the mafia and the corrupt political order. In Mari Selvarajan's film *Maamannan* (2023), we see the Dalit protagonist as an angry young man who resists the authority of the social elite with a fist of fury and wins the political battle by mobilising the people.

Similarly, in Shailesh Narwade's Marathi film *Jayanti* (2021), Ambedkar is presented as a profound voice of justice that motivates the protagonist to find meaning in his life. Again, in Nagaraj Manjule's Hindi film *Jhund* (2021), the audience witnessed the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti on the screen. Here, when we see that people are dancing with joy, it is to represent an elevated image of Ambedkar — not only as anti-caste icon but as a metaphor of inspiration and celebration for the young generation.

In web-series and TV shows as well, Ambedkar is starting to have a presence on-screen. Subhash Kapoor's *Maharani 3*, the recent web-series on Amazon Prime, showcased the protagonist Rani Bharti (Huma Qureshi) raising the slogan of "Jai Bhim" in the climax. Bharti dons her "lower" caste identity without any hesitation and fights her political opponents using Machiavellian strategies. Similarly, in Sudhir Mishra's series *Serious Men* on Netflix, Nawazuddin Siddiqui played a Dalit protagonist who utilised his social location and rationality to con the system.

Series like *Paatal Lok* (Amazon Prime), *Dahaad* (Amazon Prime) *Aashram* (MX Player) and films like *Kathal* (Netflix) and *Pareeksha* (Zee 5) have presented a new image of Dalit characters. Ambedkar's photographs or statues are often utilised to showcase that the characters are conscious about their social identity and readily assert it in the public, demanding social justice and equal respect.

In this context, Neeraj Ghaywan's story 'The Heart Skipped a Beat' in the web series *Made in Heaven* is the most impressive addition. Here, Pallavi Manke (Radhika Apte) is a proud Dalit professor, working in an Ivy League university and has no hesitation in flagging her "ex-Untouchable" identity. Though she is marrying a sensitive and progressive Indian-American lawyer, she faces social burdens and anxieties when she asks to add a Buddhist ritual to commemorate her marriage. The ceremony is beautifully showcased with Ambedkar's photograph at the centre, representing the social principles that he wanted to establish in India.

Finally, there is new interest shown by young documentary filmmakers. For example, Jyoti Nisha's *B R Ambedkar: Now and Then* (2023) is a feature-film-length documentary that explores the current predicament of Dalit lives in India. Nisha calls herself a Bahujan-feminist filmmaker and provided a new lens to understand the ongoing Ambedkarite struggles for social justice, dignity and the battles against patriarchal domination. On this scale, Somnath Waghmare's *Chaityabhumi* (2023) is an excellent addition that explores how the site of Ambedkar cremation in Mumbai has now been elevated into a historic monument, inspiring and engaging millions of followers.

The growing presence of Ambedkar in popular films, documentaries and web series shows that Dalit-Bahujan cultural values are slowly being integrated into popular media. Though it is a small beginning, it has the capacity to initiate a dialogue for the democratisation of the entertainment industry and adopt cultural narratives that speak to and of socially marginalised groups. This acknowledgment is visible in Hollywood director Ava DuVernay's new film *Origin 2023* (based on Isabelle Wilkerson's book *Caste*) that explores Ambedkar as a crucial figure to understand the global context of racial discrimination and hatred against Jews.

Culture, especially cinema, is dominated by the conventional social elite and serves their social and political interests without resistance. Marginalised social groups are the passive recipient of such an entertainment culture. This arrangement needs democratic reform. Ambedkar's appearances on-screen and the arrival of a nascent "Dalit Cinema" genre has the potential to bring in a new cinematic culture, evoking the possibility of a socially responsible cinema.

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A history of distrust

Gap between BJP & Muslims mirrors earlier rupture between Congress and community

BALBIR PUNJ

ONE FREQUENTLY ASKED question in the Indian public discourse pertains to the absence of Muslim representation in the highest levels of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Out of the Lok Sabha candidates announced by the party so far, only one is a Muslim. The outgoing Modi cabinet has no minister from the community. The implied allegation is that the party is anti-Muslim, a by-product of its ideological paradigm. But let's raise a question from history. Is the anti-BJP sentiment in the community a throwback to its historical alienation even during the British times? Didn't the ties between the pre-Partition Congress and Muslims suffer from a trust deficit?

Today's distance between the BJP and Muslims mirrors that between the pre-Independence Congress and the community. In March 1938, the Muslim League appointed what is known as the Pirpur committee to inquire into Muslim grievances in the Congress-ruled provinces. The Committee accused these provincial governments of anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu bias. The report was used to strengthen the demand for Pakistan on the plea that Muslims couldn't get a fair deal in an independent India, likely to be ruled by a Hindu-dominated Congress. It implied that Hindus, Hindu communalism and Congress were all synonymous. The allegations of "atrocities" against Muslims by the Congress listed in the report, and the ones used to paint the Modi government as anti-Muslim are uncannily identical.

All efforts by the then Congress leadership, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, to dispel Muslim apprehensions fell flat. In April 1947, a desperate Gandhi proposed to the new Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, that M A Jinnah be offered to head the interim government. This suggestion is akin to the Biblical allegory of two women fighting over a baby as they approach King Solomon for justice. The King orders them to cut the infant in two so that each can have half. The real mother cries, "Please, Lord, give her the live child. Do not kill him!" and the lying one says: "It shall be neither mine nor yours — divide it."

On December 6, 1945, Jinnah explained, "...a united India means slavery for Mussulmans and complete domination of the imperialistic caste Hinduraj throughout this sub-continent..." He wasn't speaking only for himself. He spoke for the community he claimed to represent. In the 1946 elections, the Muslim League captured all Muslim constituencies in the central assembly and 87 per cent of the provincial Muslim constituencies. At that time, Jinnah didn't contest from any area of present-day Pakistan but from Bombay's Byculla seat and won.

The League got massive support from a section of Muslims in the areas that are now a part of India. A vote for the League was a vote for Pakistan. It's why Sardar Patel, speaking in Calcutta on January 3, 1948, said, "The Muslims who are still in India, many of them helped in the creation of Pakistan... They (now) say why their loyalty is being questioned."

During the First War of Independence (1857), the Hindus and Muslims joined against the British. Subsequently, most of the prominent Muslims — such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, and Jinnah — spoke in terms of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood and the need for a common front against the alien British. However, the British soon started working on the divide-and-rule policy. A section of the community's leaders shapeshifted into Islamists and developed close working relationships with the British. Abdul Wali Khan, in his seminal work, *Facts are Facts: Untold Story of India's Partition*, quotes a communication from Viceroy Lord Linlithgow to the Secretary of State, in which the viceroy says that "Jinnah is our man and we accept him as a representative of all Muslims."

While a section of the community hailed these hate-spewing leaders, it ostracised those opposing Partition. The community spurned nationalist Muslim leaders like Maulana Azad and Humayun Kabir. The Maulana, in his convocation address to the Aligarh Muslim University in 1949, didn't mince his words when he referred to the phase when Indian Muslims "not only stood aloof from all political movements of the day but were inclined to oppose the country's struggle for emancipation." And he squarely held Sir Syed responsible for keeping Muslims away from Congress.

Today, new characters have replaced the old ones. In pre-Independence India, the wily British and communists managed to create a wedge between the bulk of Muslims and the national aspirations represented by Congress. They demonised the Congress and successfully labelled it as anti-Muslim. Now, instead of the British, Congress is playing the same divisive game.

Both in the pre- and post-Independence era, India has seen the emergence of several Muslim leaders of distinction committed to a nationalistic plank. Today, it's the hardliners and the extremists who are heard the loudest. For the BJP, Muslims are part of the 140 crore Indians — all having equal rights and identical obligations to the nation. Right from Jana Sangh's days, it had a slew of Muslim leaders such as Arif Beg, Sheikh Abdul Rehman, and Sikander Bakht. APJ Abdul Kalam was elected President (2002-07) with BJP's support. Several of the present-day spokespersons of the party are Muslim men and women. They are there on merit.

Democracy is a game of numbers and winning elections. There is a disconnect between the BJP's performance and the response of a section of the Muslim community to it. For no fault of their own or of the party, BJP Muslim candidates usually find it difficult to garner support from their community. Against this backdrop, the party is reluctant to field them. A section of the Muslims didn't trust the Congress's leadership during the decades preceding Independence. It isn't surprising that they don't trust the BJP now. Building this trust is a challenge for both sides.

The writer is the author of the recently published, Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DISTRACTION ISSUE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Poll heat and a flashpoint' (IE, April 13). As India enters another election season, it is an opportunity to draw attention to the challenges that China poses to our national security interests. Recently, China issued a fourth list of "standardised names" of places within the Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Meanwhile, the Union government is trying to distract attention ahead of Lok Sabha elections from the serious developments at the LAC between India and China by raking up the issue of the Katchatheevu Island. Ironically, New Delhi is following Beijing's example of ignoring bilateral treaties and opening up disputes where none existed previously. India can't afford to ignore China's challenge.

S S Paul, *Nadia*

LONG ROAD AHEAD

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Scaling up TB care' (IE, April 13). The pharmacy of the Global South is once again struggling to treat patients. Recently, there was an acute shortage of critical MDR-TB drugs. Disruption in drug supply, which began with drug-sensitive medicines in 2022 and snowballed to include MDR-TB drugs, lasted for nearly a year. A delay in diagnosis and treatment is already a huge concern. A 2010 study found that non-availability of drugs was responsible for eight per cent of non-adherent patients missing treatment. Given the poor socioeconomic background of most TB patients, far from reaching the 2025 goal, India does not seem to have a handle on the most basic elements of TB control.

Khokan Das, *Kolkata*

FOR A BETTER WORLD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Problem with coal' (IE, April 13). The Russia-Ukraine war inflicted a severe blow to many countries' intentions to progressively lessen their use of coal for power generation. Concerns over potential interruptions in energy supply drove international coal prices through the roof. This prompted all major producers to pledge further investments. China, the world's largest consumer of fossil fuels, is reluctant to sacrifice its economic interests over climate goals. India is one of the most vulnerable to climate change with extreme water scarcity and coastal floods threatening its millions. Even if it does its bit to reduce its use of coal for power production, unless other countries do the same, it will have little control over climate change mitigation.

Kamal Laddha, *Bengaluru*

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Lamp to Lotus, Two Bullocks to Hand: a story of symbols

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, APRIL 14

ELECTION SYMBOLS are a critical component of elections. They are a party's identity, and help voters recognise candidates. When parties split, a battle is fought for its election symbol. What is the history of the iconic election symbols of the country's oldest and largest parties, the Congress' 'Hand', and the BJP's 'Lotus'?

Beginning of symbols

Before the first Lok Sabha election of 1951-52, the Election Commission of India (ECI) realised that election symbols were critical in a country where the literacy rate was less than 20%. It was decided that symbols should be familiar and easily recognisable, and should not show any object with a religious or sentimental association, such as cow, temple, the National Flag, spinning wheel, etc. Parties that were recognised as national and state parties, were offered choices from a list of 26 symbols approved by the ECI.

Allotment of symbols

At present, Rules 5 and 10 of the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961 deal with symbols.

Rule 5 states that the ECI shall "specify the symbols that may be chosen by candidates at elections in parliamentary or assembly constituencies and the restrictions to which their choice shall be subject".

The Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968 defines a "reserved symbol" as one that is "reserved for a recognised political party for exclusive allotment to [its] contesting candidates". A "free symbol" is "a symbol other than a reserved symbol".

Free symbols are allotted to independents and unrecognised registered parties based on their request and preferences.

Symbol of the Congress

Ahead of the first election, the preferred symbol of the Indian National Congress was 'Plough with Bullocks', followed by 'Congress Flag with *Charkha*'. However, on August 17, 1951, the Congress was allotted 'Two Bulls (later 'Bullocks') with Yoke on'. The 'Human Hand', the Congress symbol today, was allotted to the All India Forward Bloc (Ruiker Group).

JOURNEYS OF THE ELEPHANT, ENGINE, BICYCLE

ELEPHANT, the symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party, was allotted to the All India Scheduled Castes' Federation in the first Lok Sabha election.

RAILWAY ENGINE was removed from the list of free symbols in 1957 after many parties said it was unrecognisable to rural populations. It is today the symbol of Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena.

DECISION 2024

BICYCLE, now the symbol of the Samajwadi Party, was earlier allotted to some state parties.

BOW & ARROW was allotted to the Shiromani Akali Dal in 1952. After many splits, however, the SAD now has the 'Balance' (*Tarazu*).

In 1969, the Congress split into the Congress (O) and Congress (R), where 'O', headed by S Nijalingappa, stood for 'Organisation' and 'R', headed by Jagjivan Ram, for 'Requisitionists'. On January 11, 1971, the ECI decided that Jagjivan Ram's Congress, which was supported by Indira Gandhi, was the real Congress.

But the Supreme Court stayed the ECI's order and ruled that neither group would be entitled to use 'Two Bullocks with Yoke on'. On January 25, 1971, the ECI allotted '*Charkha* being Plied by Woman' to the Nijalingappa group, and 'Calf and Cow' to the Jagjivan Ram/ Indira group.

Several leaders objected, saying 'Calf and Cow' or '*Gomaata*' was related to religious sentiments, but the ECI overruled these objections.

Calf and Cow to Hand

In the late Seventies, the Indira-Jagjivan Ram Congress split again, and the anti-Indira group was led by Devaraj Urs and K Brahmananda Reddy. On January 2, 1978, Indira was elected president of the Indian National Congress, and she approached ECI to retain 'Calf and Cow'. After the ECI said no, Indira moved the SC, which refused to interfere and dismissed the petition as withdrawn.

On February 2, 1978, the ECI recognised the Indira group as a national party named Indian National Congress (I) and allotted it the symbol 'Hand'. In 1979, the ECI froze the symbol 'Calf and Cow', and later recognised the Devraj Urs faction as a national party named Indian National Congress (U) with the symbol '*Charkha*'.

The ECI subsequently decided that Congress (I) was in fact the real Indian National Congress. From the 1984 Lok Sabha election onward, Congress (I) became Congress, with the 'Hand' election symbol.

BJS to BJP, Lamp to Lotus

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was allotted '*Deepak*' ('Lamp') as its election symbol on September 7, 1951. The BJS continued to use 'Lamp' until it was informally merged with the Janata Party before the 1977 election. Janata was born as an amalgam of four national parties and some unrecognised parties.

But the Janata Party very soon suffered a series of splits. On April 6, 1980, a group of leaders who had earlier been with the BJS met in Delhi and declared Atal Bihari Vajpayee as their leader. Both groups claimed to be the real Janata; however, the ECI ruled that neither could use the name until its final decision.

On April 24, 1980, the ECI froze the Janata Party's symbol '*Haldhar* within Wheel', and recognised Vajpayee's group as a national party under the name of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and allotted it the symbol 'Lotus'.

Besides '*Haldhar* within Wheel', the Janata splits resulted in the freezing of four other symbols — 'Lamp' (of the erstwhile BJS), 'Tree' (of the erstwhile Socialist Party), 'Woman plying *Charkha*' (of the Congress-O), and 'Farmer Ploughing the Field' (of the Janata Party-S).

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

HOW DID STAR RESIDING IN 'DRAGON'S EGG' NEBULA GET A MAGNETIC FIELD?

TWO LARGE stars, residing inside a spectacular cloud of gas and dust nicknamed the 'Dragon's Egg' nebula, have long presented a puzzle to astronomers. One of them has a magnetic field, like our Sun. But its companion does not. Moreover, such massive stars are not usually associated with nebulae.

Researchers now appear to have solved this mystery.

The 'Dragon's Egg' nebula surrounding a pair of stars. *Reuters*

What has the new research found?

According to a study published on Thursday in the journal *Science*, the bigger star apparently gobbled up a (third) smaller sibling star, and the mixing of their stellar material during this hostile takeover created a magnetic field.

"This merger was likely very violent. When two stars merge, material can be thrown out, and this likely created the nebula we see today," said Abigail Frost, astronomer at the Chile-based European Southern Observatory, and the study's lead author.

Computer simulations previously had predicted that the blending of stellar material during such a merger could create a magnetic field in the star born in the process.

The two remaining stars — gravitationally bound to each other in what is called a binary system — are located in our Milky Way galaxy, about 3,700 light years from Earth in the constellation Norma. A light year is the distance light travels in a year, roughly 9.5 trillion km.

The magnetic star is about 30 times more massive than the Sun, and its companion is about 26.5 times more massive than the Sun. They orbit each other at a distance varying from seven to 60 times the distance between the Earth and the Sun.

What do we know about the Dragon's Egg nebula?

The Dragon's Egg is so named because it is located relatively near a larger nebula complex called the 'Fighting Dragons of Ara'. The stars inside the Dragon's Egg appear to have started out 4-6 million years ago as a triple system — three stars born at the same time and gravitationally bound.

The triple system's two innermost members included a larger star — perhaps 25 to 30 times the mass of the Sun — and a smaller one — maybe five to 10 times the Sun's mass.

The more massive one evolved more quickly than the other, with its outer layer engulfing the smaller star and triggering a merger that ejected into space the gas and dust that make up the nebula, the researchers said.

This occurred very recently in a cosmic time scale — only about 7,500 years ago, based on the expansion velocity of the material in the nebula. It consists mostly of hydrogen and helium, but also an unusually large amount of nitrogen, thanks to the merger. Many Sun-sized stars generate magnetic fields.

REUTERS

EXPLAINED HEALTH

India's hepatitis headache

Despite killing as many people globally as tuberculosis, viral hepatitis remains under-diagnosed and untreated. Despite having a national programme, the situation in India is not any better

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 14

ACCORDING TO the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) Global Hepatitis Report 2024, India has among the highest burdens of viral hepatitis — tied with tuberculosis (TB) as the second largest infectious killer globally — in the world. Covid-19 was the number one infectious killer, according to the report which used data from 2022.

Globally, an estimated 1.3 million people died of viral hepatitis in 2022 (as compared to 1.1 million in 2019), even as its incidence — number of new cases in a year — went down to 2.2 million in 2022 (as compared to 2.5 million in 2019). Even more concerning is the fact that diagnosis and treatment for viral hepatitis remained extremely low.

What is viral hepatitis?

There are five hepatitis viruses that cause liver disease in humans. Hepatitis A and E are transmitted through contaminated food and water, and result in weeks-long symptoms such as fever, abdominal pain, jaundice (yellowing of skin), dark urine, and pale stools.

The WHO report, however, pertains to the blood-borne hepatitis B (hep B) and hepatitis C (hep C) viruses. Some of these viruses may result in a short-term infections which resolve on their own. But others can lead to chronic life-long disease, cause cirrhosis (permanent scarring of the liver, making it less efficient), and increase the risk of liver cancer.

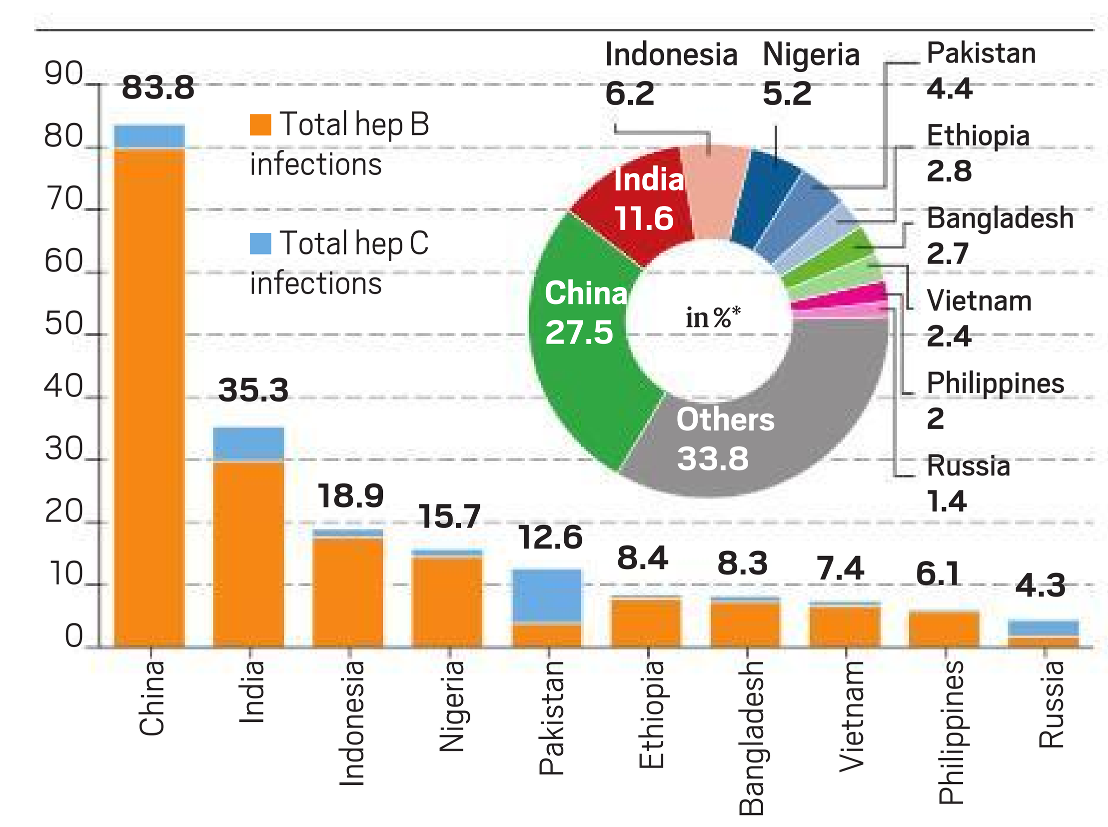
Hep B can be prevented by vaccination, while hep C can be cured with medication. The report does not consider hepatitis D that can only infect those who are already infected with hep B. It can thus be prevented by vaccinating against hep B.

What does the report say about India?

India has the world's second highest prevalence of viral hepatitis cases, accounting for over 11% of the global burden, the report found.

Globally, of the 254 million people living with hep B in 2022, India accounted for 29 million cases, second only to China (79 million cases). Of the 50 million people living with hep C in the world, India accounted for 5.5 million cases, just behind Pakistan's 8.8 million cases. The diagnosis of viral hepatitis also remained abysmally low. According to the report, only 2.4% hep B cases and about 28% hep C cases were diagnosed.

10 COUNTRIES BEAR TWO-THIRDS OF GLOBAL BURDEN



Stacked bars represent total hep B + total hep C infections in millions. Figures in pie are country-wise share of total hep B + total hep C infections in the world. Source: WHO's Global Hepatitis Report 2024

This is despite there existing a national programme that offers free diagnosis and treatment for hep B and C. Dr S K Sarin, vice chancellor of the Institute of Liver and Biliary Disease (ILBS), and one of the people behind the country's national programme, said that even though the programme was launched in 2018, its reach remains limited. "People have not been utilising the free diagnostics and treatment that is offered," he said.

What is driving up viral hepatitis cases in India?

Viral hepatitis can be transmitted through contaminated blood transfusions, or through contaminated needles.

Dr Sarin, however, said that India's hep B cases are driven up by mother-to-child transmission. "Almost 90% of hep B cases in India are transmitted from mother to child, because most blood banks now provide safe blood, and needle-stick transmission in healthcare workers is limited because almost everyone is vaccinated," he said.

With regard to hep C, the WHO report says that India is one of 10 countries where 80% infections are among injection drug users.

What are the challenges in dealing with viral hepatitis?

There are more challenges to controlling hep B (than C), Dr Sarin said. At least three things have to be ensured. "First, all newborns will have to be fully vaccinated against hep B. Second, adults who have not been immunised should also be given the shot. And all those who are diagnosed with the infection should be put on treatment," he said.

The hep B vaccine was rolled out for children in 2007-08, under the government's universal immunisation programme. But a 2019 study found that its coverage varied between 41% and 62%. The 2018 National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme also makes provisions for vaccination of people at high risk of contracting hep B, such as healthcare workers.

When it comes to treatment, Dr Sarin said: "The treatment for hep B is done by specialists according to an international guideline. The problem is that the parameters mentioned in the guideline for initiating treatment exclude seven to eight of the 10 people who are diagnosed with the infection. There is a need to adopt a 'treat all' approach just like we have done for HIV — meaning anyone diagnosed with the condition should be offered treatment immediately." The antiviral treatment for hep B slows the ability of the virus to damage the liver.

With regard to hep C, according to Dr Sarin, just making medicines available is half the battle won. "The available treatment can cure hep C, and has a good efficacy of 80% to 90%. Unlike hep B, for which medicines have to be taken for life, the treatment for hep C goes on for a shorter duration [12 to 24 weeks]," he explained.

How does India's response to viral hepatitis compare with that to TB?

Crucially, despite the infection killing almost as many people as TB, it does not receive nearly as much attention. Globally, treatment coverage for TB was estimated to be around 70% in 2022, but the coverage for hep B and C was only 3% and 20% respectively.

In India, the numbers of deaths due to viral hepatitis aren't comparable to TB, which killed an estimated 3.31 lakh people in 2022, but the disparity in treatment coverage remained stark. The report found that none of the diagnosed patients received treatment for hep B, while just 21% received treatment for hep C. In comparison, 95% of those diagnosed with TB in India were put on therapy.

Shortage of drugs is not the problem. According to the report, India has among the cheapest drugs and diagnostics available. For example, the cost of a rapid diagnostic test for hep B in India, at $0.09, was the lowest among the countries that reported the figure. Similarly, the cost of a rapid diagnostic test for hep C was only $0.21 in India, again the lowest among countries that reported the figure.

In India, the TDF treatment for hep B is also available for lower than the global benchmark price of $ 2.40 per month. Moreover, a 12-week course to cure hep C, for which the global benchmark price is $60, is available for cheaper in India. In fact, several Indian drug makers manufacture generic versions of these medicines.

What Moscow attack suggests about ISKP and emerging terror threats

EXPERT EXPLAINS
ANJU GUPTA

ABOUT 14 HOURS after the March 22 terrorist attack at Moscow's Crocus City Hall, Russia announced the arrest of four suspects, all Tajik citizens living in Russia. The men, who according to Russian security agencies were trying to flee to Ukraine, confessed to the crime in which at least 144 people were killed and 550 injured in the space of 20 minutes.

Later that day, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack on pro-IS Telegram channels, but did not link it to any affiliate. However, 'IS watcher' social media accounts soon started attributing the attack to Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Russian investigators put forward testimonies of the suspects and the forensics of their phones to point fingers at the Ukrainian Special Services. The handler, whom the suspects identified by the *nom de guerre* Saifullo, had allegedly selected the target, supplied the weapons, promised them a million rubles each, and had given detailed instructions for them to reach the border with Ukraine, where they would be helped to cross over.

The claims about the ISKP and Russia's accusation against Ukraine have raised important questions. Why did pro-IS accounts claim the attack? Why was it attributed to ISKP? What kind of threats and concerns do they indicate?

First, was it the Islamic State?

The suspects did not raise jihadist slogans — and even though they could have caused greater damage, they did not stay to fight to the finish as security forces arrived on the scene. The gunmen demonstrated only an ability to shoot randomly with automatic weapons, and were not suicide bombers. According to Russian investigators, the attackers' motivation was *prima facie* money.

Some pro-IS accounts had claimed early on that the suspects had escaped. But they were caught hours later, suggesting that the handlers had limited access to the suspects beyond their getaway from the site. This *modus operandi* does not match with that of classic IS attacks on such targets.

Since the end of the "caliphate", the IS and its affiliates have claimed several attacks, but the credibility of such claims have rarely been confirmed by investigators. IS watcher accounts and some data consortiums continue to document these claims and to attribute unclaimed attacks to the IS to suggest the strength and expanse of the operations of the IS. Many such claims are made by 'lone wolves' — either individuals or cells — who pledge allegiance to the IS to claim legitimacy for violent actions.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

Why the attribution to ISKP?

On March 7, the US embassy in Moscow had warned of a possible non-specific attack in the Russian capital. Around the same time, Russia had claimed to have neutralised an ISKP cell consisting of two Kazakhs who were allegedly planning an attack on a synagogue.

After the Crocus attack, when claims were made on behalf of the IS, some watcher accounts started to attribute the operation to ISKP. This gained strength after some pro-ISKP accounts started issuing multi-lingual threats to Russia for torturing the suspects.

Over the last few months, ISKP has either claimed or has been blamed for more than 20 "external" attacks — which means attacks outside Afghanistan, where ISKP was born in 2015. However, these claims or attributions have not been backed by evidence.

Following the Taliban takeover, the ISKP claimed a major suicide attack at Kabul airport on August 26, 2021, in which 13 US troops and more than 170 Afghans were killed. Attacks on the Taliban and soft targets such as the Shia Hazara followed over the next 18 months, which earned the Taliban rebuke from the US for failing to deliver on counter-terrorism assurances made under the Doha agreement.

By 2023, the Taliban appeared to have curbed the ISKP. The Global Terrorism Index, 2023 found ISKP responsible for only 7% of the total deaths caused by the IS and its affiliates worldwide. Despite its current low operational capability in Afghanistan, however, the ISKP has continued to publish multilingual propaganda threatening the Taliban, as well as countries in the region and the world.

It also appears that the propaganda has helped the ISKP recruit cadres for so-called "external" attacks, which is evidenced by the arrests this week in Afghanistan of two Tajik nationals who were recruited online while in Russia. These individuals were guided to Afghanistan as making the "Hijrah to IS territory" and from there to Quetta in Pakistan for training. One of the men was caught while crossing into Iran, and the other while on his way to Quetta.

What are the emerging threats and concerns after the Moscow attacks?

The Russian investigators have pointed a finger at the alleged "mastermind", but that does not rule out the possibility of involvement of a mercenary group. A deeper question is whether the IS and its affiliates are turning to mercenary recruitment, or have acquired mercenary interests by using their abilities, cadre, and propaganda machine.

The attack has presented a 'quick-damage-and-withdraw' model for urban warfare that may be used elsewhere. Pro-ISKP accounts have called for attacks on football stadiums in London, Paris, and Madrid during the ongoing UEFA Champions League. This may encourage lone wolves or radicalised individuals to carry out attacks. This week, the FBI arrested an 18-year-old who was on the radar for online IS radicalisation, who was enthused by the Moscow terror strike to carry out attacks on churches.

How do we then interpret the threat from the IS and its affiliates today? While claims by the IS and its affiliates cannot be taken at face value without investigating each case across countries, the excellent global counter-terrorism cooperation witnessed in the years after the 9/11 attacks does appear to be weakening. Mistrust among countries does not augur well at a time when multiple actors pose perhaps the gravest terrorist threat since the end of the IS caliphate.

Anju Gupta is a security analyst and a former Director General of Police

IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

"The balance of power has shifted decisively in Russia's favour, they are likely to win the war either by the end of this year or sometime in 2025... They will take somewhere between 20 and 40 per cent of Ukrainian territory"

WHY JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

Prof John Mearsheimer is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and is considered one of the most respected voices on international relations theory. His book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) is one of the most-recommended books for international relations scholars. Belonging to the realist school of thought in international relations theory, Mearsheimer's views on Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict are perceived as controversial and contrarian. His books, *Israel Lobby and the US Foreign Policy* (2007), and *Why Leaders Lie* (2010) challenge conventional thinking in international relations

"You don't want to provoke the Chinese unnecessarily, but that does not mean that India should do whatever China wants. India is much more powerful relative to China, than Ukraine is relative to Russia"

'If the Chinese threat were to disappear, then US and India wouldn't be nearly as friendly'

Political scientist John J Mearsheimer on US-India ties, why China wants to be powerful, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the power of the Israel lobby in the US. This conversation was moderated by Shubhajit Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*

Political scientist and theorist John Mearsheimer (right) in a discussion with Shubhajit Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*, Noida *Praveen Khanna*

Shubhajit Roy: In your book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, you write about how great powers are deeply suspicious of each other. Can you contextualise this in 2024?

My argument about how international politics works is that states operate in a world in which there is no higher authority, if you get into trouble. We call this, in the international relations world: anarchy. In such a system, where you can never be certain about the intentions of other states, where there may be powerful states that can hurt you... you have no choice but to fear other states. So you want to make sure that you have as much power as possible... If you could become a hegemon, that is the ideal situation. The problem is that all the states in the system understand that basic logic. And that's why, states compete with each other for security and why they worry about the balance of power.

India has, for several decades, been warning about China's rise not being a peaceful one. Do you think that an India-China conflict is inevitable?

Inevitable is too strong a word. A competition between India and China already exists, and if China continues to grow economically at an impressive pace, and China becomes even more powerful, relative to India than it is today, that competition will heat up. China will be deeply interested in making sure that its lines of communication from the east coast of China, through the Straits of Malacca, through the Indian Ocean into the Persian Gulf, are secure... this will upset the Indians and the Americans... The rise of China is a serious threat to the US. So, the more powerful China grows, the more India and the US will move closer.

India has so far made coalitions with like-minded countries like the US, Japan and Australia, to take on this Chinese threat. Will these coalitions last?

Relations between the US and India over time will be profoundly affected by just how powerful China is. If the Chinese threat were to disappear, then the US and India would not be anywhere near as friendly... Alliances are marriages of convenience... They are designed to deal with specific threats. When those threats go away, the alliances usually disappear.

What do you think China is thinking about India?

From a Chinese point of view, one main concern is the border between China and India. The Chinese want to grow very powerful relative to India. And they would then like to settle the border dispute on their terms... the best way to do that is to be really powerful. The Chinese understand what happens when you're weak in international politics. They call it the century of national humiliation. The Chinese were once weak and other great powers took advantage of them. They do not intend to ever be weak again. And therefore, if they do become more powerful than they are now, they will push hard to resolve the border dispute in their favour.

Do you think India is on track to be a great power?

The two principal ingredients of power are population size and wealth. During the Cold War, we had two great powers in the system, the US and the Soviet Union. It was a bipolar world. China was not a great power... But in the early 1990s, the Chinese economy began to grow... India is an aspiring great power in my lexicon. It certainly has the population size but not the requisite wealth. India is growing economically, and it could, eventually, become a great power. There's no question about it. But at this point, India is not considered wealthy enough to be ranked among the great powers.

Your views on the Russia-Ukraine war have been controversial. Why do you think the West provoked Russia?

I believe that the principal cause of the Ukraine war is NATO expansion. The West was determined to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's borders... You want to remember that the US decided, in the mid-1990s, to expand NATO eastward, despite the fact that it had promised Gorbachev that there would be no NATO expansion... And then in January 2021, President Biden moves into the White House. He has a longstanding reputation as a Ukraine hawk... It's no accident that a year and a month after Biden moves into the White House, the war breaks out... Two months before that, on December 17, 2021, Putin writes a letter to Jens Stoltenberg, head of NATO, and Biden proposing a possible solution to putting an end to this crisis and preventing a major war. What does the US do? It basically tells Putin that it has no interest in working out any diplomatic arrangement. If you go back and look, it's quite remarkable how little interest the US had in solving the problem diplomatically. And it's because we thought we could push NATO expansion down Russia's throat. If that did not work and a war broke out, we thought we could defeat the Russians.

Many would argue that this is exactly what Putin's argument has been. How do you counter that argument?

I don't view myself as Putin's puppet. I'm not interested in defending Putin. What I've always been interested in are facts and logic. Putin's explanation for what caused this war is correct... one argument against me is that Ukraine is a sovereign state and has the right to join the alliance and choose its own foreign policy. The problem with that argument is the Russians don't agree... because the Russians care about their own security... If you're a smaller country and you live next door to a great power, you have to be very careful in terms of choosing your foreign policy... Do you think any country in the Western Hemisphere has the right to choose its own foreign policy, if the US doesn't like what it's doing? Do you think that we thought that Cuba had the right to invite the Soviet Union to put missiles in Cuba in 1962? If Mexico or Canada, 10 years from now, decide that they want to invite China to build a military base on their territory, do you think the US is going to say, no problem? I can guarantee you the United States will go ballistic. The US has a Monroe Doctrine which says that the Western Hemisphere is our backyard... The same logic applies to the Russians... The Russians had no interest in conquering Ukraine before 2014, when the crisis first broke out. Michael McFaul, then-US ambassador to Moscow and a major critic of Putin, had said that Russians had no interest in conquering Ukraine or Crimea, before 2014.

If I take your logic to project it on India and China, India should also be careful about how it formulates its foreign policy so that it doesn't upset Beijing, and, therefore, Beijing is in its full right to do whatever it wants to do with India.

No, I agree with the first part of your statement, not the second part. The first part is that India should be very careful in dealing with China. There's no question about that... You don't want to provoke the Chinese unnecessarily, but that certainly does not mean that India should do whatever China wants. India is much more powerful relative to China, than Ukraine is relative to Russia. India is in a much better position to stand up to China, but at the same time, you want to be very careful in how you deal with China because China is a powerful country and it's in India's interest to avoid a war with China.

Putin has just been re-elected for another six years at least, and we don't see an end to the war. What is your prognosis of the war?

I actually think that the balance of power has shifted decisively in Russia's favour, and that Russia is likely to win the war either by the end of this year or sometime in 2025. When the war first started, it looked for most of 2022 like the Russians were going to lose the war, that Ukraine was going to win. But in 2023, the balance began to shift. The Russians mobilised huge numbers of troops. Their industrial base was spun up and began to produce huge numbers of weapons, and the Ukrainians began to run into trouble in 2023... So, what you essentially have here in Ukraine is a war of attrition, where two sides are fighting each other, and each side is trying to bleed the other white. And the side that is likely to win that war is the side that has greater manpower and has more artillery... There's little that Ukraine can do... So, I think the Ukrainians are going to end up losing this war. My argument is that the Russians will win an ugly victory, and they will end up taking somewhere between 20 and 40 per cent of Ukrainian territory.

What's your sense of Putin's power? Do you think there will be a vacuum after he's gone?

First of all, the Wagner group has been eliminated as a possible threat to his rule. Secondly, because economic sanctions have not hurt the Russian economy in any meaningful way, and because the Russians are winning on the battlefield, Putin's public standing is very high... To use an American phrase, he's in the catbird's seat at this point in time... He knows that Russia is in excellent shape economically and militarily. Now what happens after he leaves, I have no idea. Putin has gone to great lengths to make sure that he has no competitor... So, if he were to disappear from the scene, the Russians would have serious difficulties replacing him.

The Israel-Hamas conflict has been on since October 7. What are the reasons for the US administration's support to Israel?

The US has a remarkably close relationship with Israel... Why is this? The answer is the Israel lobby. You have this group of institutions and individuals in the US who work overtime to make sure that it supports Israel no matter what. If you look at what's happening in Gaza today, it's very clear that President Biden is deeply upset with Israel's behaviour... His administration has been trying to get (Benjamin) Netanyahu not to invade Rafah, and Netanyahu has just told the President, in no uncertain terms, that he's going to invade Rafah. He doesn't care what President Biden thinks... The Israelis know full well they can do whatever they want, and the Israel lobby will protect them on the American home front.

I was in Israel after the October 7 attacks, and I asked the same question to some of the Israeli scholars. The uniform response was that you overestimate our influence, our lobby. If we were that strong in the US administration, in the US Congress, Hamas wouldn't exist. You think that's a valid argument?

I don't understand what that means, that Hamas wouldn't exist. Hamas exists because the Israelis have created an apartheid state. There's no way that you can subjugate the Palestinians the way the Israelis do and not expect them to resist... and if Israel persists in maintaining an apartheid state in greater Israel, you'll have more resistance down the road. The Israelis are not going to defeat Hamas. Even if I'm wrong and they do defeat Hamas, there will be a new group that will come to replace Hamas. Every American president since Jimmy Carter has been committed to a two-state solution, and that involves giving the Palestinians a sovereign state of their own... The Israelis are adamantly opposed to it. In fact, Benjamin Netanyahu worked with Hamas to prevent it... The Israelis don't want to go down that road. But as long as there's no two-state solution, as long as the Palestinians in Gaza are in the largest open-air prison in the world, they're going to look for opportunities to resist.

Shalini Langer: Now we are heading towards a Trump White House, most likely. How do you think that the situation will change as far as both the wars go?

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, very little will change. Trump has made it clear that he supports Israel no matter what... With regard to China and East Asia, you won't see much change there. Trump, when he first got elected in 2017, ran against the policy of engagement. He said that engaging China was a flawed strategy and that China was an adversary and we should pursue containment... The place where Trump may radically alter American foreign policy, of course, is Europe and, more specifically, with regard to the Ukraine war and the NATO alliance. Trump wants to put an end to the Ukraine war. He wants to work with Putin... If Trump does have a free hand, he will put an end to the NATO alliance... It is important to emphasise, however, that the foreign policy establishment in the US will push back big time, as it did during his first term... so, we'll see.

Shubhajit Roy: In the US, Russia has been portrayed as a rival right now...

Oh, it's worse than that. Russia is the fount of all evil in the American story... Many Americans, especially in the Democratic Party, believe that Vladimir Putin is the equivalent of Adolf Hitler. These are not serious arguments... but you hear them all the time in the US.

Harish Damodaran: From the 1990s to the 2000s, we had two decades of hyper-globalisation, where everybody just focused on the economy. What actually broke this compact?

From 1991 to 2017, we lived in a unipolar world. There was only one great power on the planet, the United States... What we saw with regard to China was a country that presented a large market to us. It could help facilitate American prosperity. China, of course, looked at other countries through the same lens. It was a way to get rich. Globalisation was talked about all the time as the great panacea for solving the world's problems, but that world has gone away... Great power politics is back on the table, and in that world, security will always trump prosperity.

Aakash Joshi: One of the arguments is that Russia will come out of this conflict greatly diminished, because countries like Germany are diversifying energy sources and because China is a greater power. What do you make of this analysis?

Regardless of the war in Ukraine, China was always going to be a much more powerful state than Russia. China has a much bigger population than Russia, and it has much more wealth than Russia has... Actually, one could argue that as a result of this war, the Russians have rationalised their economy in smart ways, and they are actually doing quite well economically... This is not to say that Russia is going to catch up with China.

Shubhajit Roy: There are arguments that because of the sanctions, Russia's access to technology has diminished, and in the longer term, will diminish its potential for military industrial cooperation. You think that argument holds water?

No. I think evidence shows that the Russians are getting sophisticated technology from the Chinese and through other sources. I don't see any evidence that their military is suffering... How this plays out over time, I don't know... One of the principal consequences of this war is that the Chinese and the Russians have been pushed together. They have a deep-seated interest in helping each other economically and militarily, and, I think, the Chinese will do everything they can.

"Netanyahu doesn't care what President Biden thinks... The Israelis know full well they can do whatever they want, and the Israel lobby will protect them on the American home front"

Opinion

MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2024

ON BR AMBEDKAR'S BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

President Droupadi Murmu

Babasaheb Ambedkar, pioneer of social change and a versatile personality, made exceptional contribution to our country and society as a jurist, educationist, economist, social-reformer and political leader. Even today, his strong belief in the constitutional system is the foundation of our democracy and good governance

Wake-up call from SC

Govts, India Inc must stop their *laissez faire* approach to misleading advertisements

LAST WEEK, THE Supreme Court sent a singularly stern signal to the corporate sector against any attempt to take the public for a ride with misleading advertisements when it censured self-styled yoga practitioner Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna, founders of the consumer goods firm Patanjali Ayurved. The court refused to accept apologies from the duo for a second time. And the judges did not spare a state licensing authority over inaction in Uttarakhand, where the fast-moving consumer goods company is based. "What about all the faceless people who have consumed these Patanjali medicines stated to cure diseases which cannot be cured. Can you do this to an ordinary person?" the court asked the licensing authority. The court also expressed dissatisfaction with the AYUSH ministry which aims to propagate traditional medicines including ayurveda. The warning from the judiciary was much needed for an area where self-regulation has completely failed. Ad violations by brands are unfortunately routine, and reports by the Advertising Standards Council of India repeatedly flag healthcare and education as among the worst offenders.

Patanjali Ayurved had it coming. The court took note of the company's misleading ads promising that its products could cure all kinds of ailments including even Covid-19, which were "deliberate and wilful violations" of the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954. The latest reprimand followed a Supreme Court warning in November 2023 to fine the company Rs 1 crore if it made such claims, and a letter to the Chief Justice of India in January that highlighted how Patanjali continued to float misleading ads. It was bad enough that in 2021 during the peak of the pandemic, the company launched a product, Coronil, as the "first evidence-based medicine for Covid-19" in the presence of Union ministers.

If anything, it only showed an errant brand operating with impunity and government backing of pseudoscience in its zeal to promote and popularise home-grown or "Indian systems of medicine" as an alternative to "Western" medicine. The case against Patanjali unfolded after it riled the medical fraternity with an egregious dismissal of allopathy in August 2022. The Indian Medical Association filed a plea after Patanjali published an advertisement in newspapers titled "Misconceptions spread by allopathy: Save yourself and the country from the misconceptions spread by pharma and medical industry." There have been many examples of brands being at the receiving end of law over advertising violations. The larger issue, thus, is one of missing deterrence. At present, under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) can impose a penalty of up to ₹10 lakh on manufacturers, advertisers, and endorsers for false or misleading advertisements, and a fine of up to ₹50 lakh for a subsequent violation.

The CCPA has slapped penalties on several big brands across sectors including pharma and education. However, such action has been either too mild or too late. In the US, the Federal Trade Commission last year issued a public warning to 670 advertisers of health-related products that it could enforce fines of up to $50,120 per violation. Two years ago, a standing committee submitted a report in Parliament, suggesting that the consumer affairs ministry create a mechanism to control the menace of misleading and fake advertisements and recommending hefty penalties and bans. It's time the government takes considers such options and reviews existing laws to effectively deter advertisers from unfair and deceptive practices.

Mergermania isn't so bad for business after all

EVERYONE SAYS THAT mergers and acquisitions mostly fail. Now Bain & Co. brings a challenge to the received wisdom. The "Big Three" consulting firm says companies engaging in regular M&A actually deliver better returns than those who resist the urge to merge.

But there's a notable caveat that keeps the skeptical mantra alive — the bigger the deal, the more likely it will end in tears.

Bain's research is manna for anyone who garners fees from transactions — bankers, lawyers, spin doctors, not to mention its own corps of management consultants. Companies doing occasional M&A outperformed those focused solely on organic growth in the decades ending 2010, 2020 and 2022, Bain found. Those that did one or more deals a year performed even better. The natural conclusion? Every company needs an M&A strategy and should keep at it throughout the economic cycle. That's slide 1 of the pitchbook sorted.

The observation echoes similar findings by the Boston-based firm from 2004, when Bain looked at why dealmaking persisted despite mega-disasters like the AOL-Time Warner combination. But, more than $50 trillion of transactions later, the evidence in favor of doing regular, manageable M&A has become more pronounced.

Common sense suggests digestible dealmaking ought to do well. Companies don't normally embark on a takeover unless they anticipate benefits from eliminating duplicated costs, cross-selling to each side's customers or accelerating entry into new markets. Frequent M&A necessarily involves a series of relatively small targets. Such transactions should be easier to integrate; the acquirer's management team will be calling the shots without the governance fudge of fusing two similar-sized enterprises. There's also less risk that the deal becomes a distraction.

Companies that get takeovers right will find their shareholders encourage them to do more. Experience of combining operations begets success, which in turn begets more deals and more learning. The firms that mess it up presumably kick the habit. That still leaves the question of why the relative benefit of frequent M&A grew during the second decade of this century. One answer could be that the cheap-money era favored companies that chose to expand. Buyers probe areas they didn't previously, like the culture of the target. Websites provide a window on employee and customer satisfaction. Sniffing around networks of contacts can provide intelligence on the state of the business that's not published.

CHRIS HUGHES

Bloomberg

Shareholders still need to be vigilant. The fact remains that the bigger the target, the higher the chances things go awry. Bain looked at acquirers whose cumulative purchases were large relative to their market capitalization. The ones that dined regularly - say, drinks giant Constellation Brands Inc. - did far better than those who binged selectively. Due diligence hasn't improved sufficiently to mitigate the risks that go with a jumbo transaction; precautionary work around the inevitable people issues could still be improved. As the consultancy says, making big bets has proved enduringly risky, "which is why the best acquirers avoid it."

The latest crop of big M&A to mature shows the problem—from Bayer AG's lamentable purchase of seed-maker Monsanto, to Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield's leveraged expansion in shopping malls before the pandemic and Fidelity National Information Services Inc.'s botched acquisition of payments peer Worldpay. The "transformational" deal often delivers on its promise in a bad way.

Seasoned acquirers deserve the benefit of the doubt. But dealmaking for its own sake doesn't guarantee improved performance. Where an acquisition is about gaining scale, the question is whether the buying bosses will be able to run the target better. Where it's about obtaining new capabilities, investors should satisfy themselves the aspiring owner can preserve rather than squash the culture being subsumed. If the answer is no, or the target is just plain massive, shareholders shouldn't be afraid to deploy the old cliche about failed M&A.

After all, cliches persist because there's something to them.

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

ALL STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD BE BENEFITTED TO MODERNISE INDIAN FOOD SYSTEMS

Food systems under Modi 3.0

ASHOK GULATI, RITIKA JUNEJA, & PURVI THANGARAJ

Respectively, Distinguished Professor, Fellow and Research Associate at ICRIER

Views are personal

AS THE ELECTION campaign in India is hitting a high pitch despite rising temperatures, most of our pollsters are predicting a continuation of the incumbent government as Modi 3.0. The differences are more on the number of seats that the Bhartiya Janta Party and its allies will win. Interestingly, the Modi government has already asked various ministries to prepare plans that they would like to announce in the first 100 days of their third term. The ministries are contacting various experts to help them create the right policy framework that is suitable not just for the next five years but that is in sync with the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

As part of this exercise, here are some of our suggestions for the agri-food space.

First, we need to see this as a food systems transformation (see graphic). Agriculture has to produce not only more food, fibre and even fuel (biofuels) but it has to produce them with lesser resources. India's population is likely to go to about 1.6 billion by 2047. So, there will be more mouths to feed. With gradually rising incomes they will demand more and better food. Efficiency in the use of land, water, labour, and inputs like fertilisers and farm machinery is going to be critical. In other words, we must aim to raise our total factor productivity. It can be done only by putting in more resources in agri-R&D, innovations and extension.

Second, the production system is being threatened by extreme weather events triggered by global warming. The last April to March temperature has already hit the *Laxman Rekha* of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Last year's El Niño effect in India made its agri-GDP drop from 4.7% in 2022-23 to just 0.7% in 2023-24 (second advance estimate). This is high risk, which then triggers knee-jerk reactions to ban exports, put stocking limits on traders, and unloading government stocks at below their economic costs with a view to contain food inflation. The real solution lies in investing resources to create climate-resilient (smart) agriculture. This would mean more investments in seeds that are heat- and flood-resistant, more investment in water resources, not just in augmenting their supplies but also ensuring water is being used more wisely. 'More crop per drop' should not be just a slogan but a reality. Drips, sprinklers, and protected cultivation as part of the precision agriculture will have to be adopted at much larger scale than is the case today. Given that almost 78% of India's fresh water is used for agriculture, we must learn to use every drop of water wisely, else cities will starve for water. Bengaluru's water crisis is just a trailer. More is to come.

Third, we must realise that by 2047 more than two-thirds of India will be living in urban areas, up from about 36% today. Migration from rural to urban areas in search of higher productivity jobs is a natural process that cannot, and should not, be wished away. The implication of this is that much of the food will have to be moved from hinterlands to urban areas. This would require a massive logistics revolution, from transporting to stocking to processing and organised retailing. And this would open doors for large-scale investments, primarily by the private sector. The Modi 3.0 government will have to facilitate this transformation by changing laws that are suitable for Bharat@2047. Many of our laws are still those that we inherited from British India in 1947. A fresh set of rules that are more market-aligned would be the need of hour to build efficient value chains. Else, we are afraid, our post-harvest losses will mount.

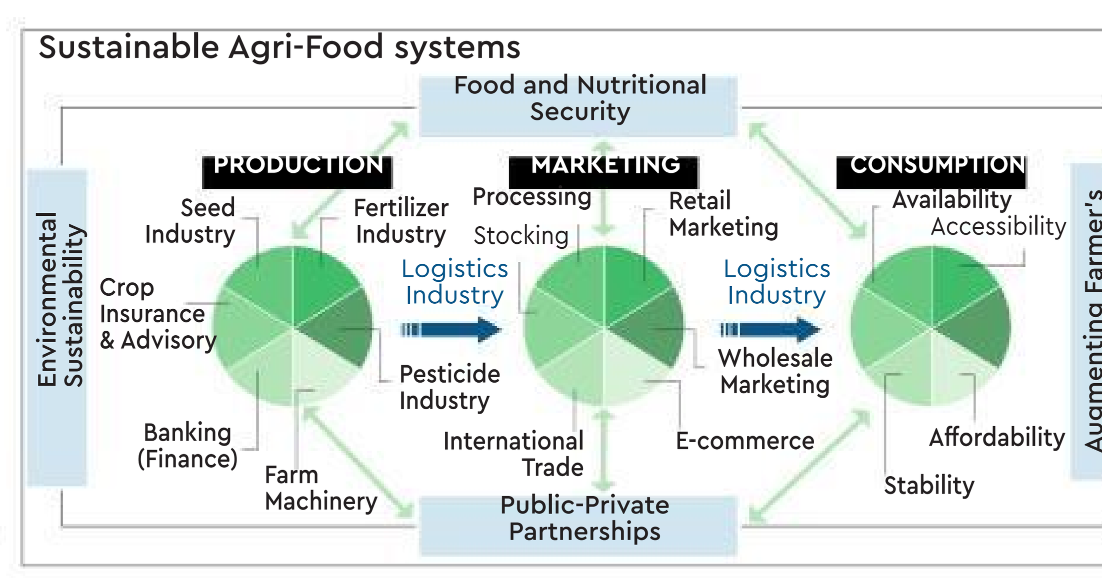
Fourth, in this food systems transformation, while all players from seed industry to farm machinery to processing and retailing are scaling up, farming is still fragmenting to smaller and smaller holdings. The challenge is to ensure that these small holders are brought together, through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) or cooperatives (as was done in milk sector, a la AMUL model), to create a scale that is demanded by processors, organised retailers, exporters. This institutional innovation is the key for inclusive Bharat.

Fifth, on the consumption front, we need to move beyond simple food security to nutritional security. Our malnutrition numbers, especially for children below the age of 5, are horrifying. With stunting today at 35%, how would they make an efficient labour force for Bharat@2047? For this to improve, besides sanitation, women education and immunisation, we also need to fortify our staples with micro-nutrients. The government has made a beginning with zinc-rich rice and wheat, but why is it shying away from Golden rice with beta carotene (Vitamin A-rich), when Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US have declared it safe, and even Bangladesh and Philippines have allowed its trials. Rice is our first crop, and most of those children that are malnourished today do consume a lot of rice. This needs to be fortified with high nutrition.

Sixth, all this cannot be done by the government. Public-private partnership is the way to go. The private sector can build efficient value chains, as also produce seeds that are climate resilient and more nutritious. The government has to provide a conducive policy framework. When the government can devise Production Linked Incentives-type schemes for industry, why not for food systems transformation for tomorrow?

Lastly, nothing much will move unless farmers' incomes improve. For that, we need to "re-purpose" our subsidy regimes, be it fertilisers or food. A minimum of 25 to 30% of ₹4 trillion subsidy on food and fertilisers can be saved if we move from a price-subsidy approach to direct income transfers to beneficiaries. These savings can be ploughed back to food systems for higher resilience and better nutrition.

Can Modi 3.0 do it? Only time will tell.



Decoding India-Mauritius DTAA protocol

PRANAV SAYTA
ARCHIT SHAH

Respectively, international tax and transaction services leader, and tax partner, EY India

Views are personal

Clarifications on prospective applicability and continuance of grandfathering would go a long way in providing much-needed clarity to international investors

THE GOVERNMENTS OF India and Mauritius have recently signed a protocol amending the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) with an intention of curbing treaty abuse for tax avoidance.

The protocol intends to include the concept of principal purpose test (PPT), which essentially means that tax benefits under the DTAA will not be available to the taxpayer if it is established that obtaining tax benefit was one of the principal purposes of the transaction or the arrangement.

Mauritius has been a preferred jurisdiction for investments in India over the last few decades. The DTAA between India and Mauritius was amended in 2016 (2016 protocol) to subject transfer of any investments made by a Mauritius entity into India post-April 1, 2017, to taxation. The treaty, thus, provided for exemption from tax investments made prior to March 31, 2017. Indian domestic tax laws also provide for exemptions from applicability of the Indian general anti-abuse rules (GAAR) for transfers of any investments made prior to April 1, 2017.

Even after the aforesaid amendment of the DTAA in 2016, considerable investments continue to be made into India from Mauritius. While the sale of shares of an Indian company acquired by a Mauritius entity post-April 1, 2017, does not enjoy treaty exemption in India, the sale of shares of a non-Indian company arguably continues to be exempted from tax, even if such a non-Indian company derives substantial value from India.

To address treaty shopping and to align the global base erosion and profit sharing (BEPS) agenda, the protocol intends to cover the following:

1. Amend the preamble of the DTAA to provide for eliminating double taxation without creating opportunities for non-taxation or reduced taxation through evasion or avoidance (including through treaty-shopping arrangements aimed at obtaining reliefs provided in this convention for the indirect benefit of residents of third jurisdictions).

2. Introduction of Article 27B — Entitlement to Benefits: The new article provides that the benefit under the treaty shall not be granted in respect of any income if it is reasonable to conclude that obtaining the tax benefit was one of the principal purposes of any arrangement or transaction that resulted directly or indirectly in that benefit unless it is established that granting the benefit was in accordance with the object and purpose of the treaty.

While the domestic GAAR provides that the main purpose of an arrangement should not be to obtain tax benefit, the PPT can be invoked even when one of the principal purposes is to obtain a tax benefit. Further, while domestic GAAR has more checks and balances, including the burden of proof on the revenue authorities and the need for an approving panel, the same is not mandated under PPT.

The above amendment seems to be in line with the recent changes in DTAA between India and other countries like Singapore, the Netherlands, etc. and further stresses the need for a commercial rationale for arrangements/ transactions. The amendment is expected to add a further burden on investors that are already prone to litigation on account of beneficial ownership and substance concerning Indian investments.

The amendment to the preamble along with the introduction of Article 27B has further cemented the intention of the two nations to strictly act upon tax avoidance and evasion

As per the protocol, both the countries are expected to be issuing notifications in due course and the later of the two notifications shall be considered the date on which the protocol can be considered effective. However, the language seems to create ambiguity on whether the protocol shall impact the income earned prior to it being effective.

While the intent of the protocol seems to suggest that it may apply only prospectively, or only to income earned (for instance, capital gains or dividend income) after the protocol becomes effective, the language, however, is not completely clear and does seem to create room for ambiguity in terms of its date and period of applicability.

Further, as stated above, the 2016 Protocol grandfathered and exempted future capital gains, on the transfer of investments made prior to April 1, 2017. As stated earlier, this is consistent with the grandfathering under the domestic GAAR as well. However, the current protocol seems to create doubt as to whether this grandfathering under the treaty continues to be available after the protocol becomes effective, and as to whether the PPT shall impact capital gains on future transfers even if the investment was made prior to April 1, 2017.

Appropriate clarifications on both the aforesaid aspects (prospective applicability and continuance of grandfathering) would go a long way in providing much-needed clarity and certainty to international investors and help reduce unnecessary controversy and litigation. It would also further enhance India's attractiveness as a fair and welcoming investment destination.

The amendment to the preamble along with the introduction of Article 27B has further cemented the intention of the two nations to strictly act upon tax avoidance and evasion. This amendment will require investors to substantiate strong and genuine commercial rationale for any transaction or arrangement to obtain the tax benefits as provided under the India-Mauritius DTAA.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Start-up downturn

While resourceful investors may have become more prudent, most start-ups continue to struggle. The so-called success stories are limited and fail to generate promising returns for retail shareholders, even as markets outperform. Lacking product-market fit, poor cash management, unclear business models, neglected marketing and sales functions, failure to hire the right people—these are some factors which contribute to a below-par performance of start-ups. High rate of interest and cost of credit prevents a firm from enjoying economies of scale. It is nearly impossible to produce a surplus and boost exports if the cost of material, labour, and production is high. Moreover, the lopsided IBC norms, which preserve lender interests and penalise the shareholder if the firm goes belly-up, offer a good escape route to a promoter sans accountability. It is time market regulators become more prudent too.

—Girish Lalwani, Delhi

High on indices, low on savings

The record levels of market indices and its ₹400 trillion m-cap has no doubt added a welcome sheen to the veneer of the economy. That said, some important factors would seem worrying. For a nation with a penchant for savings, that catered to its capital requirements, there is a relentless dip in gross domestic savings. In a decade it has dropped to 30% from 35% of GDP. The household debt figures too show a unwelcome trend. Non-mortgage debt is higher at 25% of GDP than the 10% of the mortgage class. This indicates consumption-led borrowing.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

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"History lies at the core of every conflict. A true and unbiased understanding of the past offers the possibility of peace

Ilan Pappé

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

40 YEARS OF GRIT AND DETERMINATION TO HOLD SIACHEN GLACIER

APRIL 13 marks a glorious and strategic milestone in the annals of Indian military history. It was the day the Siachen glacier came under decisive Indian control four decades ago through Operation Meghdoot. It brings back memories of humongous determination of our armed forces at the inhospitable terrain around 20,000 ft above sea level, where atmospheric oxygen is thin and night temperature could plummet to minus 40 degree Celsius. In a sudden swoop on April 13, 1984, Indian soldiers occupied almost all peaks and passes in the Saltoro ridge region hours before Pakistan had intended to do so as part of its cartographic aggression. Operation Meghdoot marked the beginning of the longest ongoing military operation in the highest and coldest global battlefield. An estimated 2,000 soldiers on the Indian side have since laid down their lives on Siachen, primarily due to extreme weather conditions. A bilateral truce announced in 2003 notwithstanding, both sides haven't withdrawn their presence there.

Much has changed in Siachen over the years as technological and logistical advancements have helped improve the living conditions of soldiers and given them a better chance to withstand the elements—avalanches, frost bites and other adverse conditions. An extensive network of tracks, all-terrain vehicles, special clothing, and advanced rations, besides heavy-lift helicopters and logistic drones for supplies in otherwise inaccessible areas have enhanced the support system on the icy frontier.

The 40th anniversary of Siachen's control came and went without much attention from the otherwise voluble netas, busy as they are with the ongoing election campaign. Attempts at demilitarising it were made at least thrice—in 1989, 1992 and 2006—but they fell through. Both sides came closest to clinching a deal during UPA-I under Manmohan Singh's watch in 2006, but it was spiked by policy hawk M K Narayanan, the national security advisor of the day. Details of how Narayanan's distrust of Pakistan derailed the initiative were revealed by then foreign secretary Shyam Saran in his 2017 memoir *How India Sees the World*. Siachen and Sir Creek in Gujarat could be the first bilateral friction points that could be resolved if Pakistan were to show real intent to put the terror genie back in the bottle. But expecting that to happen in the short term would be naive.

GOVT MUST PROTECT ANIMALS FROM DROUGHT

IT has been a dry and difficult year for most parts of the country, with the vagaries of a whimsical monsoon teaching us a few lessons in austerity. Karnataka, especially Bengaluru city, is on the brink of rationing water, with curbs on using precious potable water for washing cars and watering plants. While the drought has taken a toll on agriculture and left farmers in debt, it has also led to distress among wildlife whose habitats have dry water holes and sparse fodder. It's been a merciless summer without any spring showers—140 dry days on the trot—leading to a heat wave alert. Four elephants have died of heat-related causes and dehydration in the past few days in southern Karnataka, which is an indication of the condition of waterbodies in the forests.

While human beings are banking on technology to keep the water flowing until the situation improves, animals in forests are at the mercy of nature. Drought, and especially lack of water, leads to mass migration among both humans and animals—humans move towards cities in search of livelihood, while animals are forced to travel long distances looking for basic sustenance and water, and often enter human habitations, leading to conflict. The forest department does its bit to ensure that waterholes are filled up by installing solar pumps, which are powered by solar panels to pump water from borewells deep in rural areas and forests. Yet, this is not enough and does not ensure there is adequate fodder for herbivores. Likewise, crop damage across 40 lakh hectares in the past year in Karnataka is bound to lead to a food shortage in the coming seasons, affecting GDP and per capita income.

Conservation experts point out that such animal deaths are an indication that long-term measures are necessary to stave off an impending natural disaster. Humans play a big role in bringing on drought and exacerbating heat conditions by the indiscriminate use of land and water, change of forest land use, deforestation and destruction of catchment areas. It is time to stop and place checks on the exploitation of natural resources and degradation of animal habitats. The authorities have recognised the need for afforestation, with Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah directing the forest department to increase forest regions from 20 percent of the total land area of Karnataka to 33 percent, to prevent extreme weather conditions. While there is good news of a normal monsoon this year, we must not forget the trials of the past year with the first showers.

QUICK TAKE

LOOK EAST, TECHIES

JUST when a weak Western market is forcing tens of thousands of Indian IT workers from their jobs, the Far East is trying to lure them. Japan's cabinet office formulated a plan last week to attract investment and talent to the country's tech industries. It included easing norms for getting a visa and setting up a company. Japan, still nominally the second largest economy in Asia, is socially less accessible than big brother China. Indian workers looking to move east would do well to learn a lesson or two in assimilation from the hundreds of thousands of 'Nikkei Brazilians' who have made Japan their home.

Congress actions in the past threatened the independent functioning of the judiciary. Can the pall bearers of democracy in the 1970s pretend to be its standard-bearers in 2024?

THE TROUBLED PAST BETWEEN CONGRESS AND THE JUDICIARY

A SURYA PRAKASH

Vice-Chairman, Executive Council, Prime Ministers Museum and Library, New Delhi

SOURAV ROY

THE recent letter written by 600 lawyers to the Chief Justice of India expressing their "deepest anguish" about the manner in which a "vested interest group" was trying to pressure the judiciary and defame courts on the basis of "frivolous logic and stale political agendas" could not have come at a more appropriate time.

With so many politicians facing the heat because of corruption cases, the signatories to the latest missive to the Chief Justice refer to the "antics" of this group and caution him of the pressure tactics that are most obvious in cases involving corruption and tend to "threaten our democratic fabric".

Taking a cue from the letter by these lawyers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted to say: "To browbeat and bully others is vintage Congress culture." Five decades ago, they had themselves called for a committed judiciary—"they shamelessly want commitment from others for their selfish interests, but desist from any commitment towards the nation." This may sound harsh to the uninitiated, but for those who have lived through the dreadful Emergency (1975-77), this would be nothing more than a mild admonition.

The prime minister's tweet has indeed triggered a flashback to some appalling events in the 1970s that undermined the judiciary and virtually rendered it incapable of performing its fundamental duty to uphold the constitution at that time. The first of these was former prime minister Indira Gandhi's decision to supersede three judges of the Supreme Court—Justices K S Hegde, J M Shelat and A N Grover—in order to make A N Ray the Chief Justice. The then chief justice, S M Sikri retired on April 25, 1973, a day after the historic judgement in the *Kesavananda Bharati* case, in which the majority declared that parliament cannot alter or abridge the "basic structure" of the constitution. Indira Gandhi was furious with this judgement because it constricted the party's plans to bring in major amendments. So, the three judges were accorded "swift punishment" via supersession on April 26 and Justice Ray, who did not subscribe to the majority decision, was elevated.

The ruthless supersession of three eminent judges had obviously sent its message, as could be seen in the court's majority decision in *ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla* (also known as the *Habeas Corpus* case). This case arose when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency on June 25, 1975, and got the president to pass an order suspending all fundamental rights including the right to life and personal liberty (article 21). This led to a string of petitions challenging the presidential order, all of which were bunched together and heard by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice Ray and comprising Justices H R Khanna, M H Beg, Y V Chandrachud and P N Bhagwati. Attorney General Niren De told the court that so long as the Emergency was in force, no citizen could seek enforcement of the right to life and personal liberty.

Justice Khanna recounts in his autobiography *Neither Roses nor Thorns* that the other judges on the bench, who used to be vocal about human rights and civil rights, "were sitting tongue-tied" and hearing Niren De in silence, which seemed "rather ominous". He, therefore, decided to confront the Attorney General and asked him in view of his arguments, would there be no remedy if a police officer, because of personal enmity, killed another man. The Attorney General was absolutely candid in his reply. He told the court that "there would be no judicial remedy in such a case so long as the Emergency lasts". Further, he told Justice Khanna, "It may shock your conscience, it shocks mine, but consistent with my submissions, no proceedings can be taken in a court of law on that score."

However, though it shocked the conscience of the Attorney General, it did not prevent the majority on the bench to deliver what was clearly an unconscionable judgement and declare that citizens had no right to life and personal liberty during the Emergency! Justice Beg even went so far as to ask why those thrown in jail were complaining when they were "well-fed and well-treated" and the care bestowed on them was "almost maternal".

Only Justice Khanna dissented. Though he was the senior-most judge after Chief Justice Ray, the Indira Gandhi government superseded him in January 1976 and appointed Justice M H Beg as the Chief Justice.

Justice Beg was succeeded by Justices Chandrachud and Bhagawati. Thus, all judges who declared that citizens had no right to life and personal liberty went on to occupy the highest judicial office in the country.

In November 1976, the Congress with its massive majority brought in the obnoxious 42nd Amendment that sought to snuff out judicial independence and pave the way for a full-fledged dictatorship. Here is a glimpse of what senior members of the Congress Party had to say about the judiciary at that time:

C M Stephen: Now the power of this parliament (through the 42nd Amendment) is declared to be out of bounds for any court. It is left to the courts whether they should defy it. I do not know whether they will have the temerity to do that but if they do … that will be a bad day for the judiciary. The committee of the House is sitting with regard to the enquiry into the conduct of judges. We have got our methods, our machinery.

Has anyone come across a more blatant threat held out to the judiciary by a member of a ruling party in a democracy? But there is more.

Swaran Singh: Unfortunately, the courts transgressed the limits prescribed for them. It is a crude sort of invasion.

N K P Salve: In the life of every nation … there comes a time when the constitution has to be saved from the court and the court from itself.

In recent times, having got a severe drubbing at the hustings in 2014 and 2019, the Congress is desperately trying to cajole, threaten and manipulate institutions including the Supreme Court to try and remain relevant. But one should never forget or forgive those who turned India into a fascist state during the 1970s. More importantly, does it lie in the mouth of those associated with such a party to claim the right to defend democracy? In other words, can the pall bearers of democracy in the 1970s have the luxury of pretending to be its standard-bearers in 2024?

(Views are personal)
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THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF FOOD IN CULTURE

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

MERCY and truth, my friends, have met together," said the General. "Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man is frail and foolish. We have all been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness, we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason, we tremble. We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong."

"But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realise that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty."

These words are from *Babette's Feast*, a short story by Danish writer Isak Dinesen aka Karen Blixen, whose birth anniversary is on April 17. She is best known for her memoir, *Out of Africa*, on which the film of the same name was based. There is a Karen Blixen Museum in Nairobi, Kenya.

Babette's Feast, made in Denmark by director Gabriel Axel who also wrote the screenplay, won the Oscar in 1987 for Best Foreign Film. I found myself going back to both story and film for spiritual sustenance, driven by sadness about the ongoing food wars and inter-faith acrimony, gladness at the coincidence of several religious festivals, and desire to retell this beautiful story to a new generation of readers.

So, if you, like me, missed this classic of world cinema when it debuted, perhaps because it never came your way or you were the wrong age or not even born yet, I'd suggest you read Blixen's short story on the net and then watch the film on YouTube.

In sum, the story is about 'conflicting values, symbolised by food', as *The New York Times* put it back then. The action centres on the preparation and serving of a grand French dinner by a famous Parisian chef, Babette Hersant, a refugee in Denmark. Her art challenges 'the dietary staple of a rural Danish community of ascetics. The enjoyment of superb food, or of other sensual pleasures, is anathema to the two spinsters who lead the pious sect. Suddenly confronted with the arrival of Babette, who has fled France in the Communard uprisings of 1871, they reluctantly allow her to do the cooking'. One day, Babette wins 10,000 francs in a lottery, giving her the resources to show her artistry.

If ever a story taught that "the one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them" (Bible, Romans 14:3), it is *Babette's Feast*. It transcends to a metaphor for God's generosity as the General, the only gourmet at the table, recognises.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The story, *Babette's Feast*, is about 'conflicting values, symbolised by food'. It transcends food into a metaphor for God's generosity. This recognition of food as part of God's grace is found in all religions.

This recognition of food as part of God's grace is found in all religions. Since we're sharing *Babette's Feast*, let's look again at the Bible. Jesus drew from a compassionate vision of God, from divine commands as in Deuteronomy 24: 17 – 19: "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

Bible scholars say that the chief crops in the old Judeo-Christian land were wheat, barley, olives, grapes, lentils, fava beans, chickpeas, onions, leeks, garlic, grapes, dates, apples, melons, pomegranates and figs. The people there also raised cattle, sheep and goats, and fished in the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. They made wine from grapes and ate unleavened bread. Olive oil, vinegar and a mint-like herb called hyssop were used as flavourings and bean-stews like cholent were made for Sabbath. We know Jesus ate fish because in Luke 24:41 – 43, he asks, "Have you any food here?" "And they gave him a piece of broiled fish. And he took it, and did eat before them."

Jesus is said to have passed bread and wine around the table to his twelve disciples at their last supper together, saying the bread was his body and the wine his blood. This is the origin of Communion, the Christian ritual where the priest administers a wafer and a sip of wine to each believer in symbolic union with Christ.

Jesus called himself "the true vine" in John 15:1 – 6 and said in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Such belief leads to grace even if we pray differently or are different, as witnessed in this story. A blind old man was tottering uphill to the temple at Tirupati. Some passersby could not resist asking him the obvious question. "We are climbing for Balaji's *darshan*. Why are you bothering to make the effort when you can't see?" they joked, not out of malice but with the unthinking condescension that is often handed out to those who don't get to tick all the boxes. The old man knew how to answer them. A radiant smile swept across his wrinkled face and he said, "So what if I can't see the Lord? He can see me."

With both fasting and feasting thick this month, does it not seem like a message from on high to show grace to each other? Because the Lord sees us?

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

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Individualised politics

Ref: *E24: Seeking mandate for me and myself* (Apr 14). We can clearly see a shift towards individual supremacy in Indian politics. Our political and cultural future will be significantly shaped by the results of the coming polls, which will also reflect the worldwide trend toward individualised ideology.

Ashribad Sahu, Rayagada

Coalition pioneer

Ref: *The choice—the repeat of 2014-24 or throwback to 1989-98?* (Apr 14). The author should have included Manmohan Singh's regime of 2004-14 also. He is the pioneer of coalition governance in India. Though he had a few setbacks, he successfully completed his 10-year regime. In the US-India nuclear deal, he threatened to resign if he was not given freedom to complete it. India needs such a leader.

P Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai

Forward, backward?

The author put forth his arguments quite convincingly. But what struck me is, many Modi supporters themselves do not highlight these points in their electioneering speeches. The INDIA leaders loudly raise local issues, drowning the BJP's voice. The choice is clear: Should we move fast forward to the future or backwards to the past?

V Janakiraman, Tiruvarur

Talk policy

The INDI Alliance should think twice before spreading falsehoods along the lines of Modi being a 'dictator'. One wonders if they will elaborate on their own policy instead of continuously just badmouthing their opponent.

D S Pillai, Chittoor

'Health' products

The Indian Medical Association filed a case against Patanjali for misleading advertisements on their products and the Supreme Court rightly admonished them. But there are products like Bournvita and others that claim to be health products, which is not correct. The SC should take up the case suo moto.

P Venkateshwar Rao, Hyderabad

Global turmoil

While the proxy war between Iran and Israel over the years itself had global ramifications, an eye to eye confrontation may subvert the regional stability in West Asia and may have an adverse spillover effect. No country is insulated or isolated from global turmoil. Rather than escalating the conflict, global powers organisations like the UN must work to avert the war.

M Rishidev, Dindigul

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CONTRAPUNTO

Only the dead have seen the end of war

–GEORGE SANTAYANA

Shadows Catch Fire

Iran-Israel conflict has taken a historic wrong turn. Global focus has to be on preventing further escalation

Unlike on Oct 7 last year, Israeli defences held up excellently against Iran's attack this weekend. They successfully intercepted over '99%' of the 300 drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles Iran fired. This attack is 'historic' – because hitherto Iran had fought Israel in the shadows and by proxies. It also threatens to tip West Asia into a wider conflagration – even as Gaza is already laid to waste and the Ukraine war has entered its third year. Condemning the attack is the easier part. What's really needed is talking both countries down from the edge of wild escalation.

Damascus's toll | In both countries, not to mention US, there are hardliners baying for escalation. And they all cite international law, very selectively. Iran retaliated against the April 1 Israeli strikes on its Damascus consulate within 13 days, but it hardly considers other countries' diplomatic privileges sacrosanct. It describes the historic attack on Israel as 'legitimate self-defence', but on the opposite side Netanyahu uses this same card no less righteously.

MSC Aries's warning | Also this weekend, Iranian troops descended from helicopters to seize a commercial ship, as it passed through the Strait of Hormuz. Reason? 'Israel links'. Indians form the majority of its crew. This is not the first time Indian sailors are taking collateral damage. But any sustained disruption of energy supply will cause more broad-based hurt. In US, the economic repercussions of increased chaos in West Asia would impact Biden's chances of re-election. Inflationary pressures would be unpleasant here as well.

Hardliners' sway | Biden's role to maintain homeostasis is going to be incredibly important here. He has indicated that US will not participate in offensive operations against Iran. But while much is heard about his suboptimal relationship with Netanyahu, the one with Iran is even more wanting. Following the attack on Israel, Iran's parliament reportedly cheered, 'Death to Israel! Death to America!' What reckless actions such a mood can propel is worrying. Billy Joel is right on this – who 'didn't start the fire' is less important than who 'tried to fight it'.

Thought For Food

Govt advisory on 'health drinks' highlights the larger challenge of regulating misleading claims

GOI advisory on categorising Bournvita and other beverages as 'health drinks', follows food safety authority FSSAI's remark to ecommerce websites on April 2. FSSAI had asked for appropriate categorisation of foods on sites. It pointed out that since the term 'health drink' was neither defined nor standardised in the 2006 food standards law, or in any rules thereafter, no drink could claim to be 'healthy'.

'Health' is wealth – for companies | FSSAI made the right call in tackling the nub of the issue – categorisation as a 'health drink'. India has consumed malt-based beverages for generations. White beverages – such as Horlicks, Boost, Bournvita – make up about 70% of the ₹14.4b market. Users are children across India, who reportedly consume three times more than recommended values of added sugars.

Some believe malt-based beverages should be seen as ultra-processed food, responsible for child obesity and teen diabetes.

Online, ad is product | Companies argue their formulations are clearly labelled, that consumers make informed choices. But for decades they've been advertised as aids to stronger, taller, smarter growth. Shop sales is one thing, but on online stores, the ad is the product – all you do is click. Recall that a govt ban on advertising of infant food and milk substitutes, for babies less than 24 months old, curtailed these products' growth in India, promoting breast milk and home food.

Market maturity | Indian food companies, and MNCs operating in India, advertise even snacks as 'healthy', but resist labelling. But consumer awareness forced ice cream giants to relabel their sugar overkills as frozen desserts. It's a sign of a maturing market. That said, a large section of buyers choose basis advertising and labels. Most consumers don't think through the health implications of popular products. For many, a ₹5 biscuit packet, a malt-drink sachet or instant noodles is the cheapest food around.

What this episode highlights is the dire need for food safety regulations and monitoring. Bournvita has been in the eye of a storm since last April. The company responded to a social influencer's video on its sugar content with a legal notice. That's not how healthy markets or iconic brands operate.

Skin democracy

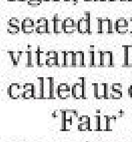
It leaves no one feeling blue or seeing red anymore

Shinie Antony

Human beings are widely available in black, white, brown, olive, yellow, and (post-Trump) even orange. 'Wheatish' women, however, were to be found only in India, a rare shade aided by the arrival of bleach creams in early 80s. The British had left but we wanted their pelt.

Armed with golden moustaches, sideburns and even eyebrows (if the hand was unsteady), women battled racism any way they could. Young girls were kept indoors, like homegrown Draculas away from sunlight, and served lightly blanched to suitors in dim-lit drawing rooms, carefully seated next to female relatives of a deeper hue. Occasionally they succumbed to vitamin D deficiency and everyone could envy the corpse its pallor. If anyone called us colourist we didn't blush – our skin did not allow it.

'Fair' crept in fairly early on, skipping past 'carnival' and 'justice' in meanings to describe human hide. Cavemen who clubbed women on the head chose only those with alabaster complexions. Victorian women munched on arsenic wafers to maintain a pale, interesting air. Skin should be pure and flawless, said MNCs, selling us talcum powder and fairness creams. '*Nalla* colour' or '*romba* colour' in the South is *gori-chitti* in the North; 'colour *illa*' (literally no colour) is *pakka rang* (fast, unfading colour). When the fairest of our land go abroad and face racial bias, we scrub our skin harder. Out damned spot. Apparently, under our naughty rebel skin is another Snow-White layer waiting to be kissed awake by the right lotion.



It was a dark period for skin, the largest organ. Witch-hunted and burnt with chemical peels and acid facials. Glutathione injections and laser treatments replaced the homely turmeric, milk, sandalwood paste and saffron. Even a face-wash promised clear, transparent, see-through skin. 'Fair' gave way to radiant, glowing, brightening, luminous, pearly, dewy, peachy; 'dark' became sultry, dusky, honeyed, sun-kissed. Skin transplants seemed to be drawing nigh... Will man hunt man for skin?

Epidermis is only a stretchy covering for the body, with the face taking merely 2% surface area. Unless we walk around naked that's very little on show. As long as organs don't fall out, skin's doing its job. Nothing is black and white; Indian complexions go beyond colorimetric tools. Shadeism so over, it leaves no one feeling blue or seeing red anymore – just tickles us pink. Fair-skinned milky-white maidens in old fairy tales are now busy getting a tan.

Israel, Don't Bomb Iran Back

An Israeli political analyst outlines what his country has 'gained' from foiled Iranian attacks. Keeping global opinion on Tel Aviv's side means making sophisticated choices

Attila Somfalvi

Columnist based in Tel Aviv

The morning after the failed Iranian attack, Israel is examining how to respond. This public debate, like around any topic in this country, stirs up all the demons and emotions. Anytime you put two Israelis in one room, you'll come out with three different opinions.

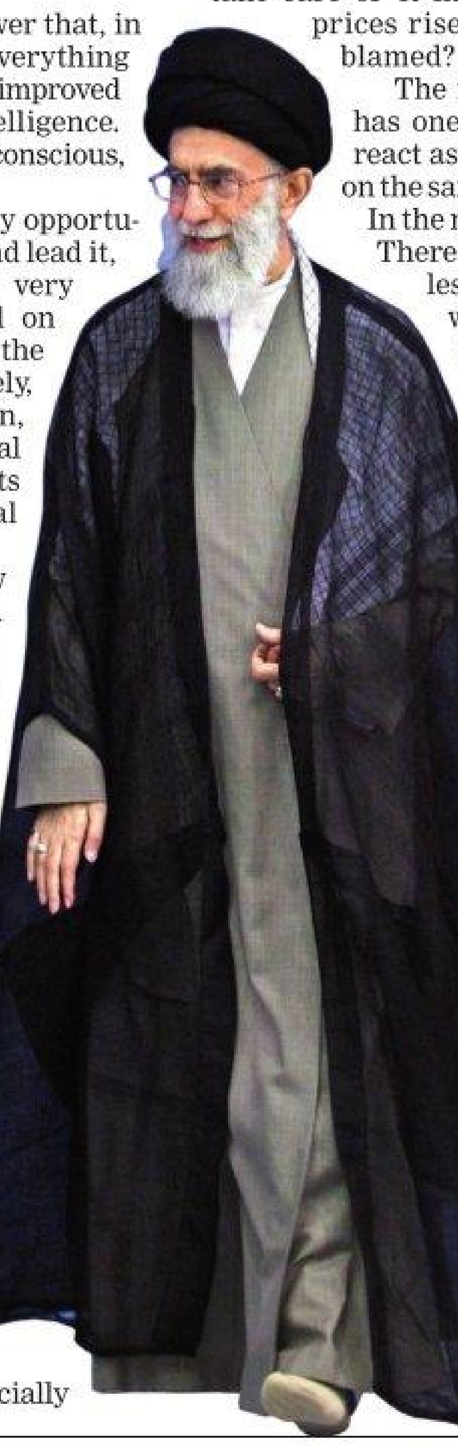
Israel is now fighting (within itself) on two fronts of influence and awareness. The simpler front is the kinetic response front. Should we shoot or not? Bomb or not? And if so – where? When? How much? These are the relatively simple questions that circulate in the basic influence space of the power games in West Asia. If we respond, how will it affect? If we don't, how will it be perceived?

How can Israel create a significant impact on awareness and thus strengthen deterrence? This question is simple because it does not include deep thought about regional alliances, international relations, international communication, and the Security Council. It's a game of influence at the most basic level. They shot at us, we shoot at them. They didn't hit, we will hit – and then (maybe) they will be scared. Or not.

On the other hand, the more complex battle of influence and awareness requires much more restraint, much more thought, and, mainly, cool-headedness. Although the response in this case might be delayed, outcomes would be much more significant than those achievable by a mere reaction.

Consider how the failed Iranian attack provides Israel with countless points of conscious credit:

- Iran is the aggressor – the whole world against it.
- World stopped (for a moment) focusing on Gaza. An opportunity for some diplomatic improvements.
- World understands what Israel has been claiming for years: Iran is a terror state. Everyone is talking about the failed Iranian missiles and UAVs, and about Israel's amazing defence systems.
- Key Western countries, led by US, the real backbone of Israel, along with moderate countries in West Asia, acted together against the Iranian attack on Israel. This is unprecedented, and it's an amazing achievement.
- Israel is a technological superpower that, in one night, regained its top spot in everything related to air defence and dramatically improved its image in the field of precise intelligence. After Oct 7, this too is a very important, conscious, achievement.
- Israel has an extraordinary opportunity to change the narrative and lead it, and to frame/position Iran very negatively. This will depend on the influence capabilities of the Israeli system. Unfortunately, these are not, as we have seen, great. But there is huge potential here to turn all the spotlights towards Tehran, the global capital of terror.
- The whole world saw what "Iranian power" is. A terror state that for years threatened Israel with North Korea like parades, failed against the startup nation being attacked. Israel's defence systems schooled the Iranian terror state whose essence is fear and intimidation. From the moment it used its capabilities, they were exhausted. In the battle of awareness today, Israel is strong, Iran is weak. Iran is aggressive, small Israel is successfully defending itself.



In the face of these achievements, if Israel attacks just for the sake of it, it may find itself losing the international support it has received. Remember how on Oct 7, that terrible day, it seemed as if the world was with us, standing by Israel's side. It took between 3-10 days for that to change.

Public opinion flips quickly, especially after Israel goes on the offensive. Why? Nothing compares to Oct 7, and therefore, in the Iranian case, Israeli aggression that increases global instability will not be well received. What today seems like an operational, security, and diplomatic achievement for Israel can turn around within hours.

And it will indeed turn around. The Russians will take care of it in the Security Council, and if oil prices rise (for example), guess who will be blamed?

The internal struggle is not easy but it has one clear conclusion: Israel must not react as Iran did. Israel must not fight Iran on the same battlefield.

In the missile arena, Iran took a strong hit. There is no need to prove, again, how much less good it is than Israel. The whole world is talking about Israeli power, and about the regional alliance against Iran. And against the Iranian nuclear plan, which is exactly what Israel needs and wants. Not another unwinnable front.

Naked aggression, not sophisticated, not realising significant security achievements and meaning, will not benefit Israel. It is secret, sophisticated actions, in the style of Mossad – those who bomb Iranian targets without traces – that will enhance the halo around Israel, and allow world powers to continue supporting it.

The battle for awareness is no less important than the amount of bombs to be mounted on the planes that will bomb Iran. Around the decision-makers' table, the test of consciousness must be the central consideration. Just bombing Iran will neither make the right impression for Israel, nor contribute to building its strength in the region and the world.

'Global media often paints one-sided picture'

State-owned Prasar Bharati's ex-CEO, predecessor to the current chief, argues foreign press ignores good news from India

Shashi Shekhar Vempati

In the contemporary global landscape, media's role is pivotal in shaping public opinion and understanding of international affairs. In this intricate web of narratives, the portrayal of India on the world stage is subject to the influence of various factors. The complex interplay of global power dynamics casts a long shadow on how India is portrayed on the world stage, fuelled by multiple factors and often amplified by anti-India propaganda promoted by various actors.

Good news abounds | A recent analysis published in *The Communicator*, a journal from Indian Institute of Mass Communications (IIMC), suggests that negative narratives about India may be finding their way into mainstream media through manipulation.

Global media coverage often paints a one-sided picture, neglecting positive developments and reinforcing negative stereotypes. This underscores the imperative to showcase India's progress and achievements, positive facets frequently overshadowed by negative narratives.

High electoral integrity | Common misrepresentations revolve around claims of 'weakening of democracy' and around false allegations of 'violation of citizens rights'. However, as the world's largest democracy, India boasts a vibrant multi-party system with regular elections in a highly competitive landscape.

India's electoral system remains robust and admired by many advanced democracies. Special efforts made to enrol young voters, women, third gender community, persons with disabilities and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups exemplify how inclusivity and accessibility have been prioritised.

Everyone's better off | Inclusivity as a mantra has gone beyond merely empowering all citizens to participate in elections to now making all citizens stakeholders in economic growth and development. This is evident in the manner in which living standards have risen apace with significant strides in the economy. Financial inclusion has expanded to over 80% of adults through tech-enabled initiatives such as the JAM trinity.

Income inequality has witnessed a decline, supported by a widening tax base and increased filings, with 82 million income tax returns filed in assessment year 2023-24. India's prudent economic management over the last decade has yielded remarkable results, with tripling of indirect tax collections since GST was implemented.

Digi-wealth makes jobs | India's unique developmental model based on building Digital Public Goods Infra (DPGI) has seen indigenous platforms like India Stack, Aadhaar, UPI, and GSTN attract global attention. These facilitate seamless transactions and governance, making essential services more accessible and efficient for citizens. DPGIs are a fine example of how India has democratised access to digital tech to eliminate the digital divide across public services. Initiatives like Standup India, Rozgar Mela and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana have been instrumental in stimulating job creation and economic empowerment to level the playing field for small entrepreneurs.

These success stories of digital inclusivity and economic empowerment demonstrate the health of democracy in India, beyond elections and free expression. India's development has been multi-dimensional, showing marked improvements across various global indices, from innovation and logistics to digital readiness.

EC must act against media | This upward trend reflects commitment to growth that reaches and benefits every citizen. Notwithstanding India's economic growth under Modi, global media's narrow and flawed perspective on India has been a case of missing the woods for the trees, bordering on foreign interference in India's electoral process. Foreign influence operations originating from China having interfered in elections in other democracies are well established.

There are serious concerns on how deepfake tech could be weaponised by malicious foreign actors to vitiate India's elections, and undermine democracy. The coordinated manner in which flawed commentary on India appears across multiple global media outlets, calls for suitable intervention from EC, to empower fact-checking and clampdown on errant platforms and media outlets.

India as role model | India's robust democracy is the cornerstone of its bright future, underpinned by an electoral system that empowers its citizens' voices. This vigour is a catalyst for tangible economic progress, visible in the surge of employment opportunities and a burgeoning digital framework. Commitment to inclusive growth and an expanding global influence has established India as a formidable global power.

The world's largest democracy cannot be trifled with by global media outlets without consequence. It's the Indian democratic experiment that gives hope to Global South on a democracy's ability to deliver inclusive growth and sustainable development. A strong message must go to global media outlets that undermining Indian democracy is tantamount to undermining aspirations of over a billion Indians, as well as hopes of billions across Global South who look up to India as a role model for democracy and development.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacredspace

What are the marks of a 'true vegetarian'? The true vegetarian, as I think of him, is filled through and through with reverence for life. He reveres life as a gift of God which no man can bestow and, therefore, will not destroy.

Dada J P Vaswani

Da Vinci: Unveiling Compassion Through Cuisine

Sumit Paul

'I have from an early age abjured the use of meat, and the time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men.' – Leonardo da Vinci.

One of the greatest minds in recorded history, Leonardo da Vinci was a sensitive man. Only a sensitive man like him could have painted the legendary Mona Lisa, La Gioconda. Are sensitivity and vegetarianism interwoven human attributes? Perhaps, they are. Ghazal maestro Mehdi Hasan once told me that he gave up eating meat with these words, "Ibadat-e-mausiqi mein jaanwaron ke qatl se khalal padta hai" – the worship of music is hampered by the killing of animals.

Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi was also a vegetarian. He believed that all lives were sacred, "Even a seemingly lifeless stone has a degree of consciousness; respect it." Like many mystics, especially Rabia Basri, Rumi was a staunch vegetarian and shunned even milk and milk products. They were today's vegans. Rumi even refrained from sacrificing animals as an Islamic ritual on Eid-al-Adah, Bakrid.

This is the apogee of compassion and fellow feeling. Here, the point is not to condemn non-vegetarianism. It is just a symbol, a metaphor, to be precise. This shows the totality of compassion and a complete banishment of violence of any imaginable sort.

Animals are not inferior creatures. Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his notebook, "Look at all animals as you look at humans." This creates sensitivity that further blossoms into universal empathy. The sanctity of every life is to be saved and preserved.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Da Vinci makes us believe that what we eat, directly influences our thinking. It is like the Eastern thinking: 'Jaisa anna, vaisa mann.' If we consume an animal, its blood and gore will make us act like a slaughterer. Elsewhere, he said, "Truly man is the king of beasts, for his brutality exceeds them. We live by the death of others. We are burial places."

Instead of circulating inauthentic and unverified teachings of Rumi and Leonardo da Vinci, maybe we should popularise their spiritually trenchant views on animal-killing for one's palate. Rumi, da Vinci, Keats, Einstein, Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, Shelly, GB Shaw, Pythagoras, and Alexander Pope were all vegetarians.

Our compassion is often limited to humans. It doesn't encompass all creatures. We often argue that animals were created by the Creator for human consumption. This, a very warped way of thinking. Creator, if at all it does exist, cannot be so ruthless as to create animals for our palate.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "Sensitivity makes us compassionate, and compassion is not just a quality. It's a virtue. A virtuous heart is always ethical and embraces all creatures on the Earth; from the tiniest to the biggest. So, be sensitive and compassionate to all." And Leo Tolstoy underscored this by saying, "Compassion and vegetarianism go hand in hand." They indeed go together. We need to love animals, not devour them.

April 15 is Leonardo da Vinci's birth anniversary

Broaden Base to Fill Boardrooms

Workforce inclusiveness can power bottom lines

The number of companies putting in place enabling strategies for women to advance their careers is rising smartly. This is a necessary step for arresting the flight of mid-career female talent that accompanies the growth of most companies. Although corporate hiring of women has grown, numbers start thinning out as their female workforce confronts work-family trade-offs after a decade in their jobs. This has led to a flurry of corporate intent to retain them, but supporting HR strategies have largely been missing. Companies are now moving into the next stage of their diversity journey by offering women the extra training they need to move past their higher mid-career hurdle.

This is an advancement over the rhetoric surrounding women in the boardroom, where participation falls woefully short of goals imposed by regulations. Since the talent pool is not growing fast enough, companies struggle to appoint women directors. Upskilling further down the funnel is critical to widening its top, and it is vital to ensure greater female participation at that stage in roles stereotyped for men, such as in negotiations and profit delivery. Alongside this, companies need to work on the male response to having more women in functions that are critical to the company's growth.

Productivity gains from putting women's careers on the fast track will be sustainable if companies can offer pathways that reduce the gaps in work-life choices by men. Of course, these strategies are industry-specific, but there are common addressable strands across companies, for instance, making functional roles gender-neutral. There is also scope for a corporate response that is more organisationally and financially supportive of the greater family demands women face. Workforce inclusiveness must be sustainable for it to work and break through a long history of male bias. Companies that can tool their diversity strategy to their bottom line are expected to power ahead in this race.

Do We Really Need Summer to Vote?

As the heat of the campaigning for the seven-phase general elections, beginning April 19, intensifies, so is the temperature in most parts of India. To meet high power demand, GoI has directed all gas-based power plants to operate in May and June and has issued an advisory to all states and UTs to implement measures to protect workers in factories, mines, construction sites and brick kilns. EC and NDMA have also released advisories on tackling heat.

These steps have come on the back of several warnings. Earlier this month, the World Meteorological Organization's report stated that 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded, and 2024 could be worse. The Indian Meteorological Department, too, forecasts higher-than-average temperatures and almost double the number of heat-wave days — 10-20 days, against the four-eight days every summer.

Yet when we hear the ongoing poll discourse, rising heat, which can have deep health and socioeconomic impact on voters, is hardly on any party's agenda. No political party has released guidelines for their foot soldiers or those who will attend rallies, even though extreme heat events can lead to illnesses, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heatstroke, hyperthermia, and even death. In April 2023, 11 people died at an open-air rally in Navi Mumbai. Instead of waiting for such mishap(s) to happen, political parties must release heat SOPs, avoid public gatherings during afternoons, and use this time to engage with voters on heat mitigation and adaptation strategies. Voters must demand that heatwaves be notified of a national disaster to ensure adequate funding for response, relief and rehabilitation efforts. With climate change's impacts becoming more visible, extreme weather events must become an issue in elections, both for choosing poll timing and tenure, and a step for devising a multi-sectoral heat management plan.

JUST IN JEST

Our cricketing nation could be a footballing one if we focus on talent in five states

Make MMWPG Great As a Footballing Side

Since 2018, Iceland has stood out as a catcall for Indian football fans. With a population of 3.82 lakh — about the population of Latur in Maharashtra in 2011 — its national football team features regularly in the highly competitive stratosphere of European tournaments. In the 2018 World Cup, it reached the group stage, drawing with Argentina in their opening match. India, with its great aspirations, is crap in football. This embarrassing matter, especially for a country that takes great pride in being a nation of international football fanboys, is an elephant in the football field. The 'problem' is that India doesn't *really* want to be a football-playing nation.

But where there is data, there is an explanation, if not intent. Research by former All India Football Federation head of player development Richard Hood has found that this country of over 1.4 bn people has over 65% of its top footballers coming from only five states — Manipur, Mizoram, West Bengal, Punjab and Goa. While India sporadically breaks into 'debates' over 'veg-non-veg nation', it avoids the more real one over 'cricket-football'. We're kings of cricket, as players and spectators, a sport played by a dozen-odd countries. If we want to get 'global', football is a better bet. And to do that, it may make better sense to focus on the footballing prowess of these MMWPG states.

EYES WIDE SHUT

For better jobs, don't just look West, look to places like Japan

Time to Seek Out the East

Neeraj Kaushal

Go Tokyo

A substantial part of India's demographic dividend lies outside its shores, in countries like Japan, with shrinking working age and rising elderly populations. To encash this dividend, we need concerted initiatives and investments to upgrade the skills of Indian workers that are specifically required in these countries.

This is an excellent opportunity for staffing companies to liaise between Japanese firms and Indian workers, train Indian workers on cultural competence and ethics to excel in Japan and establish trust that Indian workers can deliver services without ruffling Japanese social fabric.

Demographers use the term 'demographic dividend' to describe the economic benefits that a country enjoys from its large young population. India has one of the world's largest reservoirs of youth. Yet, it has caused us to worry about unemployment rates and stagnant wages. Many want to go to the West for better jobs and higher salaries. But there are largely unexplored opportunities in the East.

Over the past three decades, Japan's working-age population shrank 15%. The trend will continue. Japan's ability to manage its economy with the shrinking labour force is weakening, a reality that local Japanese political leaders acknowledge. A survey by Kyodo News in 2023 found that 86% of municipalities want more foreign workers.

It is common to see highly skilled Indians, such as engineers and tech experts, in Japan. On a recent visit to Fujikawaguchiko, a Japanese resort town in the northern foothills of Mount Fuji in Minamitsuru district, I met two Indian engineers. They mentioned that there were 400 Indian engineers working at Suzuki factories in their district or prefecture. Yet, Japan needs workers not just at the very high end, but also at various spectrums of skills, such as drivers and construction workers. And India can provide them in large numbers.

Hardworking Japanese society has handled its demographic challenges with remarkable dignity. It has used multiple means to increase its labour force internally by:

- Raising the historically low workforce participation of women. It has now increased from 58% in 1991 to 75% in 2020.
- Relaxing norms of retirement age and increasing overtime. Japan's male labour force participation is one of the highest in the world at 87%. Japanese people retire yet continue to work within their communities voluntarily.

However, it now appears that the sources of workers who could possibly keep the labour force from falling have been exhausted. Consider these:

- The average age of taxi drivers in Japan is 59 years.
- A fourth of the skilled workforce in the construction sector is older than 60. Few new sources of labour exist, and size of the construction workforce has shrunk 27% since 2000.
- Labour scarcity is so acute that in 2022, about 40% of businesses hired workers aged 70 or older, and allowed older workers to continue working. Japanese industry is investing heavily in labour-saving devices. But so far, labour savings from such investments are modest.

Japan needs workers not just at the very high end, but also at various spectrums of skills, such as drivers and construction workers. And India can provide them in large numbers

- Most Japanese employers expect their employees to work overtime, and workers consider it their duty to do so. However, excessive overtime can be dangerous for the elderly.

The work-style legislation of 2019 caps overtime at 45 hrs a month and 360 hrs a year. But several sectors facing severe labour shortages — including truck and bus drivers, construction workers, and doctors — were exempted.

Starting April, overtime work in construction is restricted to 720 hrs (or 15 hrs a week, assuming 48 working weeks in a year) and for physicians to 960 workers (or 20 hrs a week, assuming 40 working weeks in a year).

Expect these restrictions to increase as the nation's working age population gets older. While a 50-year-old physician may work 60 hrs a week, the same may not be possible for a 60-year-old physician. Likewise, there are likely perils to working 55 hrs in construction for workers aged 65 and above.

While Japanese society has been reluctant to accept foreign workers, change is coming. In 2019, the Japanese government announced two programmes for foreign workers:

- **Type 1** Workers with specific skills and experiences are allowed to work in Japan for five years.
- **Type 2** Individuals with higher skill levels can work permanently.

In sectors, such as tourism, where English-speaking skills are rewarding, Indian workers can provide a range of services. For example, Japanese schools and universities need English teachers, and India can provide them. A key obstacle for foreign workers in Japan is the language, one of the world's toughest ones to master. Indians, too, face this problem. Yet, a rudimentary knowledge of Japanese and competent use of translation devices paves the way to the Japanese labour market and the dividends it stores for India's young demography.

The writer is professor of social policy, Columbia University, US

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

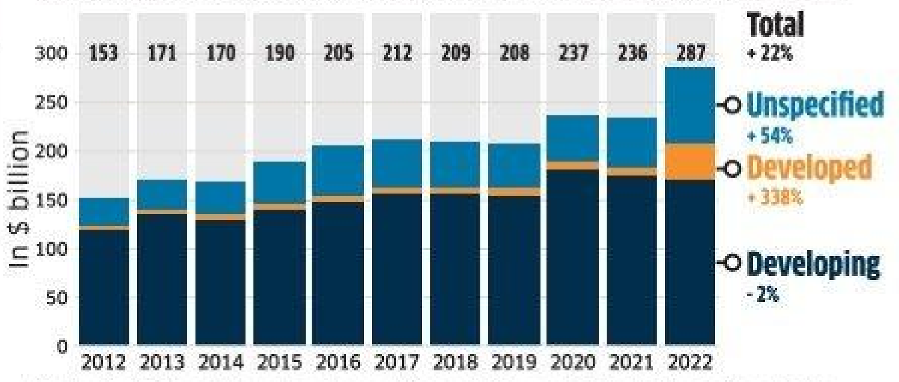
*In throwing stones,
we must desist,
At politicians,
please don't persist.
For though they may irk,
It's better to work,
With words, to ensure
they assist!*

...

Development Aid

Despite reaching record levels in 2022 ($287 billion), Official Development Assistance^ decreased by 2% ($4 billion) for developing regions, affecting over 70 countries* and almost 3 billion people. ODA, also referred to as aid, is the most stable and predictable source of external financing for developing countries, especially in times of crisis. For vulnerable countries, ODA is often the main source of external financing. In 2022, ODA fell $143 billion short of the Sustainable Development Goal 17 target...

Official Development Assistance (ODA), 2012-22

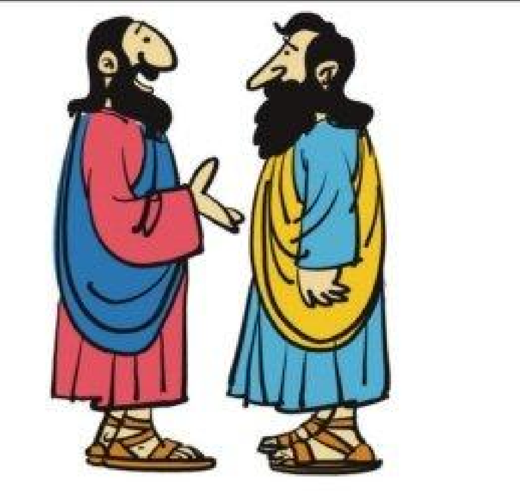


*Including 24 least developed countries and 15 small island developing states; ^Sum of ODA grants (major share), ODA loans (growing) and equity investment (minor amount) at constant 2021 USD

Source: UNCTAD

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Render to Matthew just a fraction of what is due to Caesar, for Matthew can leverage the loopholes in Roman tax laws.

Caught in a Solar Flare

Arijit Barman

What is more important: power or panels? Earlier this month, India — which has punitive duty barriers of close to 50% for importing solar modules and cells from overseas — devised its own set of non-tariff barriers to predominantly block China. This coincided with US treasury secretary Janet Yellen's heightened political pitch around overcapacity in Chinese steel, solar and lithium-ion batteries as a precursor to a crackdown on imports.

Our updated docket of vendors who can supply solar panels does not include Chinese candidates. As per this Approved List of Models and Manufacturers (ALMM) order for solar photovoltaic modules, domestic module manufacturers must also register their subcontractors and vendors with the renewable energy ministry.

ALMM is a big mistake. No country has tried to improve domestic manufacturing through tariffs, non-tariff barriers and capex-linked incentives the way India has done. It adversely impacts major stakeholders — developers, discoms, lenders, robs people of jobs and even GoI's much-vaunted net-zero targets while distorting our $100 bn electricity market. If GoI's primary goal is to achieve 500 GW of RE by 2030, we would need an additional 30-40 GW of solar capacity every year instead of the current 10-12 GW/year, which has brought us to a total of 75.4 GW solar capacity as of February.

Logically, our focus should be on large-scale RE asset creation. As a result, if we are overwhelmingly dependent on China for hardware — 85% of our solar farms are, indeed, built on Chinese modules — then de-risking the supply source by indigenising manufacturing becomes our secondary objective. Currently, both primary and secondary drivers are getting muddled.

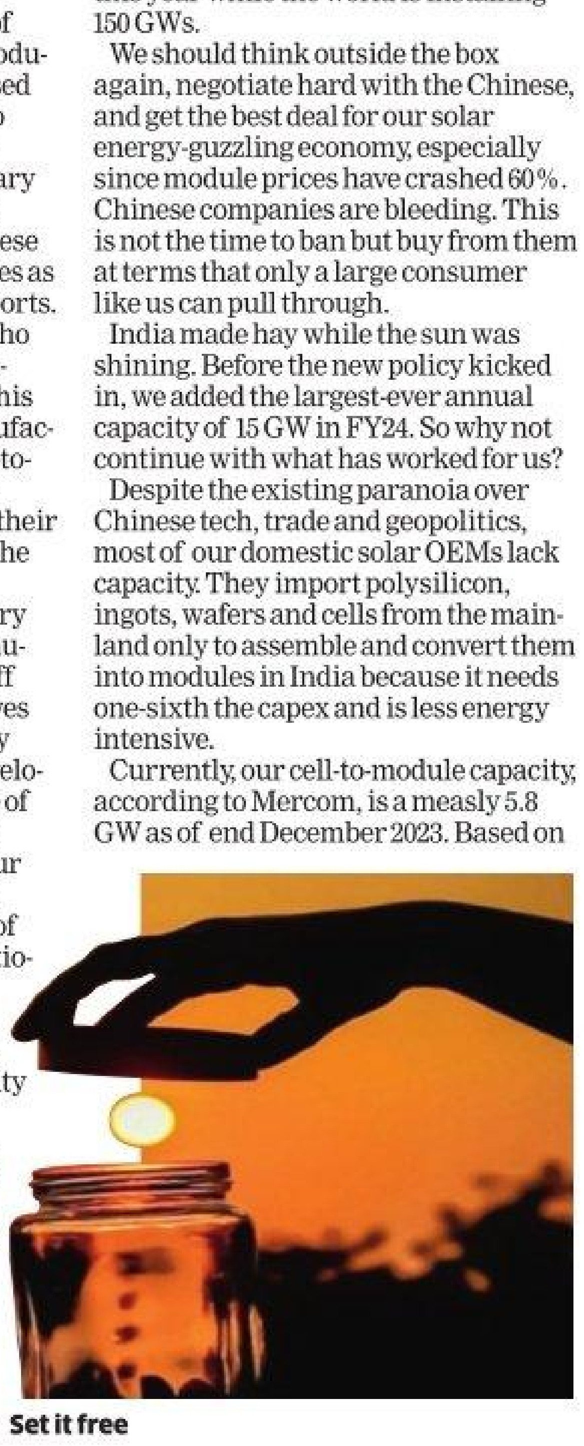
Last year, for our energy security, India courted Russia, a global pariah, to source crude at a discount at the height of the Ukraine War. China is also in the same boat today as most of the Western world. However, Bloomberg NEF data shows that its heavily subsidised solar manufacturers are saddled with 250 GW of export capacity this year while the world is installing 150 GWs.

We should think outside the box again, negotiate hard with the Chinese, and get the best deal for our solar energy-guzzling economy, especially since module prices have crashed 60%. Chinese companies are bleeding. This is not the time to ban but buy from them at terms that only a large consumer like us can pull through.

India made hay while the sun was shining. Before the new policy kicked in, we added the largest-ever annual capacity of 15 GW in FY24. So why not continue with what has worked for us?

Despite the existing paranoia over Chinese tech, trade and geopolitics, most of our domestic solar OEMs lack capacity. They import polysilicon, ingots, wafers and cells from the mainland only to assemble and convert them into modules in India because it needs one-sixth the capex and is less energy intensive.

Currently, our cell-to-module capacity, according to Mercom, is a measly 5.8 GW as of end December 2023. Based on announced plans, ICRA predicts a 10x leap after adding the fully tied-up PLI-I AND II capacity. But they all need to come up on time.



Set it free

Ironically, all, except one of the 12 coddled companies chosen under our $2.9 bn PLI scheme for solar equipment manufacturing, have Chinese suppliers. Some have earned $1.3 bn as their exports to the US and the West increased 12x last year. So effectively, Indian PLI is paying for cheaper power overseas. Some are reportedly considering setting up US greenfield ventures to avail 10x in tax credits in Joe Biden's overarching Inflation Reduction Act regime compared to our PLIs.

A clutch of the bigger Indian conglomerates have ambitious plans to be one-stop integrated manufacturers in India. With deep pockets, some of them will crack the code and be globally competitive with scale, subsidies and science backing them, but that's still 2-5 years away.

We can lose the momentum by then. Utility-based projects are a game of scale. Supply bottlenecks will weaken future projects economically, thereby jacking up not just the project's risk profile for both lenders and equity investors but even the final cost of power, which is expected to escalate 35%. Inefficient Indian module makers are already negotiating a premium to earn a fast buck on the back of a supply squeeze. This will now have to be borne by the state exchequer and large end consumers, who are already among the most expensive electricity buyers in the world.

We also take away many more construction jobs by obsessing over local manufacturing. Module manufacturing is not labour-intensive. For a 1 GW solar farm construction across 4,000 acres, one needs 2,500-3,000 blue-and-white collar workers versus a 1 GW mostly automated module manufacturing line that would require 100 jobs as per industry standards.

Without proper backward integration, quality or scale, our misplaced manufacturing ambitions should not leave the entire industry scorched.

Arijit.Barman@timesgroup.com

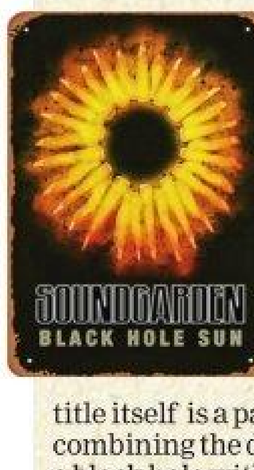
MELODY FOR MONDAY

Black Hole Sun

Soundgarden

Listen to Soundgarden's majestic 'Black Hole Sun' and from the opening guitar chords, you're transported into something astronomical. The song, released in 1994, stands as a testament to the band's unique ability to blend heavy metal with a beautiful melody.

The beauty of 'Black Hole Sun' does lie in its haunting melody and lyrics. Frontman Chris Cornell implores, 'Black hole sun/ Won't you come/ And wash away the rain?/ Black hole sun/ Won't you come?' We're walking here on biblical, Old Testament terrain.



The song's title itself is a paradox, combining the darkness of a black hole with the brightness of the sun. This juxtaposition reflects the song's theme of despair and hope. Cornell's powerful vocals add depth to the song, his voice echoing the pain and longing present in the lyrics. Kim Thayil's guitar soars with reverse gravity.

'Black Hole Sun' is iconic, mixing its choral quality with the hardcore. 'In my youth, I pray to keep/ Heaven send/ Hell away/ No one sings like you anymore.' Listening to it, we end up asking ourselves whether our past, nostalgic as we are about it, was as glowing as we see it now.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Inner Springtime

SANT RAJINDER SINGH

Spring is when nature awakens from her slumber and we see her in all her beauty. But we must understand the need to focus within so our soul can experience the inner springtime.

Amid fragrant blossoms and sprouting seeds, springtime is a time of joy and happiness for all. However, this celebration is in stark contrast to the state of our soul, which is currently parched. Separated from its Source for eons, the soul is yearning to experience its union with God. To fulfil the purpose for which we came into this world, we need to experience the inner springtime — when our soul awakens from its slumber and is nourished and rejuvenated by connecting with God.

This connection happens when we take our attention away from the world outside and focus it within through meditation. As the soul connects with God's love within, it is nourished and blooms and blossoms so that we experience it in all its glory. On its journey, the soul experiences the sights and sounds, happiness, and bliss that no outer spring can compare with. We rise above the fleeting joys of the outer springtime and begin to enjoy the eternal spring within.

To experience the inner springtime, we need to still our body and mind and focus within through meditation. We should practice it daily and regularly so we can experience the love of God and make steady progress back to God while we are in this human body.

Chat Room

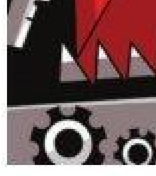
Teamwork Wins the Day

Apropos the Edit 'Finally, Moving Out of Defence Colony' (April 13). For India, marketing military hardware is a challenge as it has to deal with a deeply entrenched Western industrial-military complex. To garner a share of the market, India will need to demonstrate that its military hardware is value for money. That will require a coordinated and balanced approach by the defence attaches and other embassy personnel. Teamwork is essential for success.

KU MADA
Mumbai

A Plan for Action

Apropos the report 'Closure of Textiles Units, Lack of Jobs at Play in Tiruppur' (April 14). The political fallout of closed factories and industrial centres is clear. It is equally important to understand the reasons behind the decline of centres like Tiruppur, which once dominated the garment industry. Tiruppur is not the only industrial city that is suffering due to closure of traditional businesses and MSME units. A plan to tackle the decline of these industrial hubs is what is needed.



VINOD JOHRI
Delhi

Cheers to Health

Apropos 'Bournvita, Other Brands to Lose 'Health Drink' Status' (April 14). The uptick in regulatory oversight in the F&B segment following the Patanjali episode is welcome. Labelling is a crucial marketing tool to attract customers and it must be in total alignment with legal standards. Claims on ingredients, health benefits and target customers should be vetted by the authorities to ensure veracity. Prior approval of FSSAI must be mandatory for labels and ads. It is high time that consumers raise their voices against false and misleading claims. A robust customer feedback and complaints system is essential.

RAJARAO KUMAR
Bengaluru

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

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Iran vs Israel

World must act to avert another war in West Asia

IRAN launched a missile and drone attack on Israel on Saturday night, turning into reality the greatest fears that had gripped the world after the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas, a close ally of Iran. Tehran's attack comes less than two weeks after Israel's April 1 bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus — which killed a top General of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and several military advisers — and one day after Iran seized an Israel-affiliated cargo vessel, which has 17 Indian nationals among its 25-member crew. Tel Aviv has claimed that Iran's attack has been 'foiled', with hundreds of missiles and drones being intercepted with the help of the US and other allies. It also said that the bombardment caused injuries to over 10 persons, including a seven-year-old girl, and 'minor damage' to an airbase.

After the April 1 bombing, the Iranian leadership had vowed revenge, with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declaring that Israel would be 'punished' for it. On Sunday, having demonstrated that it had the capability to hit deep inside the Israeli territory, Iran declared through its Permanent Representative to the UN that its retaliation had 'concluded', and warned Israel not to respond. Apart from the US, several Israeli allies — including the UK and France — have reaffirmed their commitment to safeguarding Tel Aviv. More importantly, they must join forces to persuade Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu not to strike Iran, for that could plunge West Asia into a full-blown war. India, which has good relations with both countries, has been urging restraint; its immediate goal must be to rescue its nationals — including the ship crew and the labourers who migrated recently — from the region that may soon turn into a bigger war zone.

The events since the October 7 attack, with Israel using disproportionate force that has caused thousands of civilian deaths and a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, have placed West Asia on a powder keg. Escalation may benefit the war industry of Europe, US and China, but the right-thinking people there and the rest of the world must do their utmost to bring peace to the region.

PM's J&K outreach

Assurance on statehood, Assembly poll welcome

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's assurance on the restoration of statehood of Jammu and Kashmir and the conduct of Assembly elections has raised the hopes of the people of the union territory. The government's commitment to restoring normalcy is underscored by the PM's pledge during a poll rally in Udhampur to hold the Lok Sabha elections in the UT without fear of violence. However, these promises require timely implementation, along with upholding of democratic values and principles in the region. Further delay in restoring statehood and holding Assembly polls will undermine India's democratic framework. The prolonged absence of an elected government in the UT and the lack of representation in the Rajya Sabha are stumbling blocks to the region's progress.

The Supreme Court's order to conduct the Vidhan Sabha elections by September reinforces the need for democratic representation and governance in J&K. The resumption of the electoral process is not only a constitutional obligation but also a crucial step towards rebuilding trust among the people. Going beyond rhetoric, the government needs to outline a roadmap and timeframe for these milestones and address the aspirations of the people.

Even as the government's development initiatives related to infrastructure, healthcare and connectivity are laudable and there has been a decline in terror-related incidents, significant challenges persist. It is essential to prioritise inclusive dialogue and engagement with all stakeholders, including regional political parties and civil society. The restoration of statehood and the conduct of free and fair elections will empower the people and pave the way for prosperity and political stability in J&K.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

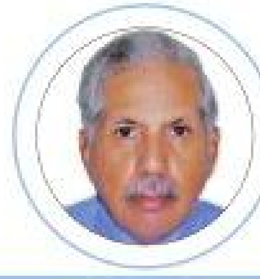
LAHORE, TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 1924

The departmental inquiry

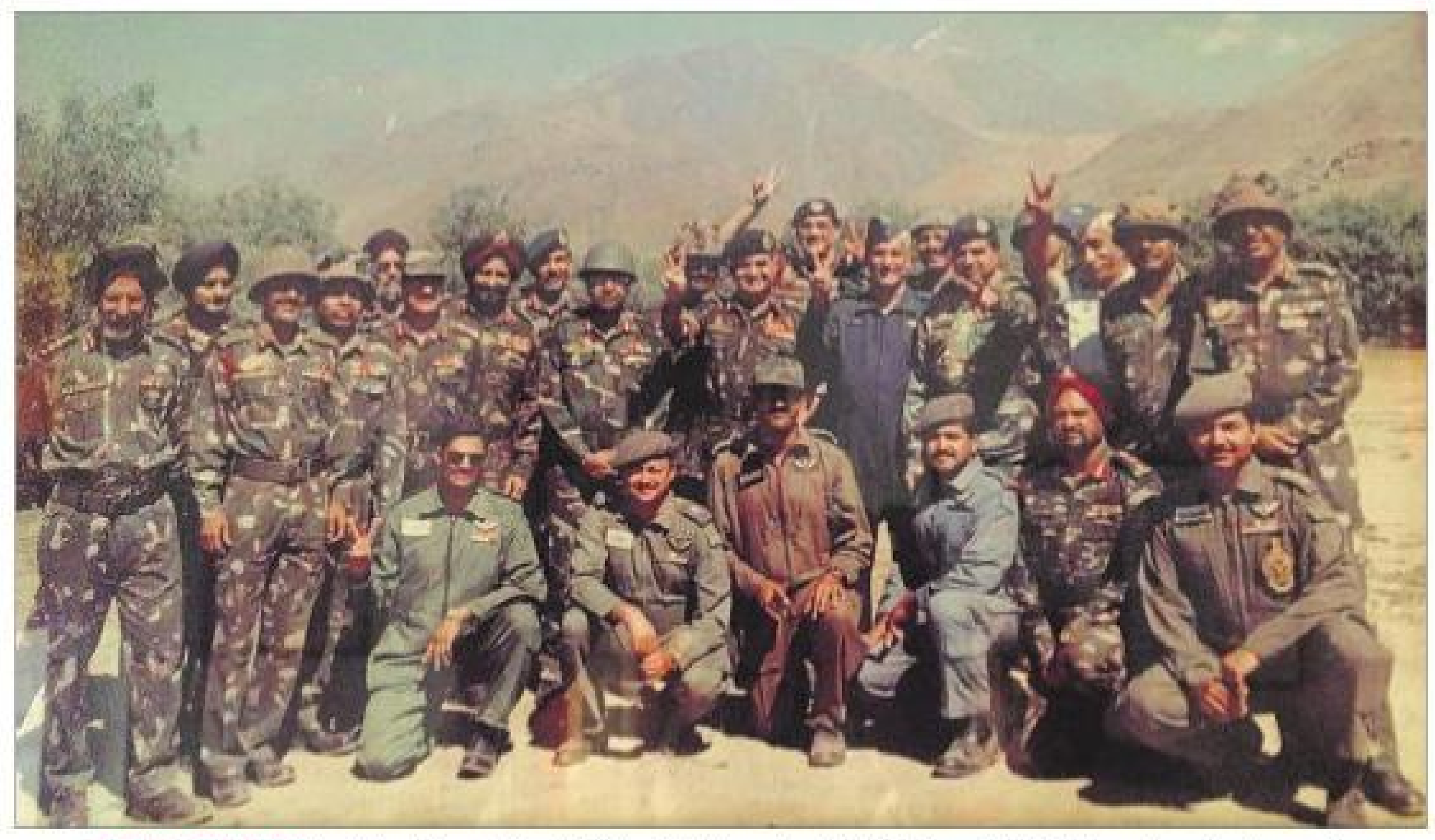
AT last, some information is vouchsafed to the public as to the action taken by the Government of India in pursuance of its decision to hold a departmental inquiry into the working of the reforms. An *Associated Press* telegram, dated April 10, states that the government has been busy giving effect to its promise and has already addressed a circular to the local governments, indicating the probable lines on which their report on the working of the reforms should be submitted. And that "as soon as the local governments' replies have been received, special officers are likely to be deputed to sift the material collected for the formulation of the Government of India's views and their submission to the Secretary of State." The statement is not only meagre, but also shows that practically all that the government has done in this matter so far is issue a circular to the local governments, suggesting the lines on which they should submit a report on the working of the reforms. This is apparently all that the government being busy giving effect to its promise means. The fact shows how exceedingly slow the machinery of the government grinds when the question is not about repression but about reform and progress. Here is a matter on which the public is admittedly keener than on any other living subject. The government, for reasons of its own, did not like to move forward along the particular road chalked out for it by the legislature but promised to go forward in its own way and along a road of its own choosing.

A saga of bravery, discipline & sacrifice

The ferocity and speed with which the Army responded to the intrusions surprised Pakistan



LT GEN MOHINDER PURI (RETD)
FORMER DEPUTY CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF



CELEBRATIONS: India's victory in the Battle of Tololing, in which 8 Mountain Division played a key role, was a pivotal moment of the Kargil War. FILE PHOTO

A quarter century has passed since Pakistan's attempt to intrude across the Line of Control (LoC) to avenge its successive defeats at the hands of the Indian armed forces. The war in Kargil, fought in May-July 1999, was another effort by Pakistan to regain its honour after its humiliating defeat in 1971, which led to the dismemberment of that country, and was followed in 1984 by our occupation of the Siachen Glacier. In the late 1990s, Pakistan's strategy of inflicting 'a thousand cuts' on India was not producing the desired results. The situation in the Kashmir valley had stabilised. The Army had brought insurgency under reasonable control for the Central Government to hold elections in Jammu and Kashmir in 1996 and instal an elected government. In this backdrop, Pakistan launched its operations by intruding into the Mushkoh-Drass-Kargil-Batalik sectors, over a frontage of approximately 130 km, in areas where both sides traditionally used to vacate their posts during the winter months and reoccupy them once the snow melted. While Pakistan's political aim was to bring back the Kashmir issue on the world stage, its military aim was to isolate Ladakh and secure maximum territory with a view to changing the alignment of the LoC.

I had the honour and privilege of commanding the 8 Mountain Division in the Valley and on the outbreak of hostilities in the Drass-Mushkoh sector. In early May, the battalion in Batalik received information from a local grazier of suspicious movement in the sector, which perhaps was not given the attention it deserved. As the local formation sent out patrols, it gradually became evident that a number of places had been intruded into by the enemy; yet, there was no clarity on the identity of the intruders and it was apparent that the undetected intrusions were an intelligence failure. However, the ferocity and speed with which the Army responded surprised Pakistan and disrupted its plans of consolidating the initial gains.

I was ordered to assume operational responsibility of the Drass-Mushkoh sector on June 1 and immediately set into motion preparations for our first attack. As the battalions got inducted from the Valley, they were given time to reorient their battle drills and procedures from counter-insurgency operations to conventional warfare, carry out advanced stages of acclimatisation and a recce of their nominated objectives. Meanwhile, the artillery, both integral and reinforced, was getting inducted and preparations for their gun positions and dumping of

> As the local unit sent out patrols, it became evident that several places had been intruded into by the enemy. It was also apparent that undetected intrusions were an intelligence failure.

ammunition were in full swing. Having considered our pace of buildup and level of preparation, I decided to launch the first attack on Tololing on the night of June 12/13 with 2 Rajputana Rifles, with two companies of 18 Grenadiers providing the firm base, while the balance of the battalion was employed as reserve.

As one crosses Zoji La, one is awestruck by the terrain which tactically favours the defender and puts the attacker at serious disadvantage. The conduct of military operations demands proper acclimatisation, clothing to survive in the extreme cold climates and high levels of physical fitness. For a well-planned attack, the approaches are narrow, restricted and arduous, the going is uphill and the attacking troops, as a consequence, are likely to suffer heavy casualties. The momentum of the attack is slow and the high altitude and rarefied atmosphere add to the toll on troops and equipment. The limitation of movement along only one available major road axis also creates several tactical and logistic problems. The induction of troops as reinforcements or reserves, the availability of limited areas for the deployment of guns and their movement, and constraints on logistics are some of the major issues which need to be factored in while evolving any operational plan.

As scheduled, 2 Rajputana Rifles commenced its attack at 8:30 pm with massive artillery support, and since this was the first coordinated attack by the division, the atmosphere was extremely tense. The attack progressed satisfactorily, and by the first light, we had the better part of Tololing in control, except the top, which was holding out. The commanding officer, Col MB Ravindranath, an intrepid leader, saw a weakness in the enemy's defences, and in a daylight assault, cleared the remnants, to our immense joy. With our victory at Tololing, the battle of the ridges commenced as we successfully went 'ridge-hopping' to restore the sanctity of the LoC and the honour and pride of the Army as well as the country. Every battalion was launched with the effective support of the artillery and combat engineers, fully backed by communications and logistics. All, without exception, met with success in accomplishing their task.

The Kargil War was a saga of bravery, raw courage, discipline and sacrifice by young officers and men, many of whom laid down their lives so that we could live a life of honour and dignity. While the courage displayed by Capt Vikram Batra and Capt Manoj Pandey, along with now Grenadier (later Honorary Captain) Yogendra Singh Yadav and Rifleman (later Subedar Major) Sanjay Kumar, all recipients of the Param Vir Chakra, is part of folklore, there are numerous untold stories of the courage and determination displayed by young officers and men in bringing victory to the country.

We had a heavy toll of casualties, losing 559 men in the operations. On the 25th anniversary of the war, it is to these brave-hearts that we pay homage and remember their sacrifice for the country. We also need to recognise the sacrifices made by the Veer Naris, many of whom were widowed days after their marriage, in having lived a life of dignity and brought up their children as worthy citizens of the country.

The author commanded 8 Mountain Division during the Kargil War

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

There are cases in which the greatest daring is the greatest wisdom. —Carl von Clausewitz

The scourge of forest fires

HIMMAT S DHILLON

IT had been a winter like no other in recent memory. There had not been even a drop of rain in the foothills and absolutely no snow in the middle hills. If one knew where to look in the distance through the haze, a sprinkling of snow was discernible on the high mountaintops north of Shimla. However, this was the perennial snow, on the other side of which lay the Tibetan plateau.

There had been a brief but passing cold spell in December. It had seemed to be the perfect run-up to snowfall. However, a white Christmas failed to materialise. By January, the temperatures were rising. February saw the advent of spring in all its glory. By March, the hillsides were tinder-dry.

Consequently, there was a difficult warm season marked by an acute water shortage and a plethora of forest fires. Each ridge and spur was delineated in a fiery spectrum of colours. That was so when the fire was at a distance. It was a very different situation when the fire was nearby.

One such fire took place late in the afternoon on a weekend. It was uncanny that my colleague and I reached the roadhead almost at the same time — he on his motorcycle and I on foot.

Before long, we had crossed Monkey Field and taken the steep path that led to the farthest point of the campus. The firefighters from disparate departments were on site. The water raced through the fire hose like a force of nature. There being no wind, the fire was vanquished almost even before it had been given a chance to ravage the dry hillside.

It was time to pack up and make the long, steep and arduous trek back to the very top of the ridge. Almost like a school team returning after securing a trophy, the tired souls walked home up the mountain path.

Well past midnight, a frantic call came — a raging fire below Esquire Hall. As I rushed out, there was an orange glow to the east. Reaching the Vindhya House pavement, I saw a chowkidar taking a stroll. I directed him to lead me to the scene of the fire. Even if one did not chance upon a white-lipped pit viper or a banded krait, the treacherous path in pitch darkness was far more dangerous than any creature of the forest.

The fire was raging uphill and had entered our campus on a slope below the boys' dormitories. Only the greatest fortitude and the strongest resolution enabled the team to vanquish it.

The fire beaten, the chowkidar led me back without a word, past the steep ravine on a path that skirted the perimeter and back uphill towards home. By now, the moon had risen high. In its effulgence, I saw a neat compound adjoining the campus. As I paused to catch my breath and gazed upon the silvery scene, he continued to walk uphill. 'A very nice place... who lives there?' I wondered. Even as he answered softly, '*Kabristan*', the light of his torch flickered and died, and the chowkidar 'vanished'! I am still at a loss to explain what transpired that night.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Saffron party's challenge

Apropos of 'Shadow of economic distress on polls' (*Nous Indica*); unemployment and price rise can influence the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections. The amelioration of the suffering of poor and marginalised people is the real parameter of a country's progress. It is generally the poor who bear the brunt of price rise. Employment provides financial independence to people, enabling them to lead a prosperous and meaningful life. The ruling party, however, has been micromanaging its election campaign, making course correction in its electoral strategy, stitching up alliances with regional parties and banking on pro-poor welfare initiatives. It remains to be seen if the saffron party will be able to overcome the challenge and win the elections.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Fate of BJP sealed

With reference to 'Shadow of economic distress on polls' (*Nous Indica*); the fast-changing political scenario in our country indicates that a landslide victory for the BJP in the General Election is not a foregone conclusion, contrary to what some sections of the media are suggesting. The BJP relies on identity politics, pivoting around matters like the Ram Temple, and welfare schemes for the poor. But it may not be enough to offset the damage caused by the economic distress. The huge scale of unemployment and soaring prices of essential items are a matter of concern. Economic distress may override any other consideration in sealing the fate of the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, BY MAIL

Create jobs to tackle distress

Refer to 'Shadow of economic distress on polls'; the author has rightly highlighted issues of unemployment and price rise. The numerous welfare schemes launched by the ruling dispensation may have impacted the poor positively, but they are not enough to uplift those who don't have jobs. Employment generation is the best way to tackle economic distress. No matter how good a political party's poll strategy is, it cannot bring on board unemployed voters unless they are given hope for a job.

HARI KRISHAN CHAUDHARY, MOHALI

Ensure safety of students

Apropos of the editorial 'School bus mishap'; the accident that claimed the lives of six schoolkids and injured many others is a result of gross negligence and dereliction of duty on the part of the bus driver, the school management, district education officials and traffic police personnel. The episode is a reminder of the importance of ensuring adherence to safety norms. It is unfortunate that the government only wakes up when an untoward incident occurs. District officials must conduct safety audits at schools from time to time. All school bus drivers must be made to take breathalyser tests regularly. More needs to be done to ensure the safety of students.

NK GOSAIN, BATHINDA

Negligence claims precious lives

With reference to the editorial 'School bus mishap'; the death of six students in the Mahendragarh bus accident has left the parents in a state of shock. Precious lives were lost, all because of the recklessness of a drunk driver. Most private schools charge parents thousands of rupees as transportation fee. It is incumbent on the school authorities to engage only well-trained drivers and ensure that no unfit buses are used. The safety of the pupils must remain the top priority of the authorities. The officials concerned must take steps to prevent a repeat of the incident.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

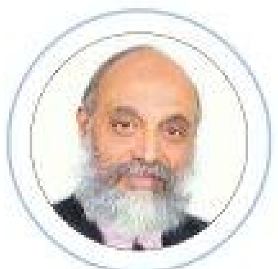
Hold school mgmt accountable

Refer to 'School bus mishap'; it was not the first such incident, and unfortunately, it would not be the last. Whenever such a tragedy happens, there is a hue and cry for some days, and then it all blows over. But hopefully, this horrific crash will wake the authorities concerned from slumber. No monetary compensation can mitigate the agony of the parents who have lost their children. Exemplary punishment should be given to the school management and all local or state-level authorities responsible for the mishap. They must change their attitude and start ensuring compliance with the safety guidelines.

BHUPINDER KOCHHAR, PANCHKULA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

National security perception and the China conundrum



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

DISCOURSE and narrative are critical elements in the shaping of the national security perception and related policy. Governments, whether liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes, accord considerable attention to these two strands in the evolution of national posture and policies. Both the US and China are examples of this practice.

China remains the abiding and heightened security and strategic challenge for India after the 2020 Galwan 'shock' administered by the PLA (People's Liberation Army). It is instructive how this issue is being packaged in India in the run-up to the General Election.

In a recent interview with a US news magazine, *Newsweek*, PM Modi made a cautiously worded response to a question about the India-China border standoff. He noted: "For India, the relationship with China is important and significant. It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us. Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and the world. I hope and believe that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, we will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquillity in our borders."

The operative phrases here are the reference to 'abnormality' in bilateral relations and the need to "urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders". This response by the PM did not go into any operational detail, and the conciliatory tenor may be seen as a signal for what could be a more definitive China policy during PM Modi's potential third term.

When the Galwan incident took place in the summer of 2020 and India lost a colonel (the CO of the battalion) and 20 other personnel, the PM's initial assertion was that "no one has intruded into our territory". This statement was later clarified by the PMO in a less than transparent manner — and it was evident that the dominant narrative at the time was to obfuscate the issue. Both India and China have kept the details about what transpired at Galwan under wraps and much of what is deliberated upon is based largely on conjecture.

On the Indian side, no substantive debate took place on this issue in Parliament. Over the past four years, Galwan has remained on the national back burner. Domain experts have been quoted on the subject and there is a guarded consensus that India has forfeited patrolling rights in certain areas of that part of the Ladakh region.

DEJA VU: Indian mandarins and China watchers are no strangers to Beijing's penchant for diplomatic duplicity and geopolitical intransigence. PTI

In recent months, External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar, to his credit, has placed the Galwan issue in an appropriate perspective. Speaking in late March to the Indian diaspora in Malaysia, the EAM noted: "The India-China relationship is difficult. For reasons which are still not clear to us, the boundary agreements were broken by China in 2020. We actually had violence and bloodshed." The onus for restoring normalcy at the LAC (Line of Actual Control) has been placed on China, even as numerous rounds of talks have not led to a resolution of the stalemate.

Against this backdrop, Home Minister Amit Shah also weighed in on the China challenge in an election rally in Assam on April 9 and accused then PM Nehru of 'abandoning' Assam in October 1962. This kind of vitriol is par for the course in election rallies and the BJP has consistently pilloried the Congress for the China debacle. Shah also asserted that China could not encroach upon a 'single inch' of Indian land during Modi's rule.

> There is a case for evolving a narrative template in relation to the Galwan incident. The CCS would be the appropriate forum for the purpose.

While this may be seen as a case of projecting the Modi government as being more effective in safeguarding India's sovereignty and territorial integrity, this is counterfactual and also at variance with what PM Modi and the EAM have maintained regarding the Galwan disruption to normalcy in the India-China bilateral relationship.

Adherence to an appropriate narrative template regarding sensitive national security matters by top ministers is the normative practice, and this has been particularly relevant in relation to China and the nuclear issue since the days of then PM Indira Gandhi.

When India conducted the Shakti nuclear tests in May 1998 under PM Vajpayee's stewardship, some BJP leaders referred to this nascent nuclear weapon capability as a 'Hindu bomb'. This characterisation was counter-productive to the Vajpayee projection that the Indian nuclear capability was anchored in NFU (no first use) and the principles of pristine deterrence, and a religious tag was undesirable.

This matter was relayed to then NSA Brajesh Mishra. Despite the enormity of dealing with the fallout of May 11, 1998, the PMO was able to issue a quiet directive to avoid religious terminology, and this was complied with by the principal actors at the time.

Amid the current election campaigning, there is a compelling case for evolving a narrative template in relation to the Galwan incident. The CCS (Cabinet Committee on Security) would be the appropriate forum for the purpose. In the prevailing environment, Galwan has become a bitterly contested issue between the BJP and the Congress and many intemperate statements are being made in an acrimonious manner. This is undesirable and will vitiate an already tangled bilateral dispute.

China has identified media warfare as one of the Three Principles of Warfare in its composite security strategy and has accorded this element high priority in its domestic and external information campaigns. In June 2020, the Chinese information ecosystem exploited PM Modi's initial statement about 'no intrusion' to the hilt and sought to project the PLA as the victim of Indian perfidy in Galwan.

Indian mandarins and China watchers are no strangers to Beijing's penchant for diplomatic duplicity and geopolitical intransigence. This goes back to the Nehru-Mao-Zhou Enlai era. There are many lessons from the Nehru-Krishna Menon handling of the information and narrative domain in the run-up to the October 1962 debacle that Modi's team can benefit from while addressing China in this bitterly animated poll season.

As Admiral Arun Prakash, former naval chief, has cautioned, "Sacrificing clarity and a cohesive approach in foreign policy on the altar of domestic politics could cost India dear."

Tackling misinformation in election season a big challenge

SHARAD S CHAUHAN
DGP AND MD, PUNJAB POLICE HOUSING CORPORATION

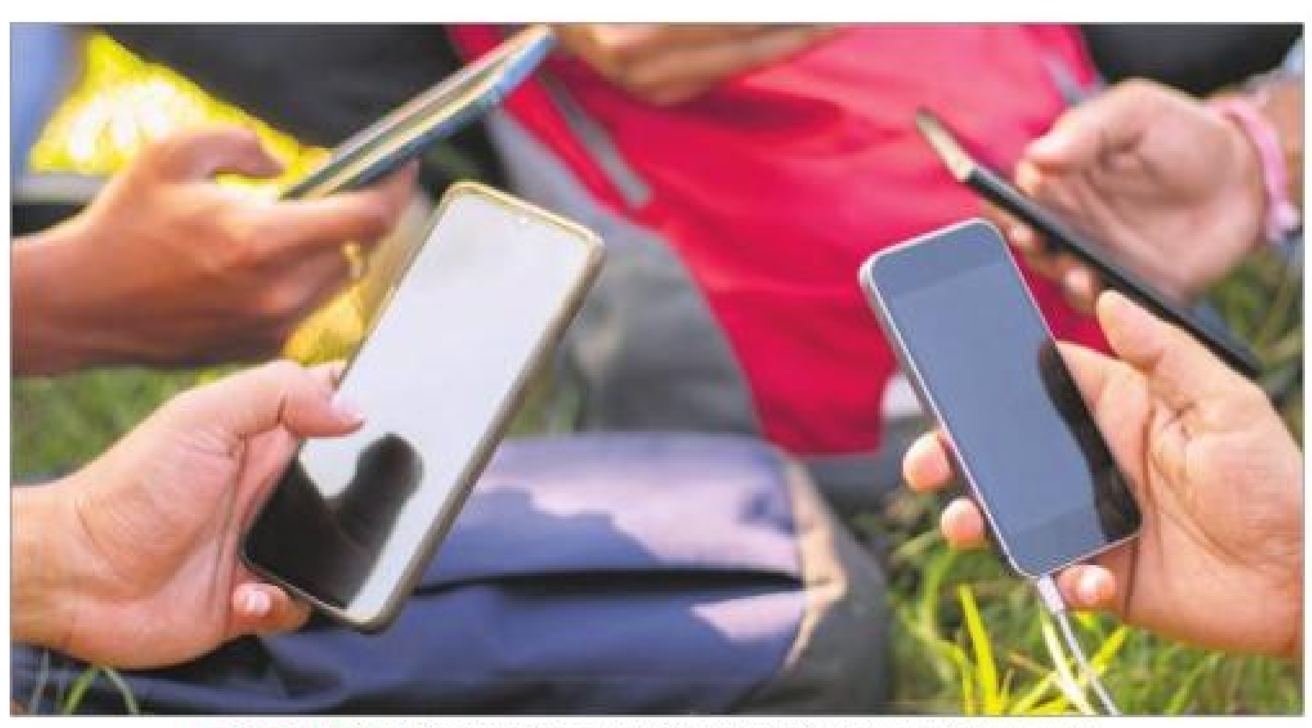
GREEK statesman and orator Demosthenes aptly captured the perils of misinformation in a democratic society with his timeless quote: "You yourselves, Athenians, should on no account be indifferent to these matters... for just as the body cannot be well in health if it is full of bad humours, so a city cannot be well administered if it harbours misleading speeches."

Traditional media like television and newspapers is constrained by space and time. Social media offers more democratic and low-budget forms of campaigning. India has over 82 crore active Internet users, with rural areas accounting for more than half. The rise of social media platforms has revolutionised electoral campaigns, enabling maximum reach at an unprecedented speed. While this is a positive feature, the challenge lies in dealing with the abundance of shared, curated and created content.

Contrasting results emerged in a UNESCO survey of 16 countries which are going to the polls this year. While the use of social media has surpassed that of traditional media, faith in the latter remains significantly higher. Contrary to popular belief, the majority (around 88 per cent) feel that the government should regulate social media content.

Online media platforms, unlike newspapers or TV, act as middlemen for information. But their rules often lead to specific outcomes, with implications for democracy. For instance, algorithms use Internet history to decide what you see in searches or ads. So, these platforms are not neutral. They act like editors, influencing how people make decisions.

Algorithms on social media platforms facilitate what is known as 'selective exposure' or 'elective affinity', connecting like-minded individuals, reinforcing shared views and values, creating echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially hindering democratic ideals. A wide range of online platforms — end-to-end encrypted ones, image hosting platforms, news aggregators, blogs, photo- and video-sharing services, wikis, online gaming platforms and cyber lockers — can potentially affect elections by serving as repositories for propaganda that may influence public opinion or dent electoral integrity.



DIGITAL AGE: India has more than 82 crore active Internet users. ISTOCK

During elections, specific techniques are employed. Software algorithms can manipulate what appears in one's news feed, potentially influencing the individual's opinions. During a US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, software algorithms manipulated what people saw in their news feeds, swaying voter preferences. Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data to target voters with personalised political messages, which raised concerns about data privacy and manipulation.

The main areas of social media that can be problematic during an election season are the virality or speed of information, filter bubbles that occur when websites and social media platforms use algorithms to show content tailored to users' preferences, insensitivity to extreme or offensive content, micro-targeting of voters, manipulation of search engine results or the trending of topics through Google or Twitter bombs. These tactics involve coordination to make a specific word or phrase appear prominently by using it in posts or linking it to a certain website. Hidden or uncertain identities on these platforms can aggravate these issues. Social media platforms are also exploited for disseminating misinformation and disinformation.

> Both state and non-state foreign actors manipulate online information to influence voters and erode trust in the poll process.

Observations show that both state and non-state foreign actors manipulate online information to influence voter choices, sow confusion among citizens and erode trust in the electoral process. If there is concern about foreign interference in elections, establishing a link with the security service becomes essential.

Regulation is commonly associated with restricting undesirable activities of campaigners and controlling finances. Traditional platforms like newspapers generally have more room for fixing responsibility and accountability internally compared to online platforms. Social media platforms have a responsibility to remove illegal content when notified, but they are not obligated to actively search for it themselves. This grants them immunity from liability for harmful or illegal content hosted on their platforms. While there is a well-established consensus on the type of regulation to apply — or not apply — to traditional media during elections, there is no consensus across the stakeholder spectrum when it comes to regulating content on social media.

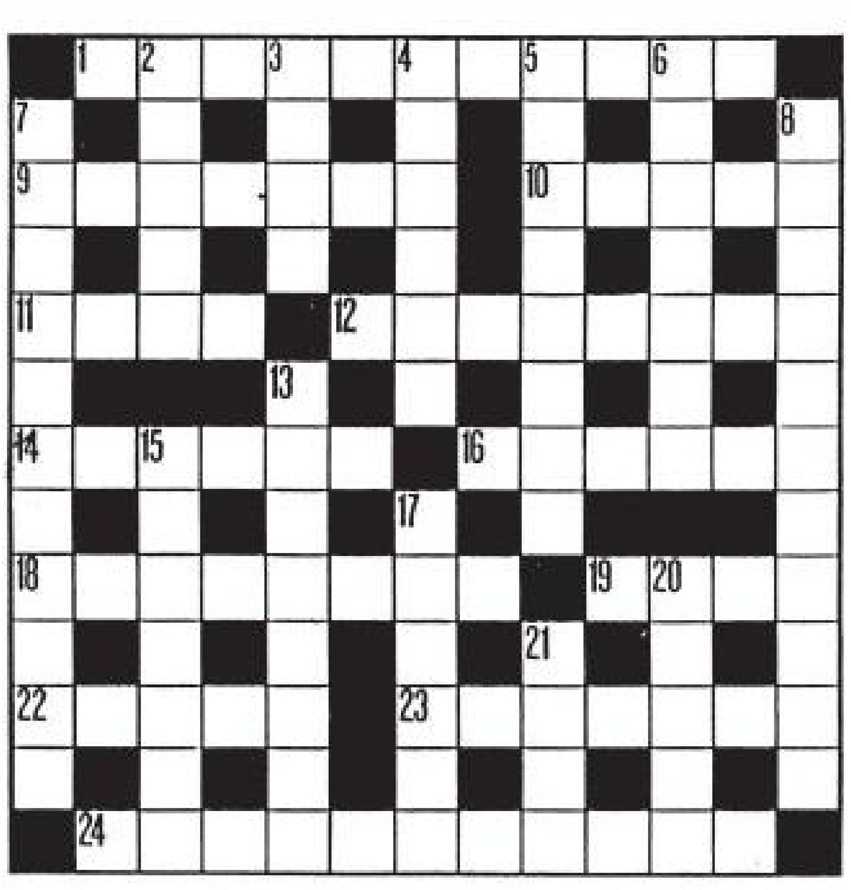
To address the problem, rapport needs to be established prior to the election between social media companies and election regulators. This would involve discussions to review the concerns that may arise during the election and charting a middle way for how social media companies can respond to such issues while respecting the rights of citizens.

Such an approach is vital because strict control over technology will always have unforeseen and negative consequences. The pace of technological change is so fast that almost all regulations become outdated by the time they are implemented. Therefore, regulators, platforms and civil society should work out means to focus on the outcomes of these technologies rather than regulating specific activities or technologies.

Canada has announced a $7-million grant programme to fund media research and civic engagement programmes to study the digital media's coverage of elections. In Argentina, the Asociación por los Derechos Civiles has developed a tool enabling citizens to monitor social media advertisements while safeguarding their privacy. Such initiatives enhance accountability on social media during elections.

Any regulatory approach should have the voter's role as the primary concern, while also respecting the boundaries of the freedom of speech and the right to campaign through open debates. It is crucial to ensure that open debates are not misrepresented as unaccountable ones and to consider how regulation fits into this broader consideration within the context of the relationship between regulators, various media platforms and democracy. Elections strive to enable informed voter choices, yet unaddressed digital regulation gaps may lead to the proliferation of misinformation and manipulation.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 A trifling sum (11)
9 Uncertain (2,5)
10 Economic collapse (5)
11 Flat and smooth (4)
12 Distinctive (8)
14 Wobble (6)
16 Emphasis (6)
18 Capital of Paraguay (8)
19 To box using light blows (4)
22 Troublesome thing (5)
23 Display proudly (4,3)
24 Decreasingly (4,3,4)

DOWN
2 Avoid definite commitment (5)
3 Notable achievement (4)
4 Right of admission (6)
5 Accept bravely (4,2,2)
6 Equivocal (7)
7 Desperate trouble (4,7)
8 Dismissive treatment (5,6)
13 Hero of superhuman strength (8)
15 Scholarly (7)
17 Relax (6)
20 Devout (5)
21 Thwart (4)

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Quarry, 4 Esoteric, 9 Ersatz, 10 All along, 12 Talk, 13 Coven, 14 Lean, 17 On the heels of, 20 Ways and means, 23 Role, 24 Shiny, 25 Trio, 28 Warranty, 29 Sordid, 30 Endanger, 31 Walrus.

Down: 1 Question, 2 Absolute, 3 Rate, 5 Silver lining, 6 Tear, 7 Rooted, 8 Cogent, 11 Powers that be, 15 Delay, 16 Roomy, 18 Labrador, 19 As good as, 21 Browse, 22 Florid, 26 Warn, 27 Yoga.

SU DO KU

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

EASY

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 15, 2024, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 26
- Vaishakh Parvishte 3
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 7, up to 12.12 pm
- Sukarma Yoga up to 11.08 pm
- Punar Nakshatra up to 3.06 am
- Moon enters Cancer sign 8.39 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: MONDAY 18:50 HRS
SUNRISE: TUESDAY 05:54 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	21
New Delhi	33	20
Amritsar	27	18
Bathinda	29	19
Jalandhar	27	19
Ludhiana	27	19
Bhiwani	34	20
Hisar	34	20
Sirsa	31	21
Dharamsala	23	11
Manali	16	02
Shimla	16	08
Srinagar	15	10
Jammu	28	20
Kargil	14	04
Leh	12	01
Dehradun	34	19
Mussoorie	21	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

NEW DELHI | MONDAY | APRIL 15, 2024

the pioneer

Opinion 06

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Promises to keep

The BJP unveils its Lok Sabha poll manifesto with emphasis on 'GYAN' and development

The ruling BJP has unveiled its long-awaited manifesto, 'Sankalp Patra', for the Lok Sabha elections, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasising the party's commitment to the welfare of 'GYAN' — Garib, Yuva, Annadaata and Naari Shakti (the poor, youth, farmers and women). Accompanied by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and BJP chief JP Nadda, the Prime Minister presented the manifesto at the party headquarters in New Delhi. Modi outlined that the paper's thrust areas were centred around the concept of 'Viksit Bharat' — empowering the youth, women, farmers and the economically disadvantaged. He stressed the importance of enhancing both the dignity and quality of life for all citizens, promising initiatives such as providing piped gas to every household and supplying free electricity through solar power. The manifesto pledges to extend the Centre's free ration scheme and prioritise self-reliance in essential food items like pulses, edible oils and vegetables to stabilise prices and ensure food security. Additionally, it vows to expand flagship schemes like Ayushman Bharat and the PM Awas Yojana while ensuring access to clean drinking water in every home. In agriculture, the BJP promises to continue providing annual financial assistance of Rs 6,000 to farmers, enhance crop insurance through technology and implement periodic increases in the Minimum Support Prices. It also addresses the party's commitment to implementing a uniform civil code, One Nation One Poll initiative, expansion of 5G networks, bolstering national security and abolishing waiting lists for train travel.

The main rival Congress' manifesto, on the other hand, focuses on social welfare, economic reforms and addressing inequality through targeted interventions such as healthcare expansion, agricultural support and a caste census. In contrast, the BJP emphasises national security, infrastructure development and cultural issues, with a lesser emphasis on caste-based policies and regional grievances. Nadda reiterated the commitment to fulfil all promises encapsulated in 'Modi Ki Guarantee', the BJP's slogan for the elections. Responding to the BJP's manifesto, the Congress has criticised it over alleged shortcomings. Party spokesperson Pawan Khera labelled it a 'maafinama' or apology, highlighting unfulfilled promises from previous elections. Supriya Shrinate accused the BJP of misleading the public and ignoring critical issues such as ethnic violence in Manipur and protests in Ladakh. As the mudslinging match between the arch-rivals continues, it is for the people to judge who kept promises and who did not. Manifestos are no commitment and, therefore, not legally binding. Nonetheless, these do spell out a party's ideology and the direction it wants to take the country in. As the campaign gains momentum, the debate over competing policy agendas is likely to intensify, shaping the discourse leading up to the polls. An informed voter would better not judge a party by its manifesto but by its track record.

PICTALK

A woman applies vermilion to another woman on the occasion of the Satuani festival, in Patna PTI

Unravelling the Roy family's legacy

PRAFULL GORADIA

The recent mudslinging between the TMC and BJP has highlighted a historical narrative concerning the role of the Roy family in the downfall of Bengal's Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula

With the campaign for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections heating, mudslinging isn't left behind, although one wishes this weren't so. The Trinamool Congress has abused Smt. Amrita Roy, the BJP's KrishnanagarLok Sabha candidate, for belonging to the family of Krishna Chandra Roy, who had sided with the East India Company to take down Bengal's Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula in 1757. The current Rajmata of Krishna Nagar has justified her family's act, saying had they not done so, Sanatana Dharma and Bengali culture under the tyrannical Siraj would have ceased to exist. Moreover, Raja Krishna Chandra Roy, Amrita's forefather wasn't alone; Jagat Seth, Raja Naba Krishna Deb and above all Mir Jafar and many others wanted to see the end of Siraj-ud-Daula. Such was the ill-will he had generated.

What would have been Bengal's fate had these merchant princes not contrived to overthrow Siraj? More than likely, Nadia district and today's West Bengal might have gone to Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh. Pakistan's first President Iskander Mirza was a direct descendant of Siraj-ud-Daula. The family lived in Murshidabad, but on the morrow of Partition, promptly migrated to Karachi, then Pakistan's capital. Iskander first became defence secretary and then Pakistan's president in March 1956.

To go back to Murshidabad, Siraj-ud-Daula came to the throne in 1756. He soon showed his colours by dismissing his chief minister RaiDurlabh, picked by his grandfather NawabAlivardi Khan. The young Nawabhumiliated the wealthy state banker Jagat Seth by publicly slapping him in the durbar and threatening him with sunnat, i.e., circumcision (see Plassey to Pakistan by HumayunMirza, son of IskandarMirza). The merchant princes were resentful of the rule by people of Central Asian stock and wanted more say in governance for the local people. However, they lacked the military organisation to effect an overthrow. Come 1757, upon the orders of the East India Company's Court of Directors in London, Robert Clive arrived from Madras, along with some sailors and soldiers, to teach Siraj-ud-Daula a lasting lesson for humiliating the British at Fort William in Calcutta the previous year. This is where the Black Hole tragedy was perpetrated on the nawab'sorders.

The nawabate's merchant princes saw this as a rare opportunity to do away with this odious regime. British arms and Bengali money as well as contacts would ensure victory. Clive had only about 3,000 men, whereas Siraj-ud-Daula had an army of a lakh, plus a cavalry and elephants. This large army had to be truncated in numbers. Mir Jafar, who commanded half the army of the Nawab, was promised that if he helped to overthrow Siraj-ud-Daula, he would be made the Nawab. Consequently, over half of Siraj's army did not fight. The Battle of Plassey on June 23, 1757, ended the saga of Siraj-ud-Daula and his life.

At the time we are talking about, there were two cultures in Bengal, namely Bengali and Islamic. Since the 12th century, the region had been slipping out of Bengali influence and had become two-thirds Arabized. The Battle of Plassey in 1757 was the first decisive setback. After Siraj was defeated and killed and his nawabate erased, Hindus for the first time in many years could celebrate puja openly. A grand Durga Puja was held at the palace of Raja Naba Krishna Deb, where the chief guest was Robert Clive. Imagine if Bengal had remained on the Islamic track, there would have been no historic renaissance for which Bengal is justly renowned and respected.

> MIR JAFAR, WHO COMMANDED HALF THE ARMY OF THE NAWAB, WAS PROMISED THAT IF HE HELPED TO OVERTHROW SIRAJ-UD-DAULA, HE WOULD BE MADE THE NAWAB. CONSEQUENTLY, OVER HALF OF SIRAJ'S ARMY DID NOT FIGHT

There would have been no Raja Rammohan Roy, no Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, no Rabindranath Tagore, no Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda, no Yogi Aurobindo, no Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and certainly no Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. One can only imagine what this region might have become. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, more than a hundred years ago, had famously said "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow". But if the likes of Siraj-ud-Daula had continued on the throne, there would not have been a Bengal today.

Gandhi did awaken Indians to the value of freedom, politics, soul and economics, but the find winner was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army (INA). This was admitted and affirmed by none other than Clement Atlee, Prime Minister of Britain from 1946 to 1951 the British leader who signed the Indian Independence Act of 1947 heralding India's independence. After relinquishing office, Atlee came to India and was a guest of the then West Bengal Governor Justice P.B. Chakraborty.

During a dinner conversation, Chakraborty asked his guest why the British quit India in a hurry in 1947, when there was no immediate cause, with the Quit India movement of 1942 having failed. The former British Prime Minister in reply quoted several reasons, principal among them being the erosion of loyalty to the British Crown among the Indian army, navy and air force, as a result of the action of Subhas Chandra Bose. Atlee's reply to Chakraborty's question on how much the non-violent satyagraha of Gandhi had influenced the British to free India, was "m-i-n-i-m-a-l", with emphasis on each letter and a contemptuous smile. Had there been no Bengal, there wouldn't have been a Netaji in the first place.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

Constitutional morality: The pillar of India's democracy

ABHAYA DUBEY

Central to India's dynamic democracy is the principle of constitutional morality, serving as a compass guiding the nation's advancement and growth

Every Quadrennial year, the election season in India sets a stage for new hope, a new batch of electorates and especially a power in each electorate to exercise their right of adult universal suffrage. News channels are brimming with discourses and the candidates are doing their best to secure a seat in the political engine of society. The vibrancy of the largest democracy was foreseen by the members of the constituent assembly who wanted the ruling ideals to rise from the Constitution itself to guide the coming of a new independent nation. The father of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar defined Constitutional morality as a paramount reverence for all the forms of the Constitution, enforcing obedience to authority and acting within these forms in addition to the habit of open speech and action subject only to definite legal control. He believed that constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment rather it needs to be cultivated consciously. In contemporary times, it has become a principal tool of activism in the hands of the judicial wing of our country. Unlike other ideals of brotherhood, equality, fairness, non-arbitrariness, etc. which sprung from the need for pre-independent India, constitutional morality had to be injected into the bloodstream of the country.

The Judiciary has brought back the discourse on constitutional morality through a slew of judgments in contemporary times. Thereby reinstating the nature of the Indian Constitution, an organic and living document, pulsating life into a more than half-century-old Manga Carta of India.

The CJI of India, D.Y. Chandrachud speaking in the same vein said that judges go by the values derived from the Constitution that the courts are intended to espouse such as human dignity, personal liberty, equality, fairness, etc. He also added that the Supreme Court is final not because they(judges) are right, but they are right because they are final. Transformational jurisprudence on constitutional morality is a pre-constitutional concept.

For Instance, practice, which was within the bounds of the then — prevailing social morality, was abolished and this act was a part of constitutional morality, even though the constitution was drawn up years later. Post Independence may not have found an explicit place in the text but it is embedded in the essence of constitutionalism. It demands morality to be objective based on the prevailing dynamics of society. The conscience-keepers are duty-bound to draw a balance between individual/class liberty and societal acceptance of change in the socio-legal and politico scenario.

From LGBTQ+ rights recognition in Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India to the striking down of section 497 of IPC, 1960, dealing with the law of adultery in Joseph Shine vs. Union of India, the Judiciary has advocated its mandate to include constitutional morality over majoritarian or popular morality. Constitutional morality is derived from public morality, however, slightly divorced from it and sifted through constitutional idealism.

The intersectionality of social and religious belief systems entangles it further, for instance, in the Sabarimala judgment, the debate circled between the popular socio-religious belief and the fundamental right of freedom of religion of a class of women (menstruating women) under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, is a worthy example in this regard. Constitutional morality may also at times be at a crossroads with Jus naturale.

Euthanasia as a practice or the Right to Abortion, both were initially entrenched in belief systems to be against societal morality. It was not until the Supreme Court of India balanced the interests of the right seekers and the opposers, allowing both the above practices in a judicially permissible manner, that it found its acceptance.

(The writer is a research scholar; their views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP'S SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Madam — Apropos the editorial, "Southern Comfort", published on April 12, this is my response. I fully agree that "Modi's forays into the southern parts of the country may bear some fruits but it would be naive to think that the results will be immediately delivered; it will happen perhaps only sometime in future. Indeed, the BJP has managed to break ice in the northeast and southern India but that has taken considerable time and effort. Of course, efforts done now in the south would not go in vain and will pave the way for success in future elections".

He talks to the people about the failures of the incumbent DMK Government. In Kerala, the BJP is crazy to open its account. It is to be seen on 4th June. In Telangana, it fared well in the Assembly elections in 2023 improving its tally. It is quite encouraging for the party. In AP, the BJP party needs to do a lot of groundwork. Along with Naidu, it may get a few seats. In Karnataka, the BJP is equally poised with the Congress. Modi's guarantees that the corrupt will be jailed in his third term may fetch the party some votes for in the south almost all the incumbent state Governments are mostly corrupt. So, the BJP is to open its gateway to the south in this scenario. More cannot be expected. It has to wait for a little more time to make its dent in the south as it did in the northeast.

N R Ramachandran | *Chennai*

THE UAE'S SWAMINARAYAN TEMPLE

Madam — Apropos the news story, "Swaminarayan Temple: The UAE's Monument of Harmony", published on April 13, this is my response. The tale of the Swaminarayan Temple in Abu Dhabi encapsulates more than just an architectural marvel; it speaks volumes about the convergence of faith, diplomacy and perseverance.

The journey from prophecy to reality, spanning nearly three decades, mirrors the shared commitment of India and the UAE towards fostering cultural understanding and global harmony. Prime Minister Modi's pivotal role, alongside the visionary leadership of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, underscores the significance of diplomatic collaborations in shaping monumental endeavours.

Beyond its aesthetic allure, the temple stands as a symbol of inclusivity, with its design echoing the ethos of unity amidst diversity. The meticulous craftsmanship and innovative solutions employed in its construction exemplify human ingenuity overcoming geographical and climatic challenges. In essence, the Swaminarayan Temple in Abu Dhabi is not merely a place of worship; it's a testament to the transformative power of collaboration, bridging nations and cultures in a shared pursuit of peace and progress.

Ishana Arya | *Thane*

Fix accountability

Apropos news article, "Drunken driving leaves six school children dead", published on April 12, this is my response. Six children were killed and 20 injured after a school bus carrying them overturned in Mahendragarh. Shockingly the driver was allegedly drunk and the bus did not have the fitness certificate. This is atrocious, after the accident they are finding fault. Many schools don't follow Government rules. Hundreds of school buses are in the same condition. But who bothers? Administration wakes up from the slumber only when poor kids lose their lives.

Dismiss the district administration for not following inspection beforehand remove them from the job and do criminal proceedings against them why shouldn't the city Traffic Police, Police Department & Transportation Department be made a party in the case for their negligence (since 2017 when the bus was operating without paying Road Tax, even the bus unfit to run. What are the RTO officials doing since 2017?), but this will never happen. People want to know, were the local traffic police sleeping till this mishap happened? Now they are saying the gross violation but no one checked & impounded the bus for these violations before the mishap? It's a pity that their timely action would have saved precious lives. RIP the departed soul may the lord give their parents the desired strength to overcome the loss.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | *Faridabad*

REFLECTIONS ON JALLIANWALA BAGH

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Honouring the martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh", published on April 12, this is my response. The tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh continues to echo through history, with its 105th anniversary drawing sombre reflections on the atrocity committed on April 13, 1919.

The massacre, orchestrated by Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, stands as a stark reminder of the brutality of British rule in India. The unjust firing upon unarmed civilians, amidst peaceful protests against the Rowlatt Act, left hundreds dead and wounded and condemnation both nationally and internationally. The reactions of prominent figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru underscore the magnitude of the tragedy and its profound impact. Their calls for peaceful resistance and condemnation of British colonialism reflect the resilience of the Indian spirit in the face of oppression. As we remember the lives lost at Jallianwala Bagh, it serves as a solemn reminder of the sacrifices made in the pursuit of freedom and justice, urging us to never forget the lessons of history.

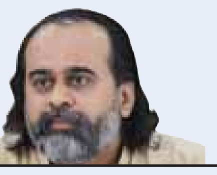
Bahadur Shah | *Dhanbad*

Send your feedback to:
letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

SPIRITUAL SOLUTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

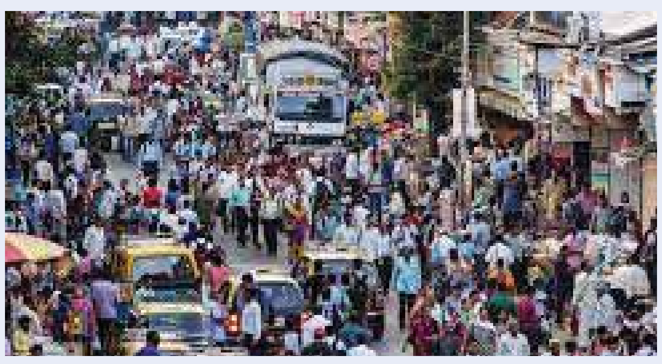
Limiting procreation is perhaps the most significant step towards sustainability



ACHARYA **PRASHANT**

Today the world that we live in, people are-trying to do small, small good things, so that we can conveniently escape away from the fact that there is something humongously evil that we are doing. Most people are habituated towards consumption, it is not consumption per se that is the problem; it is the mad and blind consumption of stuff that is anyway not going to do you any good. That's the problem. So, wisdom or spiritual wisdom is not about the renunciation of consumption altogether. There are signs which clearly show the impact of various activities on climate change. For example: going car-free, avoiding transatlantic flight; choosing green energy; switching from an electric car to car-free; choosing a vegan diet; replacing a typical car with a hybrid; washing clothes in cold water rather than hot water; recycling; hanging dry clothes; upgrading to energy-efficient light bulbs. And the title of the graphic is 'Tonnes of CO2 equivalent saved per year for one person undertaking each action' (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017; Environmental Research Letters, Volume 12, Number 7). But these are 10 activities that are popular where all the do-gooders are busy doing all these ten activities and they walk around with great missionary zeal and even greater missionary pride.

And then there is this huge bar that corresponds to around sixty tonnes of CO2 which comes from doing a single action — which is, having one child. We don't talk about the largest contributor to climate change because this is where our ego lives, this is where the physical and bodily tendencies live. You must be wondering why I am speaking about this thing regarding procreation, regarding having kids. It's because this is the single most important issue facing you and me and the planet



and the millions of species today. This is the one thing that man immediately needs to address at this moment. There is no greater challenge in front of mankind — not the Third World War, not nuclear proliferation, nothing at all. This is the biggest challenge. Can you please either stop or limit having babies? This is the one challenge that nobody wants to talk about. If you can address this, then everything will be addressed. For every urge for development, you will see linkages between body identification, consumption, procreation and followed by devastation. When the global temperatures rise by three degrees or four degrees, all these baby flowers will wilt. Anyway, not too many species of flowers are going to remain to be planted. How much is climate change to blame? It affects at least 10,967 species on the IUCN Red List and projections suggest that if global temperatures increase by 2°C by 2100, about 18 per cent of all species on land will face a high risk of going extinct.

And this cannot be addressed merely by way of litigation. You require a spiritual movement; you require a deeply spiritual consciousness to understand what I am saying and act on what I am pointing to. You cannot limit the number of kids without first putting an end to this body-identification. As long as your material body is there, you will continue to consume, you will have to consume. We do not see the linkage between body-identification, consumption, procreation and devastation; we look at them as different things. This urge for development — what do you think, it has nothing to do with the devastation of this planet? What is exactly the definition of development? That which brings pleasure to you; that which brings comfort and convenience to you, right? That's how you define development. In the history of mankind, the time has come when without addressing that root problem, you cannot address any of the problems. And if you do not address the root problem now, there is going to be no tomorrow.

(The author is a Vedanta teacher, author and the founder of Prashant Advait Foundation; views are personal)

Income inequalities hamper sustainable growth

UTTAM **GUPTA**

While the nation's GDP is poised to surge by 7.6 per cent in the current financial year, concerns loom large over the sluggish pace of private consumption

During the current financial year, the Indian economy is expected to register a growth of 7.6 per cent in real gross domestic product or GDP. Coming on top of growth of 9.1 per cent during 2021-22 and 7.2 per cent during 2022-23, India's performance is spectacular. Emboldened by this trend and Modi's commitment to pursue economic reforms with greater vigour during its third term, analysts are hoping for growth of above 7 per cent on a sustainable basis. But, there is a catch.

Private consumption which accounts for as much as 55 per cent of the Indian economy has acted as a major drag. For instance, during FY 2023-24, it is expected to grow by a meagre 3 per cent (even lower than 4.4 per cent as given in the first advance estimate). This is the slowest growth in private consumption since FY 2002-03 when growth was 2.9 per cent. It is impossible to sustain an overall GDP growth of 7-8 per cent in the years to come if the most important component (read: private consumption) is growing at less than half this rate.

What is private consumption?

Apart from essential consumption items such as food, shelter, clothing, education, health etc, it includes spending by people on a host of discretionary items such as consumer durables viz. ACs, refrigerators, washing machines, TVs, automobiles, mobiles and so on. The demand for these goods depends on the 'purchasing power' of the people at large which requires that at least all working-age persons (18 years to 60 years) have adequate incomes. This brings us to another stark reality namely the distribution of income and wealth.

Where does India stand?

According to a report 'Time to Care' by Oxfam that came ahead of the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) held in January 2020 'India's richest one per cent hold more than four times the wealth held by 953 million people who make up for the bottom 70 per cent of the population". It also showed that there were a total of 63 Indian billionaires (billionaire is a term used to describe a person having wealth over US$ one billion) and their combined total wealth was higher than India's Union Budget for the FY 2018-19.

PRIVATE CONSUMPTION, WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR AS MUCH AS 55 PER CENT OF THE INDIAN ECONOMY, HAS ACTED AS A MAJOR DRAG. FOR INSTANCE, DURING FY 2023-24, IT IS EXPECTED TO GROW BY A MEAGRE 3 PER CENT

Another Oxfam report, "Inequality Kills", released ahead of the WEF meeting held in early 2022, mentioned that the number of Indian billionaires grew to 102 by March 2020 and further to 142 in November 2021. During this period, their wealth increased from Rs 2300,000 crore to Rs 5300,000 crore. At the same time, the income of 84 per cent of households declined and the share of the bottom half of the population in national wealth was a mere six per cent.

Meanwhile, a report titled 'Survival of the Richest' released by Oxfam International at the 2023 annual meeting of the WEF in Davos, Switzerland, says that 'the wealthiest one per cent of individuals in India possess over 40 per cent of the nation's total wealth'. Juxtapose this with the bottom half of the population getting a mere six per cent of the nation's wealth, we end up with glaring inequalities.

How does it impact demand?

Let us look at India's population of around 140 crore and nominal GDP of about Rs 300,00,000 crore. Apply Oxfam percentages to these numbers.

The wealthiest one per cent or 1.4 crore individuals have 40 per cent of GDP or Rs 120,00,000 crore whereas a vast 50 per cent of the population or 70 crore individuals have a mere 6 per cent of GDP or Rs 18,00,000 crore. On per per-person basis, those in the wealthiest category have annual purchasing power (PP) of Rs 85 lakh each whereas others in the bottom 50 per cent have a PP of a mere Rs 25,000 each.

Such an income distribution pattern is far from conducive to boosting demand on a sustainable basis. There are inherent limits to how much a wealthy person can buy. On the other hand, if a good portion of the money with him is distributed among those who are not so blessed (read: the bottom 50 per cent), this would give a big boost to private consumption.

We hear loud voices from various quarters including from industries and businesses asking the Government to formulate policies, reduce taxes even give direct income support. But, there isn't even a whisper of 'why inequalities in income arise in the first place. An analysis of the financials of India's largest companies—those comprising the BSE 500 index—gives us some clues.

The profits of corporations included in this index went up from Rs 480,000 crore during FY 2017-18 to more than Rs 1000,000 crore during FY 2021-22 - an increase of over 100 per cent, whereas their revenue growth was only 47 per cent during this period. This means that payments to factors of production other than the owners of capital (read: shareholders) such as to employees/workers, purchase of inputs, interest payments, etc., have been kept under a tight leash, resulting in a disproportionate boost to profits.

The aggregate dividend paid by these firms increased from Rs 176,000 crore during FY 2017-18 to Rs 302,000 crore during FY 2021-22, which is an increase of 72 per cent. In each of the last five years, they paid at least 30 per cent of aggregate net profit as dividends. Cumulatively, the companies distributed 34 per cent of profits as dividends. This is an unusually high payout ratio—even higher than 30 per cent paid by the world's largest companies included in America's S&P 500. Thus, the companies have done little to reinvest the profits for growth.

Whether profits, albeit extraordinary, to the company or high dividends to shareholders, they have been paid for or come at the cost of others. For instance, the Rs 1000,000 crore profits of firms in the BSE 500 index during FY 2021-22 came at the cost of undermining the purchasing power of millions of consumers. If even 50 per cent of this amount or Rs 500,000 crore had remained with the latter, aggregate demand would have gone up manifolds.

Likewise, look at the Rs 302,000 crore dividend paid to shareholders during FY 2021-22. An overwhelming share of this went to the promoters and other minority shareholders. If, instead of filling their coffers—the money that merely adds to their cash balances or is spent on a few discretionary/luxury items—more of it were to be distributed in higher salaries to their employees, particularly at the lower rung, imagine what it would do to demand.

Several businesses enjoy pricing power. For instance, those operating in metals such as copper and zinc, or in hydrocarbons like oil and gas, enjoy a natural monopoly. Leveraging this, they charge high prices, resulting in windfall gains for themselves. Enterprises in the chemical, petrochemicals, pharmaceutical and agrochemical sectors have hugely benefited from a protective policy environment.

Over 60 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) also ape large enterprises when it comes to distributing the wealth generated. Their owners spend the least on payments to workers. To conclude, all businesses are structured to result in the concentration of income in the hands of their owners or those who wield power and influence. Instead of deflecting the ball to the Government, they need to bring about a fundamental change in the way they operate. They need to shed over zealousness for profits, charge less from consumers, distribute more to workers and pay more taxes.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Indian political discourse plummets: Standards in free fall

Elections serve as a litmus test for the health of a nation's democracy, revealing the true character of leaders

KUMAR **CHELLAPPAN**

The narrative that happens during the time of the General Election is an indicator of the quality of democracy practiced in a country. Leaders, especially the star campaigners, should set a standard for the public discourse through their speeches and interviews with the media persons. They should bear in mind that every word they utter is being recorded digitally with cameras and audio instruments. Whatever they speak is under public scrutiny and any aberrations would lead to major mishaps.

The campaign speeches in India took a new low during the tenure of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister (1984-1989). Rajiv, who took over the post of Prime Minister following the assassination of his mother Indira Gandhi, was a refreshing change from the image of conventional Congress leaders spotting the ear-to-ear smile and perverted smile. But that did not last long as the Government he headed was enmeshed in corruption charges ranging from Bofors Gun to HDW submarine deals. It was futile to expect the truncated Opposition to sit idle while the whole world was discussing the gun contract. Rajiv Gandhi, who was upset with the charges, went to the extent of describing the opposition as political limpets. This is a term coined by a speech writer of Rajiv who always flouted his Indian Foreign Service background to play one-upmanship against old-time Congress leaders.

On seeing that Rajiv Gandhi was upset with the allegations of corruption, Ram Jethmalani, the doyen among the country's lawyers launched a fusillade of questions at the Prime Minister. "Ill ask you ten questions each day about the Bofors deal and if you claim that there is no corruption involved in it, please answer my questions," said Jethmalani. This made Rajiv furious and he shot back saying that he would not answer barking dogs. Ram Jethmalani was a highly respected lawyer and social activist and the general public did not take the comments of the then Prime Minister lightly.

Ram Nath Goenka, the founder of Indian Express, who had said in a signed front-page editorial in his newspaper that he could die peacefully with Rajiv Gandhi occupying the Prime Minister's chair had to make a retreat and wrote that the earlier Rajiv Gandhi goes the better for the country. The Congress alone was responsible for the falling standard in the national narrative during the election. When the Congress made use of public discourses with unparliamentary and uncivilized words, it was futile to expect the opposition to sit back and suffer silently. Barring leaders like A B Vajpayee, L K Advani, Murali Manohar Joshi, George Fernandes and S Chandrasekhar, the opposition too had an array of leaders capable of spitting venom and fire at the rivals.

Though many seasoned statesmen like Nani Palkhivala and J R D Tata cautioned the nation about the falling standards in the quality of debates and discussions, it did not make any impact as politicians continued their harangues with the sole purpose of scoring brownie points. The result was that the political campaigns that should have served as a source of knowledge and information got degraded into speeches full of chosen abuses.

The present-day Congress leaders are no different. Manmohan Singh, the former Prime Minister said in a media meeting on 4 January 2014 that it would be disastrous for the country to have Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. Now it is for the people of India to decide whether Narendra Modi's decade-long regime was disastrous or not.

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge is no different from M M Mani, the Marxist leader of Kerala when it comes to "showering" rivals with the choicest of abuses. Being the president of the GOP, Kharge has the major responsibility to ensure the dignity of the narratives. But the kind of words he has used and is using do not augur well for the position he holds.

Politics is a profession that requires dignity, decency and decorum. One could not speak or behave in a manner that would put hooligans to shame. A politician should be able to control the language and mannerisms while he interacts with the people. The behaviour of former union minister Dayanidhi Maran (grand nephew of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin) who is in politics only because of his family connections, is reprehensible as well as condemnable.

When he was asked about K Annamalai, the state chief of Tamil Nadu BJP, Maran went to the extent of describing him as a joker and said he does not know any Annamalai. This is the zenith of arrogance as Annamalai is the most talked about person in South India as of date. His rise in BJP was not because of his family background while his educational and professional qualifications are sufficient to make one say My My.. Maran and his ilk need sensibility to cherish the beauty of Annamalai's qualifications.

In his decade-long service as an IPS officer, Annamalai earned encomium from all his seniors while Maran was dropped from the Manmohan Singh-led Government within three years of being sworn in following corruption charges against him. This much for dynasty politics.

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