

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Bottles of generic medication recalled by Dr. Reddy Labs

3.3 lakh. Dr Reddy's Laboratories is recalling over 3.3 lakh bottles of a medication used to treat high calcium levels in blood and hyperparathyroidism in the U.S. due to manufacturing issues. The recall is due to the "presence of N-nitroso Cinacalcet impurity above FDA recommended interim limit". The affected lot was produced in India. PTI

Germany's funds for Pakistan forest protection project

20 An agreement for financial support for the 'Billion Tree Afforestation Support Project' (BTASP) was signed in Islamabad on Saturday between Pakistan Economic Affairs Secretary Dr. Kazim Niaz and Director of German Development Bank KfW, Esther Gravenkotter. The first phase of BTASP is already under implementation, according to The Dawn newspaper. PTI

Death toll in Gaza since Israeli troops began the invasion

43,341 The Health Ministry in Gaza said on Sunday that at least 43,341 people have been killed in the war between Israel and Palestinian militants. The toll includes 27 deaths in the previous 24 hours, according to the ministry, which said 1,02,105 people have been wounded since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023. AFP

Number of people injured in Srinagar grenade attack

11 This attack comes a day after security forces eliminated a top Pakistani commander of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in the Khanyar locality of downtown Srinagar. The blast took place close to the weekly flea market, known as the Sunday market. An official said the attack was borne out of the desperation of terrorists following the killing of the LeT commander. PTI

Amount invested by the Union govt. into RINL despite issues

1,650 crore. Rashtriya Ispat Nigam (RINL) is a steel manufacturing company under the Ministry of Steel which owns a 7.5 million tonne plant at Visakhapatnam. The government is taking various measures to keep RINL as a going concern, as the RINL is in "serious financial trouble". PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Why were Romanian polls annulled?

What prompted the constitutional court to declare the European nation's presidential polls invalid? Who is Calin Georgescu and what has been his role in the elections? What are the allegations levelled against Russia and has the country faced similar accusations in the past in the region?

EXPLAINER

Garimella Subramanian

The story so far:

In an unprecedented ruling on December 6, Romania's constitutional court unanimously annulled the country's presidential elections, two days before the run-off ballot, amid allegations of Russian interference. Suspicions of foul play were fuelled when Calin Georgescu emerged frontrunner, securing 22.9% of the vote, after the first round of polling on November 24. A professor of environmental sciences who fought as an independent and had polled in single digits until then, Mr. Georgescu is an ex-honorary member of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party. He has been portrayed as an admirer of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and a critic of Romania's membership of NATO and the EU.

The Constitutional Court in Bucharest had ordered a recount in response to complaints by two of the contestants who were eliminated in the first round. Once the exercise confirmed the previous tally, the judges had given the go ahead for the knock-out round on December 8. However, the unfolding dramatic turn of events prompted the court to call off the elections altogether, concluding that the process was marred by multiple irregularities.

How serious are the allegations?

Days before the aborted run-off, Romania's National Security Council declassified troves of documents from the Interior Ministry, detailing how the country had been a target of Russian cybercrimes, information leaks and sabotage. It said some 800 TikTok



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accounts created in 2016 were activated in support of Mr. Georgescu a month before the ballot and thousands closer to the polling date. More than 100 paid influencers with a few million followers were deployed to boost Mr. Georgescu's prospects. Romania's secret service (SRI) has claimed it has identified thousands of cyberattacks originating from Russian platforms, which routed their operations from several countries, and distorted the information presented to the public. The agency singled out Mr. Georgescu, who had claimed that he had no access to campaign funds, as having received preferential treatment from TikTok, because the platform owned by ByteDance did not label his video posts as political advertisement. TikTok has denied any wrongdoing and taken down thousands of disputed posts and promised full cooperation with the authorities. Telegram and Discord are the other channels Romanian authorities have blamed for involvement in these covert and coordinated operations.

What is the status of the probe?

In a complaint filed with the EU regulator, Romania's media watchdog has alleged that TikTok's algorithms amplified Mr. Georgescu's content to the disadvantage of other candidates. Subject to available evidence, the commission could investigate the Chinese social media platform for potential violations under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). The law stipulates content moderation obligations on large online platforms to mitigate systemic risks, including the electoral processes and imposes penalties of up to 6% of global annual turnover. TikTok has already been served an order under the DSA to preserve for scrutiny all its data relating to European elections.

What explains Georgescu's appeal?

The TikTok messenger that spectacularly propelled his victory does not detract from the resonance of Mr. Georgescu's ultra-nationalist message among an electorate disenchanted with the dominance of the mainstream Social

Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party since the fall of communism. High inflation, a ballooning fiscal deficit and balance of payments challenges, not to mention rampant corruption in high places and contempt for the rule of law, have been weaponised by populist and extremist groups to peddle propaganda and conspiracy theories.

How widespread are concerns of Russian meddling in the region?

From orchestrating a so-called hybrid warfare of spreading disinformation, cyberattacks and sabotage, to paying off pro-Russian MEPs (Members of the European Parliament), Moscow's controversial role came into sharp focus during the European parliament elections in June.

In response, Belgium and the Czech Republic coordinated investigations that led, among other actions, Prague to impose sanctions on an oligarch close to Mr. Putin for promoting a pro-Russia narrative via Voice of Europe website, which has since been taken down.

While a German MP from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is under a probe for receiving money from a pro-Russia campaign, the Belgian government in April passed legislation to criminalise foreign interference in the political process.

In Moldova, the fragile post-Soviet republic, Moscow is accused of plotting to destabilise the pro-EU government, and interference in President Maia Sandu's re-election and the referendum on EU accession in October.

What next?

While a re-run of the presidential contest is expected next year, the Mayor of Bucharest has thrown his hat in the ring. The ultra-nationalist Mr. Georgescu has vowed to challenge the decision in the Supreme Court. Romanian tax authorities have launched financial investigations against the social influencers behind Georgescu's campaign, some of whom have since fled the country.

THE GIST

Romania's presidential elections were annulled amid allegations of Russian interference

Suspicions of foul play were alleged after Calin Georgescu from the political fringe emerged frontrunner, securing 22.9% of the vote, after the first round of polling on November 24

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What did the U.S. Congressional report on COVID origins find?

How did the U.S. government, in the report, arrive at the conclusion that SARS-CoV-2 emerged from a laboratory leak? What is a furin cleavage site and how does it come into play in this case?

Privali Prakash

The story so far:

A U.S. Congressional committee led by Republican Brad Wenstrup has concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic was the result of the spread of a virus that likely leaked from a research facility in Wuhan, China.

The final report of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, established in 2023, was published on December 2, 2024.

The report runs over 500 pages and, according to committee members, will serve as a roadmap for government action during future pandemics.

"A future pandemic requires a whole-of-America response managed by those without personal benefit or bias," Mr. Wenstrup wrote. "We can always do

better, and for the sake of future generations of Americans, we must."

What is the lab-leak theory?

The report stated that SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly emerged from a laboratory leak.

It based this conclusion on inferred or circumstantial claims made early during the pandemic.

It quoted an unclassified factsheet from January 2021 published by the U.S. State Department that said: "The U.S. government has reason to believe several researchers inside the WIV [Wuhan Institute of Virology] became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illness."

The report itself does not directly

prove the lab-leak theory, however.

The report also quoted statements by molecular biologist Alina Chan in June 2024 in support of the lab-leak hypothesis.

In one statement, Dr. Chan said the virus emerged in Wuhan, which is also home to China's "foremost research lab for SARS-like viruses", and that Shi Zhengli, a senior virologist at WIV, "has been researching SARS-like viruses for over a decade and even initially wondered if the outbreak came from the WIV".

But at a conference in Japan on December 4, Dr. Shi reportedly refuted the claim that the viruses she was studying were ancestors of the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen.

She had earlier promised to sequence the genomes of 56 betacoronaviruses she and her team had collected between 2004 and 2021 and were studying. She

presented the sequencing data and their analyses at the conference. (The latter have yet to be peer-reviewed.)

The Select Subcommittee report also noted an observation by Nicholas Wade, former science editor at *The New York Times*, in January 2024, that SARS-CoV-2 "possesses a furin cleavage site, found in none of the other 871 known members of its viral family, so it cannot have gained such a site through the ordinary evolutionary swaps of genetic material within a family."

A furin cleavage is the process by which the furin enzyme breaks up specific proteins to activate them. The furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 controls how it interacts with human cells to cause the disease.

A letter published in *The Lancet* in August 2023 by researchers from Cornell University refuted Mr. Wade's idea and said the site could have evolved naturally, as opposed to being genetically engineered.

What else does the report say?

The report also said the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded gain-of-function research at WIV.

Gain-of-function research refers to studies where researchers genetically alter organisms to give them additional functions, like enhanced transmissibility or infectivity.

THE GIST

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Making affordable generics more reliable

Generic drugs are crucial for addressing healthcare affordability in a population marked by significant income disparities. Bioequivalent to branded drugs, generics offer cost-effective alternatives. India leverages economies of scale and low production costs to supply affordable medication domestically and internationally.

With out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure at 39.4% of total health expenditure in 2021-22, generics reduce financial burdens and improve treatment adherence. By August 2024, generic medicines worth ₹5,600 crore sold through Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janashakti Pariyojana over a decade saved consumers an estimated ₹30,000 crore.

Ensuring the quality of generic medicines in India is vital to make them affordable and effective as innovator drugs. Despite being bioequivalent to brand-name drugs, quality control lapses have occasionally compromised their efficacy and safety.

A study by doctors of the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, published in *Mycoses*, investigated the efficacy of itraconazole in treating chronic pulmonary aspergillosis using the innovator drug and 22 generic formulations. The innovator itraconazole achieved therapeutic drug levels in 73% of patients within two weeks, compared to only 29% for generics, which often required 6-8 weeks, dose escalation, or switching to the innovator. Further, generic capsules had significant defects, including fewer and unevenly sized pellets, critical for optimal drug absorption and bioavailability.

But why do generic and innovator drugs differ in some cases despite being made from the same active ingredient? Generics can differ significantly in their excipients and manufacturing processes, leading to variability in therapeutic outcomes. First,



Aditya Sinha
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Views are personal

The key issue lies in India's decentralised drug regulation system, which grants significant authority to State Drug Regulatory Authorities, leading to inconsistent enforcement and quality standards

differences in excipients – such as binders, fillers, disintegrants, and coatings – can alter a drug's dissolution rate, stability, and delivery mechanism.

Second, manufacturing processes, including the type of punching machines, compression force, and granulation methods, can influence the drug's physical and chemical properties. Variations in tablet hardness, particle size, and porosity can affect disintegration and absorption. In some cases, while an innovator drug is designed to release the API slowly to achieve a sustained therapeutic effect, generics may release the API more rapidly, potentially leading to fluctuations in drug levels.

Third, the limitations of bioequivalence thresholds contribute to the problem. Regulatory standards often allow pharmacokinetic parameters to fall within 80%-125% of the innovator drug's range. These thresholds may be insufficient for medications with a narrow therapeutic index. Even minor deviations in drug release or bioavailability can lead to subtherapeutic effects or adverse reactions. Stability issues can also further undermine the drug's shelf life and reliability.

The key issue lies in India's decentralised drug regulation system, which grants significant authority to State Drug Regulatory Authorities (SDRAs), leading to inconsistent enforcement and quality standards. The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) can only recommend action, leaving States to act. Despite repeated calls for centralisation, crucial functions remain with States, enabling regulatory arbitrage as manufacturers exploit weaker oversight. India must centralise drug regulation, strengthen CDSCO with resources and personnel, and establish more central drug-testing labs to address this issue.

Another reason is the inadequate enforcement of stability testing to ensure drug

efficacy under diverse climatic conditions. Stability testing, mandated by the CDSCO in 2018, requires manufacturers to demonstrate that drugs maintain their quality, strength, and identity under specified conditions.

However, inconsistent implementation by State licensing authorities and the absence of clear, centralised guidelines undermine compliance. Moreover, the lack of retrospective applicability to generics approved before 2018 perpetuates the presence of substandard drugs in the market. India must enforce uniform stability testing protocols, ensure centralised regulatory oversight, and mandate periodic reassessment of all approved generics to build confidence in drug quality.

Thirdly, India's Pharmacopoeia permits higher drug impurity levels than U.S. and EU standards. The Pharmacopoeia Commission (PC) and CDSCO rejected stricter ICH guidelines as "too expensive". Thus, these standards should be made a bit more stringent. In that case, action needs to be taken at the level of PC, CDSCO, and Centre.

Centralising drug regulation will only be effective with a comprehensive overhaul of the CDSCO. It must be reorganised to deliver robust regulatory safeguards, protecting patients from the dangers of substandard and counterfeit medicines through stringent regulatory protocols and effective inspection and enforcement mechanisms.

We must champion generics – they are indispensable for ensuring equitable access to medicines. But, equity cannot come at the expense of quality. States must relinquish their fragmented control over drug regulation, which has long undermined public confidence in medicine. It is time to act on the decades-old recommendations of the Bhatia (1954), Hathi (1975), and Mashelkar (2003) committees, all of which have called for centralised oversight.

State water policymaking matters

AP's CM is calling for a comprehensive water policy to address State's challenges

STATE OF PLAY

Srinivas Chokkikul
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Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has recently called for a comprehensive water policy for Andhra Pradesh while reviewing the water resources development. The idea of such a policy must be welcomed. The fledgling state of Andhra Pradesh requires, at any rate, a territorial re-imagining of its water futures especially given the multiple challenges it confronts as a result of its bifurcation a decade ago.

Water policymaking at the State level is often underrated, yet it is both desirable and imperative for subnational and national water security. This is so at least for three fundamental reasons.

First, the fulcrum of water governance in India lies with and within the States. The much-needed paradigmatic choices and shifts – say, in supply augmentation to demand management – can be accomplished when these are leveraged at the State level.

Second, water resources development is deeply localised and territorialised for contextual reasons. For instance, Maharashtra, advanced in water resources development, may need to focus on regulation, whereas Jharkhand on supply augmentation strategies.

Third, the current Anthropocene world warrants re-visioning water resources management paradigms and practices. As the eminent Professor Asit K. Biswas puts it, the effects of climate change are most profoundly manifested in the ways of *water largely, but not exclusively*, incorporating present institutional models, such as an independent water



resources regulatory authority. This is critical for Andhra Pradesh given the acute and politically sensitive regional imbalances within the State. Such reforms could also help with another good starting point for improving water use efficiency.

The important direction is to cope with risks. While climate change presents an overarching source of these risks, water security involves addressing other emerging risks such as groundwater depletion, river pollution and water quality, and dam safety. With over 32 dams aging past 50 years, and the highest average storage per structure in the country, dam safety is an important concern.

As a downstream State with a long coastline, Andhra Pradesh is exposed to compounded climate change risks. The Vijayawada floods in September is a case in point. The intense rainfall in the upstream stretches and poor conditions in the downstream to moderate in large parts. While the Chief Minister personally led the response efforts, institutionalisation of more efficient and effective mechanisms is necessary. The State must evolve robust monitoring and response systems to address climate risks, including cyclones. This brings to the fore the crucial element of intergovernmental multi-jurisdictional coordination to cope with such an extra-territorial nature of risks. The State must be conscious of these challenges of institutional reconfiguration towards a more comprehensive water policy.

Making the shift away from supply augmentation must be a top priority for the State. Many other States' water policies articulate aspirations for such a shift, but these often fizzle out due to the problem of institutional inertia. Deeply entrenched institutional cultures of water resources departments are premised on supply augmentation through engineering solutions. These are ill-equipped to adapt or promote demand management strategies.

Reimagining these cultures must accompany other elements of institutional reforms. *Water largely, but not exclusively*, incorporating present institutional models, such as an independent water

resources regulatory authority. This is critical for Andhra Pradesh given the acute and politically sensitive regional imbalances within the State. Such reforms could also help with another good starting point for improving water use efficiency.

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Srinivas Chokkikul is president and Research, New Delhi. Views are personal

Outstanding spinner, capable batter, match winner

The cerebral Ashwin's record is highlighted by his exceptional strike rate, best among spinners

DATA POINT

Srinivasan Ramani

Ravichandran Ashwin, a colossus in Indian cricket, hung up his kit bag and called it quits in international cricket after a stellar career on Wednesday, just as the third Test between Australia and India in Brisbane petered out to a draw. This article will focus only on his Test record.

Ashwin's retirement announcement meant that he finished as the seventh-highest wicket-taker in Tests (537 wickets) at a stellar average (runs per wicket) of 24 and a strike rate (SR, deliveries bowled per wicket) of 50.7. He also scored 3,503 runs at an average of 25.75. Only his former Indian coach Anil Kumble managed a higher wicket tally (619) and only 20 Indian batsmen scored more Test runs than him, indicating his strong all-round ability and performance in cricket's classical version. Sri Lanka's M. Muralitharan (800), Australia's Shane Warne (708), and Kumble (619) finished with more wickets than Ashwin but the Tamil Nadu player and Chennai-born spinner played fewer matches compared to the other three. With 37 five-wicket-hauls-in-an-inning and eight 10-wicket-hauls-in-a-match, Ashwin was not far behind Warne's 37 5-fers and 10 10-fers, but this statistic was dominated by Muralitharan, who finished with 67 5-fers and 22 10-fers.

Where does Ashwin rank among the all-time best bowlers? As **Chart 1** shows, Ashwin's SR of 50.7 was the top of the pops among spinners (who picked up at least 250 wickets). No other spinner, except for Muralitharan, came close.

Table 1 shows the spinners with 250 or more wickets, ordered on overall SR. Ashwin's phenomenal record in the subcontinent (India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, he did not play in Pakistan), where he

picked up a whopping 433 wickets at a SR of 45.8 and an average of 21.76 (second only to Muralitharan's 21.69), helped him register a great overall SR. This is despite a somewhat less sterling 70.8 SR in venues not friendly to spin in other countries, such as South Africa, England, Australia, New Zealand, and West Indies.

Ashwin was a match-winner for India and among the team's most consistent performers in an era when the Indian team dominated Test cricket, especially at home. He won 11 Man of the Series awards in the 44 series he played. Muralitharan also won 11 such awards, but he played in 61 series.

His phenomenal rate of wicket-taking ensured he was always among the fastest to reach various milestones in Test cricket, as **Table 2** shows. He still holds the record for being the fastest to the milestone of 300 wickets in Test cricket (54 matches), and only Muralitharan bests him in later milestones (400 plus onwards).

Ashwin's batting has been an underrated ability and one of the reasons he has won several Man of the Series awards has been his ability to score vital runs as a lower-order batsman. Along with spin twin Ravindra Jadeja, Ashwin not only formed a strong spin tandem but their batting prowess strengthened the batting lineup, pulling the team out of many a batting crisis.

Chart 2 plots all-rounder cricketers (those who have scored at least 2,000 runs and captured at least 150 wickets in Test) batting and bowling averages (reversed). Ashwin falls under the category of "bowling all-rounders" who could score decent runs and were outstanding bowlers including stalwarts such as Richard Hadlee, Shaun Pollock, Wasim Akram, and Chaminda Vaas. Another attribute of Ashwin that sets him apart from other bowlers – his hegemony over left-handed batsmen. Nearly 50% of all his wickets were of left-handed batsmen (**Table 3**).

An off-spinner who took wickets quickly, a batter who shored up the lower order and a match-winner, Ashwin did it all in his stellar Test career



Tweaking to the top

The data for the charts were sourced from ESPNcricinfo

Chart 1: Strike rate of all bowlers who have picked up at least 250 Test wickets

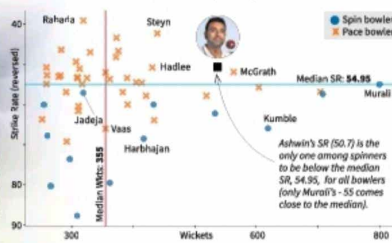


Chart 2: Batting vs bowling avg. for players with more than 2000 runs & 150 wickets

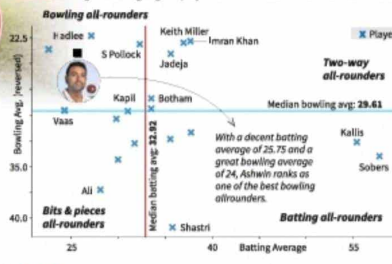


Table 2: The table shows bowlers who were fastest to wickets' milestones

Fastest to wickets	Record holder (No. of Tests)	Ashwin's rank
50	CTB Turner (6)	Joint 4th (9)
100	GA Lohmann (10)	3rd (18)
200	Yasir Shah (33)	3rd (37)
300	Ashwin (54)	1st
400	Murali (72)	2nd (77)
500	Murali (87)	2nd (98)

Table 3: Table shows total wickets for bowlers & left hand batters as a % of those

Bowler Name	LHB wickets	Total Wickets	%
R Ashwin	268	537	49.7
NM Lyon	188	533	35.3
Harbhajan	139	417	33.3
SCJ Broad	193	604	32.0
JM Anderson	221	704	31.2
DW Steyn	136	439	31.0
SM Pollock	129	421	30.6
GD McGrath	172	563	30.6
A Kumble	167	619	27.0
SK Warne	172	708	24.3
Muralitharan	191	800	23.9

% LHB wickets as a % of total

Table 3: The table shows the spinners (who took 250 plus wickets) ranked on their overall strike rate

Bowler/Team	Wickets	Avg	Strike Rate	SR in SubCont	SR in SENAAM*
Ashwin	537	24	50.7	45.8	70.9
Murali	800	22.72	55	53.2	58.3
Jadeja	319	24.05	57.1	51.1	79.2
Warne	708	25.41	57.4	56.5	58.6
Harth	433	28.07	60	54	93.4
Swann	255	29.96	60.1	55.2	62.3
Lyon	533	30.45	62.2	56.8	62.3
Kumble	619	29.65	65.9	61.3	76.4
Kaneria	261	34.79	67.8	64.2	71.1
Harbhajan	417	32.46	68.6	68.6	69.5
Underwood	287	25.83	73.6	78.9	71.8
Vettori	362	34.96	79.5	68.6	85.4
Bedi	266	28.71	80.3	78.4	82.4
Gibbs	309	29.09	87.7	78.6	89.6

SENAAM*: South Africa, England, New Zealand, Australia and West Indies

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 19, 1974

Exchange of visits: Indian Board's suggestion to Pak.

Bombay, Dec. 18: The Working Committee of the Board of Control for Cricket in India at a special meeting here today suggested to the Pakistan Cricket Control Board that they could exchange visits beginning from September to December next year.

The Pakistan Board had suggested to the Indian Board that an Indian team should visit Pakistan in the winter of 1975 to play five Test matches and nine other matches and immediately after that a Pakistan team would tour India from January to March 1976 to play an identical number of matches.

The Board considered the proposal from Pakistan at full length and since India had a heavy schedule in 1976, including a visit to New Zealand and West Indies, the Pakistan Board's suggestion could not be accepted. Instead, the Indian Board had proposed that India played three Test matches and three other matches in Pakistan, lasting in all five weeks. The Pakistan team will come to India after the conclusion of the matches there and play here three Test matches and four other matches.

The Board also considered the preparation of the Indian team for participating in the World Cup (Prudential Cup) tournament. In order to condition the players for this tournament, the Board has decided to suggest one day matches at five different centres.

The Indian selectors will watch the performance of the players and finalise the team for the World Cup to be staged in England, beginning from May 29 to June 25.

The Indian team will leave early in May to acclimatise itself to the weather conditions there and to play matches against Counties before the World Cup.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 19, 1924

American music in India

Bombay, Dec. 19: For the first time in the Radio history in this country American broadcasting was received in India in the early hours of Wednesday morning when the Marconi Company's engineers heard American music. While the former were able to pick up one of the new short wave transmissions, Mr. Hebbard listened to one of regular programmes on normal wave length of K.D.K.A. station.

BIBLIO



Nature may be complicated to write about but a gendered outlook can help to enhance the understanding of how to value biodiversity. PTI

Nature whisperers: women's unique connection with the environment

Exploring literature on climate and nature through the perspective of women authors helps to reflect on what it means to live ethically, responsibly and healthily in consonance with nature. The writers exhort stakeholders to listen to women's voices in the larger fight for climate justice

Soma Basu

Scientists and activists have warned the world about climate crisis for long. Yet, climate commitments fall short of actions needed to avoid disastrous consequences. The annual international climate summit (COP) or the environment-related days (nine in a calendar year) remind us of the challenges we face due to climate change but that effort on climate justice is too little and late.

Do we not care enough or do we not know enough to care for the environment?

Interestingly, Amitav Ghosh argues that nature does not need humans to stand up and defend it and so, instead of seeking out new ideas to address the ecological crisis, we should return to ancient stories the earth has been telling us. "We can confront the crisis not by trying to save the planet but by listening to it," he writes in an essay, *Brutes: Meditations on the Myth of the Voiceless*.

American environmentalist Charles Eisenstein underlines in his 2018 book, *Climate A New Theory*, that much of the climate derangement comes from direct disruption of ecosystems. He says the core of the crisis is ecocide, the killing of the ecosystem, and not warming.

Vital cog in the wheel

The work of writers such as American naturalist Henry David Thoreau or environmental philosopher John Muir have helped to shape the way we view nature. But women too are vital voices who are often missing from the proverbial table.

The relationship between women and the land is difficult to trace due to lack of documentation, though women sow and till fields and shape the way their cultures

relate to the land. Travel writer Suzanne Roberts gives food for thought on the masculinity of wilderness: "I realised I had been relying on a male translation of nature rather than listening to my own voice".

In his novel *Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh portrays nature as mother and writes human beings have to take help of nature for a comfortable life. As nurturers, women have a connect with nature and fight climate change through nature-connectedness. But their voices have remained in a minority in climate discourse and nature writing.

Environmental thinker Vandana Shiva is among the few who has to her credit a score of influential books on the subject. She is one who believes women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life. In her new book, *The Nature of Nature: The Metabolic Disorder of Climate Change* (2024), she explores the intimate links between food and climate to look deep into the root causes of climate change.

"What we eat, how we grow the food we eat, how we distribute it, will determine whether humanity survives or pushes itself and other species to extinction," writes Shiva, while explaining the inconvertible connections between a global warming climate and an agricultural system based on techno-optimism. She says food is the currency of life, indivisible from earth and its natural systems, and argues powerfully for a food and climate future based on regeneration or biodiversity, in partnership with the biosphere.

Turning back to nature

Like Ghosh, she writes that in an age of climate catastrophes, we need to turn back to nature and learn once again how

to live sustainably on planet earth, offering alternatives that work according to nature's ecological laws and are the real solutions to rejuvenate and regenerate the planet. Shiva analyses the false promises made by technology – oriented lab-intensive digital agriculture and calls out the fake and ultra-processed food industries that are impacting the world's health and food security.

Another widely published author, Prerna Singh Bindra, lobbies with governments on conservation issues and in her book *The Vanishing – India's Wildlife Crisis* (2017), she exhorts thinking citizens to acknowledge the Indian wildlife crisis due to development projects tearing into their habitats.

'Sixth extinction'

Bindra travels to far-flung forests to put the spotlight on the vanishing natural heritage. India is in the midst of mass 'sixth extinction' is her worry, as she writes, "We are losing species in our backyard." The once ubiquitous sparrows, or the fireflies that lit up the nights have dwindled; in the forests, great Indian bustards are down to a 100; the end of the gharial indicates the poisoning and death of the clear and fast-flowing rivers. She tells readers why extinction matters and how the fate of wildlife is linked to humans. She pushes against this "ecocide".

Arati Kumar Rao journeyed across India's diverse landscapes for more than a decade to study the slow violence inflicted in the fragile environment and how it impacts livelihoods. Her book, *Marginalia – Indian Landscapes on the Brink* (2023) throws light on the subtle tectonic changes taking place across ecosystems in India.

She cites examples of the Thar where miners bulldoze sand dunes that guard

life-sustaining water; the Gangetic dolphin that now struggles for survival as its riverine habitat is fragmented by dams and rolled by incessant shipping; the cataclysmic floods that unleashes fury on Mumbai due to encroachments.

"As the spectre of climate change compounds natural and human-induced disasters, today's climate emergency," To landscapes are pushed to the precipice of destruction," she warns, making her book a haunting read about failed government schemes, exaggerated promises and human follies.

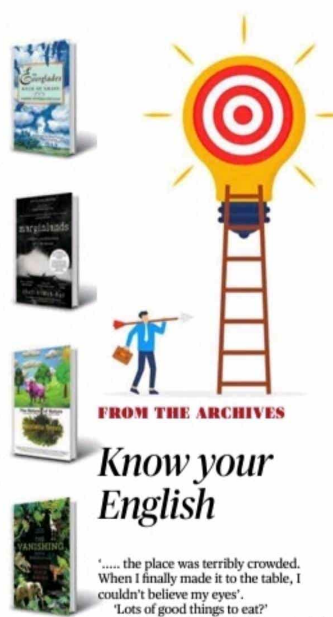
Leadership qualities

There are few other books by women writers that attempt to demystify climate change, explain what the fuss is all about and why it matters to our survival.

Named one of the best books of the year by Smithsonian Magazine, *All We Can Save* (2020) by Ayana Elizabeth and Katherine K. Wilkinson contains essays from women at the forefront of the climate movement and reveals their leadership rooted in compassion, connection, and collaboration. "To change everything, we need everyone," is their message.

A groundbreaking perspective is a rare anthology, *Women on Nature* (2021) by Katharine Norbury which has 100+ voices on place, landscape and the natural world. Another book *Everglades: River of Grass* (1947) by journalist and conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas is about her efforts to protect the fragile wetlands of Florida.

Nature may be complicated to write about but a gendered outlook can help to enhance the understanding of how to value biodiversity. These books are both a balm and a guide for knowing what has been done to the world, and how to save our collective future.



Know your English

'.... the place was terribly crowded. When I finally made it to the table, I couldn't believe my eyes'.
'Lots of good things to eat?'
'No. Nothing but sandwiches were left'.
'Was left?'
'What?'
'Nothing but sandwiches was left'.
'Nothing but' is followed by a singular verb.
'But, 'sandwiches' is plural, isn't it?'
'That's right. But as I said 'nothing but' takes a singular verb. Normally you would say, there were only sandwiches on the table. In this case, you use the plural 'were'. But when you use 'nothing but', you use the singular 'was'. Nothing but crumbs was on the plate. Nothing was on the plate but crumbs'.
'Things weren't that bad in my case. At least I had sandwiches. And guess who I met at the party?'
'You tell me'.
'Mr. Jain, my physics teacher'.
'Did you cozy-up to him?'
'Co.. what?'

'cozy-up' means 'to try to be close, friendly; try to be liked'. For example, Raju is cozying-up to Jaggu in order to make it to the cricket team'.
'That's nothing unusual. Everyone tries to cozy-up to the captain'.

'It's cozy-up to the captain'. The expression is usually followed by 'to'.
'Cozy-up' is considered slang by the way. So, did you cozy-up to your teacher?'

'No, I had no time to cozy-up to him. You see, he doesn't like sandwiches and was feeling terribly hungry. So I suggested he go to the Mayuri'.

'Cosy up' is also written without the hyphen, with 's' instead of 'z'.

'The Mayuri! That's become one of your stamping grounds, hasn't it?'
'Stamping ground? What does it mean?'

'A stamping ground is a place 'where a person spends much of his time', his favourite place!'

'If that's what stamping ground means, then Mayuri is certainly not one of my stamping grounds. It's the small tea shop next to it. My friends and I meet there after school'.

'So the tea shop is an after school stamping ground?'

'Yes'.

'What did your teacher think of Mayuri?'

'He didn't like it one bit. When he went in, he was told that the kitchen staff were on strike. All that they could offer him were cheese sandwiches!'

'A nice man is a man of nasty ideas' – Jonathan Swift
K Subrahmanian
S. Upendran
21-06-1994

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on R. Ashwin, who retired from international cricket

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Who was Ashwin's opponent in his Test debut?

QUESTION 2

Ashwin was part of two ICC tournament-winning Indian teams. Which were the tournaments?

QUESTION 3

In which year did Ashwin win the ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year and ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year awards?

QUESTION 4

In the context of his career, what is common to the following Test matches: against West Indies at Mumbai (2011) and Antigua (2106),

versus England at Chepauk (2021) and against Bangladesh at Chennai (2024)?

QUESTION 5

Ashwin belongs to an elite club in Test cricket along with Shane Warne and Stuart Broad. What are the achievements particular to this trio?

QUESTION 6

Against which two nations has Ashwin taken 100 or more wickets in Tests?

QUESTION 7

With which legendary spinner does Ashwin share the record for the most Player-of-the-series honours in Test cricket with 11 awards to his name?



Visual question: Ashwin is being congratulated after scalping the first of the 537 Test victims. Who was the batter? THE HINDU

ANSWERS TO THE PREVIOUS DAY'S QUIZ:

1. Which amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery on December 18, 1865? **Ans:- 13th Amendment** 2. Which Swiss-born German citizen was born on this day with styles rooted in expressionism, cubism, and surrealism? **Ans:- Paul Klee** 3. What happened on this day during Donald Trump's presidency? **Ans:- He became the third U.S. president to be impeached by the House of Representatives** 4. Name this TV special, an adaptation of Dr. Seuss's classic children's book, aired for the first time on this day, in 1996, and became a holiday staple. **Ans:- How the Grinch Stole Christmas!** 5. Two Hollywood celebrities, who, although have never worked together in the same film, were born on this day, one in 1963 and the other in 1946. **Ans:- Brad Pitt, Steven Spielberg** 6. Name the British guitarist of the rock band the Rolling Stones was born on this day. **Ans:- Keith Richards** 7. Identify this Czech writer and later, President, who died on this day in 2011. **Ans:- Václav Havel**

Early Birds

Piyali Tuli – Tamal Biswas – Sonali Das – Sumana Dutta – Siddhartha Viswanathan

Word of the day

Diabolical:

of, relating to, or characteristic of the devil

Synonyms: sinister, malicious, evil

Usage: The police quickly mobilised to track down the diabolical criminals before they struck again.

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/dɒl.ə'bi.ɒl.ɪ.kəl/

Pronunciation: bit.ly/diabolicalnew

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



Electronic distraction

The Election Commission has a lot to answer for, but EVMs are not the issue

After consecutive electoral losses, in the Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections, the Congress has raised the tempo with regard to its concerns about electronic voting machines (EVM). While there are numerous issues related to the integrity of elections that the Election Commission of India (ECI) needs to come clean on, the risk of electronic tampering with EVMs is not among them. The Congress is barking up the wrong tree – that too selectively and only when it loses. Some of its party leaders have publicly expressed the view that there is no evidence that suggests the risk of manipulation, remotely or through preprogramming. At least two Opposition leaders, NC leader and J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, and Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee, have distanced themselves from the allegations. To assume that EVMs are so elaborately and precisely manipulated that the BJP wins in some States and loses in some others in a detailed conspiracy, defies logic. After all, the BJP ended up short of a majority in the 2024 general election. Moreover, all these results, particularly those of Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand are well explained by the social and political dynamics at play.

By repeatedly raising the spectre of EVM manipulation, the real and serious questions of election integrity are being overlooked. Among them, the possibility of old style, manual capture of EVMs in booths dominated by one party and where polling agents of opponents are absent. This is pertinent against the backdrop of questions about a massive turnout recorded in many places in the closing hours of polling. This trend has not yet been satisfactorily explained by the ECI. Large-scale additions and deletions of voter names are now a pattern, and the ECI seems to be brazening it out. In Delhi, where elections are now due, allegations of the selective removal of Muslim voters have surfaced. In the Uttar Pradesh by-elections, partisan police actions that restrained voters expected to vote against the BJP have been controversial. The scheduling of elections is another serious question that the ECI has been less than transparent about. For a country that is preparing to conduct all elections in one go, it scheduled the three recent Assembly elections in two batches, and the BJP is the one party that gained the benefits. As is evident, some of these issues are local, some related to the vast capacity gap between the BJP and the Opposition while some others are squarely in the court of the ECI. The Opposition needs to focus on the real questions of election integrity, and an EVM scare should not act as a distraction.

Persistent instability

Social Democrats are at a disadvantage as Germany heads for election

German politics has been in turmoil ever since Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost his parliamentary majority last month, when the pro-market Free Democratic Party exited his three-way coalition. Mr. Scholz initially tried to cling on to power, heading a minority government, but amid criticism and concerns that delaying an inevitable snap election could further damage the chances of Mr. Scholz's Social Democrats, the Chancellor called for a vote of confidence on Monday. The outcome was known beforehand – his government collapsed the same day, pushing the country into early elections. The Scholz government, which was formed after the 2021 federal elections in which the Social Democrats won most seats, remained fractured from day one. While the Social Democrats and the Greens supported more public spending, the Free Democrats pushed for austerity. The government lacked coordination and what made the intra-coalition fighting worse was the financial crisis. Germany, once the engine of the European economy, has been in recession for two years. With no consensus within the coalition on how to tackle the financial crisis, the government's popularity plunged. In November, Mr. Scholz sacked his Finance Minister, Christian Lindner (Free Democrats), sealing the government's fate. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will now call for elections, most likely in February 2025, seven months earlier than planned.

When Angela Merkel was in power, her conservative coalition managed to offer political stability, economic growth and a fine balancing between great powers. Even during the Russia-Ukraine war, Mr. Merkel and the French leader engaged with the Russians, which resulted in the two Minsk agreements. But two months after Mr. Scholz became Chancellor, Russia invaded Ukraine. Germany could do little to prevent the war, but it joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia, which hit the European economies as well. The Nord Stream pipeline, built to bring Russian gas to Germany, was blown up, allegedly by the Ukrainians. The war worsened the West's energy crisis, in turn impacting the cost of living crisis. It then snowballed into a larger economic meltdown, triggering political instability. Germany is not the only country battling economic woes and political instability. In neighbouring France, a government collapsed in three months, and President Emmanuel Macron has appointed a new Prime Minister, who also lacks a majority in Parliament. Elsewhere in the continent, far-right parties with neo-Nazi views are resurgent. Mr. Scholz is likely to lead the Social Democrats in the elections but the conservative Christian Democrats are the frontrunners. A trial by fire awaits whoever wins.

Section 6A of the Citizenship Act — why it fails Assam

The 4:1 majority ruling by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India, in October 2024, that upheld the constitutional validity of Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955 is significant. This provision establishes a distinct framework for migrants from the former East Pakistan (Bangladesh) who settled in Assam, allowing them to acquire Indian citizenship if they arrived before March 25, 1971. It is worth analysing the judgment for constitutional violations that were overlooked by the majority decision, and also discussing the potential negative implications of the ruling.

The judgment seems to suffer from arbitrary reasoning. The then Chief Justice of India, D.Y. Chandrachud, while justifying the test of Article 14, i.e., taking out of Assam against other States, said, "Though other states such as West Bengal (226.7 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km) and Mizoram (318 km) share a larger border with Bangladesh as compared to Assam (263 km), the magnitude of influx to Assam and its impact on the cultural and political rights of the Assamese and Tribal populations is higher... The impact of forty lakh migrants in Assam may conceivably be greater than the impact of fifty seven lakh migrants in West Bengal because of Assam's lesser population and land area compared to West Bengal. Thus, the singling out of Assam is based on rational considerations." However, while testing the law against Article 29, the Court held that the influx of the people did not affect the language, script, or culture of the Assamese people nor did it affect their ability to protect the same. A simple examination of the contradictory reasoning indicates that the judgment was crafted to support the provision rather than to evaluate it against constitutional principles.

The background

Section 6A of the Citizenship Act was introduced in 1985 following the Assam Accord, an agreement reached between the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement. The movement arose in response to the migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into Assam, sparking concerns about the preservation of the local culture, economic strain, and political imbalance. The Assam Accord sought to resolve these issues by setting specific cut-off dates for granting citizenship to migrants: before January 1, 1966 – all Indians who migrated to Assam were declared Indian citizens; between January 1, 1966, and March 25, 1971 – citizenship can be granted to



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The top court's recent ruling upholding the constitutional validity of Section 6A, fails to address key constitutional concerns, particularly those that impact Assam's indigenous population

the people after 10 years of residence in Assam; after March 25, 1971 – all these people were declared illegal migrants and were liable to detection and deportation.

Gaps in the reasoning

There are constitutional pitfalls in Section 6A of the Citizenship Act. There is a violation of Article 29 of the Constitution – cultural and linguistic displacement. Article 29 of the Constitution guarantees the protection of distinct cultural and linguistic identities within India. In its ruling, the Court held that Section 6A was not violative of Article 29(1), stating that the mere presence of different ethnic groups in a State does not automatically infringe upon the cultural rights guaranteed by the Constitution. It said Article 29(1) confers the right to "conserve" culture, which it interpreted as allowing a section of citizens to take positive steps to protect their language, script, or culture, and that the law must not prevent such efforts. The Court emphasised that the petitioners failed to prove that the influx of migrants, facilitated by Section 6A, directly hindered the Assamese people's ability to take steps to conserve their culture.

However, this reasoning is completely flawed. While the Court laid emphasis on the abstract right to "conserve" culture, it overlooked the fact that the provision creates hindrances to the people in meaningfully preserving their cultural identity. It failed to observe that mere formal recognition of the right to conserve culture is insufficient if the State allows circumstances to unfold which erode the very culture it seeks to protect. Research by Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew A. Becker found out that during the acculturation process, both the immigrant and host cultures may change. Changes in attitudes, family values, generational status and social affiliations can occur in both the majority and minority cultures as the two interact. Further, the Court also took note of the research paper titled "The Change of Religion and Language Composition in the State of Assam in Northeast India: A Statistical Analysis Since 1951 to 2001", which indicates that between 1951 and 2001, the percentage of the Bengali-speaking population in Assam had increased by 29.7%, from 21.2% to 27.5%, while the proportion of Assamese-speaking people had declined by 12.26%, from 69.3% to 60.8%. Further, as per the submissions of the petitioners recorded by the Court, from 1951 to 2011, the percentage of the Bengali-speaking population in Assam had increased by 36.36% (from 21.2% to 28.91% of the total population of Assam), while

the proportion of Assamese speaking people in the State had declined by 30.18%, i.e., from 69.3% to 48.38% of the total population of Assam. This demographic shift is not a mere coexistence of ethnic groups but represents a cultural and linguistic displacement that has severely undermined the distinct identity of the Assamese people.

One of the most striking constitutional flaws of Section 6A is its temporal unreasonableness, a concept under the doctrine of manifest arbitrariness. Laws that are constitutional at the time of enactment can become unreasonable over time due to changing circumstances, and Section 6A is a clear example of this.

The law lacks any temporal limitation on its operation, allowing individuals from this stream to apply for citizenship indefinitely. More than 40 years after the cut-off date, the law still remains in force, which has rendered it ineffective in addressing the original problem it was designed to solve.

Faulty mechanism, its impact

The mechanism for identifying and processing these migrants under Section 6A(3) is flawed because it places the burden of initiating proceedings on the state, without providing a means for voluntary self-identification by migrants. This means that suspected illegal immigrants must be referred to a foreigners' tribunal, which then determines their status. However, the absence of any deadline for making such referrals allows the law to remain operational indefinitely, perpetuating a system that no longer serves its intended purpose.

Further, the foreigners' tribunal, which is responsible for determining the citizenship status of individuals referred under Section 6A, has become bogged down by the sheer volume of cases. Even individuals who do not qualify under Section 6A can claim to fall within its purview, slowing down the entire process and leading to widespread confusion.

It seems the Court wrote the judgment to merely justify the enactment of Section 6A. The ruling fails to address key constitutional concerns, particularly those regarding the cultural and demographic impact on Assam's indigenous population. The judgment overlooked how unchecked migration has eroded the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people, in violation of Article 29's protective intent. Moreover, the Court's neglect of the provision's temporal unreasonableness perpetuates arbitrary and outdated policies.

Strengthening the roots of an agri-carbon market

Carbon markets hold the potential to transform Indian agriculture, turning sustainable farming practices into a lucrative opportunity for farmers while combating climate change. In this, carbon pricing is a critical tool for mitigating climate change. It functions through compliance and voluntary carbon markets. Compliance markets, regulated by governments or international bodies such as the United Nations, impose emissions caps on companies. Businesses exceeding these caps must either purchase carbon credits from projects that mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, such as agroforestry or sustainable agriculture projects, or pay carbon taxes for their extra emissions. In contrast, the voluntary carbon market operates without regulation, allowing organisations to trade carbon credits through mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism, Verra, and Gold Standard, among others. Together, these systems aim to reduce GHG emissions and support global climate goals.

Carbon markets, their working

Carbon markets are gaining momentum. At COP29, in November 2024, for instance, a centralised carbon market under the UN got a green signal. Last year, India announced that it would launch its own compliance and voluntary carbon markets. Recently, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and State universities, listed five agriculture carbon credit projects in Verra.

Carbon markets rely on two key principles: additionality and permanence. Additionality ensures emission reductions happen only due to carbon credits, requiring farmers to adopt new practices. This means that those who already use sustainable methods are not eligible for credits. Permanence refers to the long-term durability of these benefits. Permanence guarantees these benefits last, such as ensuring carbon stored in soils through reduced tillage is not lost due to a return to conventional ploughing. Therefore, projects that aim to generate and trade carbon credits must adhere to certain conditions, including additionality and permanence.



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In India, existing carbon credit projects listed under non-governmental entities need to be examined to ensure inclusivity and efficiency

To assess the readiness of India's agriculture sector for a full-scale carbon market, we must examine the existing carbon credit projects listed under non-governmental entities such as Verra. This highlights challenges and the necessary fixes before scaling up. If projects fail to deliver promised environmental benefits, producing unreliable credits, buyers may lose confidence and stop purchasing agriculture carbon credits. This deprives farmers of extra income and discourages the adoption of sustainable practices. Ensuring high-quality credits from the start of Indian carbon markets is crucial for trust and long-term farmer participation.

In just four years, over 50 agriculture carbon farming projects have been listed in the Verra registry, targeting 1.6 million hectares of farmland in India. These projects aim to generate approximately 4.7 million carbon credits annually, equivalent to offsetting the GHG emitted from 11 billion miles driven by an average gasoline-powered vehicle. However, none of these projects is registered, which means carbon credits have not been issued and that farmers have not received the money.

Carbon farming projects in India

A recent study by the writers of this article published in Climate Policy – "Carbon farming in India: are the existing projects inclusive, additional, and permanent?" – examines seven such carbon farming projects in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, focusing on socio-economic inclusiveness, additionality, and permanence.

The findings show that marginalised communities and small farmers were largely excluded, with women making up only 4% of participants. Carbon farmers in these States cultivated significantly more land – 51% more in Haryana and 32% more in Madhya Pradesh – than non-carbon farmers. Among non-carbon farmers, 46% of the land was owned by non-marginalised castes (general castes), while 54% was owned by Scheduled Caste-Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) farmers, whereas among carbon farmers, 63% of the land was under non-marginalised castes and only 13% was owned by SC/ST farmers.

Further, while some sustainable practices were already in place before the projects began, others such as zero tillage, alternate wetting and drying,

intercropping, reduced chemical fertilizer use, micro-irrigation, and tree planting were newly adopted, which satisfies the additionality condition. This demonstrates that, when implemented effectively, these projects can genuinely reduce GHG emissions.

Significant challenges remain in these projects: 45% of farmers reported no communication, over 60% lacked training in new techniques, and 28% stopped sustainable practices by the second year, mainly due to insufficient financial incentives. Alarmingly, 99% had not received carbon credit payments, with additional issues including yield penalties and inadequate information on carbon farming.

Despite these setbacks, projects managed by startups focused solely on carbon credits, termed "Carbon Core" in this study, performed better than those run by subsidiaries or offshoots of larger corporations. However, these projects were less inclusive of smallholders and marginalised communities.

To address these issues, India's carbon market must incentivise socially inclusive projects by offering higher prices for carbon credits from projects that include smallholders and marginalised communities. Effective communication, regular training, and guaranteed, timely payments can enhance farmer participation. Collaborating with national and international research institutions to target suitable regions and interventions can prevent yield penalties and protect food security.

An improving science

The science of measuring soil carbon and GHG emissions is expected to improve over time. In recent years, digital technologies have advanced significantly. Tools such as remote sensing, satellite imagery, drones, and sensors for monitoring project activities will soon become more accessible. However, for carbon markets to succeed, the critical focus must be addressing the grand old implementation challenges.

Building a thriving agricultural carbon market in India requires collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and private entities to ensure inclusivity, transparency, timely rewards for farmers, and improved project implementation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'One election' Bills

It is surprising that the government has taken the trouble of preparing and introducing the Bills for implementing the concept of simultaneous national and State Assembly elections knowing fully well that the Bills may not muster the necessary two-thirds votes in

Parliament for their passage (Page 1, "Two Bills on simultaneous elections rock Parliament", December 18). The government has a valid point when it puts forth the reasoning that simultaneous elections would save expenditure and the country would be rid of the situation of 'constantly being in election mode'.

But, given the negative impact of such simultaneous elections on the polity, democracy, existing State legislatures by way of curtailment of their tenure, and the federal structure as embodied in the Constitution, the implementation of the concept of simultaneous elections is not desirable.

The cost of conducting separate elections cannot be considered prohibitively high, compared to the country's total revenue expenditure. In a democracy, the cost of conducting elections should never be a matter of debate, as the exercise of conducting elections is the basic necessity for the

survival of democracy in a country.

Kosaraju Chandramouli,
Hyderabad

While 'cost reduction; appears to be a reasonable benefit, it cannot be the sole justification. In reality, the government has not adequately addressed other forms of wasteful spending.

Nor has it tackled the issue of using money to unfairly influence elections. The primary focus of any change should be on what is best for voters, not politicians.

V. Nagarajan,
Chennai

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



Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Thursday, December 19, 2024



AMY POZE
DG, Inti Organization for Migration

“ Syria’s new leaders recognise the job they have ahead of them is enormous and that they need the support of intl community. It’s going to be a question of whether they can deliver



PRAKASH AMBEDKAR
Head of Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi

Before the BJP came into existence, its forerunners Jan Sangh and RSS had opposed Babasaheb while the Constitution was being adopted. There is nothing new in the statement (Shah’s)



CHHAGAN BHUJBAL
NCP leader

I would raise the injustice meted out to OBCs despite their significant contribution. I will take this battle for the OBCs for the streets now. I won’t take any decision in a hurry

Confessions of a wounded loyalist

A political career nurtured by family patronage ends by the lack of it. This sums up the life and times of veteran Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar who was pushed into political oblivion by the same Gandhi family which bestowed him with positions of power. Despite holding various key positions in the party and in the government, the octogenarian leader finds himself completely isolated, culminating in a suspension and strained relationship with both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. In the twilight years of his life, Aiyar (83), once seen as an intellectual face of the grand old party, reflects on his past in a candid tone that comes naturally to him and marvels at the irony of his political career that was “made and unmade by the Gandhis”. In his forthcoming book *A Maverick in Politics*, the former union Minister, whose unhinged public statements often landed his party in trouble, gives a frank account of his blow-hot and cold relationship with the Congress leadership, particularly the Gandhi family. His claim that he was not given an opportunity to meet Sonia Gandhi one-on-one in the last ten years nor was he allowed any substantial engagement with other members of her family speaks volumes about the fragility of patronage-based relationships. “The day Sonia Gandhi got angry with me, the patronage ended,” was how Aiyar put it, reminiscing his rise and slow marginalisation in the party.

The advent of Rahul Gandhi saw Aiyar being stripped of one party position after another. He was suspended from the party in December 2017, following an uproar over his comment calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi a “neech kism ka aadmi”. This remark proved to be the epitaph of his long political career, which began under Rajiv Gandhi. Since then, the gulf has only widened and eventually reached a point of no return. Aiyar’s career serves as an example of the limited role of loyalty in the success of a politician in the absence of a strong base and popular support. Rahul Gandhi, he claimed, kept avoiding him “as if I were a political leper.” The standard practice in the party was that Congressmen “begged and pleaded with their president for their rights”, confesses the veteran Congressman in the book, which captures his personal and political journey from 1991 to 2024. Aiyar spoke about a crucial period in 2012, a time he described as marred by dual crises: Sonia Gandhi’s ill health and Manmohan Singh’s multiple bypass surgeries. This left the party in a leadership vacuum. According to Aiyar, the Congress leadership created a paralysis in governance by opting for Singh as Prime Minister despite his declining health and relegating Pranab Mukherjee to the largely ceremonial role of President. This misstep not only undermined the government’s effectiveness but also shattered its credibility in the eyes of both the electorate and the global community.

Once seen as an intellectual face of the grand old party, Mani Shankar Aiyar marvels at the irony of his political career that was ‘made and unmade by the Gandhis’

Insertion of the words ‘socialist’, ‘secular’, ‘integrity’ needs to be looked into as part of constitutional fidelity



NAYAKARA VEERASHA

India is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of India. The Government of India is planning to hold the celebrations throughout the year. After deadlock and lots of pressure from the opposition parties, the government agreed to a debate on the subject of Constitution@75 in the Lok Sabha (on December 13-14) and Rajya Sabha (on December 16-17).

The Constitution has been the subject of debate of the 18th general elections and has acquired the status of one of the electoral issues except during the Emergency period. Such a large-scale political awareness and debate took place only when the National Democratic Alliance government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee formed the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution. It submitted the report in 2002 consisting of two volumes with its terms of reference: “how best the Constitution can respond to the changing needs of efficient, smooth and effective system of governance and socio-economic development of modern India within the framework of parliamentary democracy, and to recommend changes, if any, that are required in the provisions of the Constitution without interfering with its basic structure or features”.

Political Values

Set against this backdrop, it is essential to enquire upon not only the relevance of the Constitution but also its Preamble wherein the political values — Fraternity, Equality, Liberty and Justice — form the soul of the Constitution.

On November 25, the Supreme Court delivered a verdict on some of the public interest litigations (PIL) challenging the insertion of the words ‘secular’ and ‘socialist’ in the Preamble through the 42nd Amendment Act in 1976. The



judgment not only dismissed the pleas but also reiterated that there was no reason to move these pleas to a larger bench of the court. By doing this, the verdict in general and the court specifically acted as a guardian of Constitutional Governance in its true sense.

This is significant in these critical times wherein the tussle between the Executive and Judiciary is going on in an undercurrent way. The Supreme Court of India’s verdict in the case of *Kesavananda Bharati Sripadagalvaru vs State of Kerala* (1973) paved the way for establishing the doctrine of the ‘basic structure’ of the Constitution. Some of the constitutional office bearers such as Vice-President of India while speaking at the 83rd Conference of All India Presiding Officers in January 2023 expressed that subsequent to this verdict “the highest court delivered significant rulings on matters that it held pivotal to this ‘Basic Structure’ and in the process, parliamentary sovereignty was compromised”.

For this, he cited the example of the court’s striking down of the 99th Amendment, namely the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act, 2014, as unconstitutional on the premise that it violated the Basic Structure, in October 2015. In constitutional evolution, the evolution of the doctrine of ‘Basic Structure’ during the *Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala* verdict (1973) is a significant moment. Former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi called for revisiting the ‘Basic Structure’ doctrine. Such contemporary developments have pushed the Constitution into the phase of Jürgen Habermas’ ‘legitimation crisis’.

Parliamentary Sovereignty
In this context, the Supreme Court’s recent verdict in *Dr Balram Singh and Others vs Union of India and Another* (2024) assumes significance in restoring

not only the legitimacy of the Constitution but also the Preamble. By upholding the insertion of the words ‘secular’, ‘socialist’ and ‘integrity’, the highest court rekindled the spirit of parliamentary sovereignty in amending the Constitution and its provisions. This is in accordance with the fact that the Constitution is a living document and evolves with time, needs and the aspirations of the citizens. While dismissing the pleas, the court observed that “India has developed its own interpretation of secularism, wherein the State neither supports any religion nor penalises the profession and practice of any faith” in accordance with Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution.

The Constituent Assembly Debates rejected the idea of a theocratic state and opposed the insertion of the word secular at that point due to the fear of balkanisation on a religious basis and also due to the situation that prevailed in the aftermath of partition. It reiterated both *Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala* and *SR Bommai vs Union of India* verdicts have asserted secularism as one of the ‘Basic Features’ of the Constitution.

The verdict mentions that the word ‘socialist’ in the Indian context should not be interpreted as restricting the economic policies of an elected government. Neither the Constitution nor the Preamble mandates a specific economic policy or structure, whether left

By upholding the insertion of ‘secular’, ‘socialist’ and ‘integrity’, the highest court has rekindled the spirit of parliamentary sovereignty in amending the Constitution

or right. Rather, ‘socialist’ denotes the State’s commitment to be a welfare State and its commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity”. The Indian economy has transitioned from the dominance of public investment to the co-existence of public and private investment. The court did not find any legitimate cause or justification for challenging the 42nd Amendment after nearly 44 years.

‘Constitutional Fidelity’

The verdict manifests the Goodwin Liu et al (2009) concept of constitutional fidelity in practice at the core. According to them, constitutional fidelity means “to be faithful to the Constitution is to interpret its words and to apply its principles in ways that preserve the Constitution’s meaning and democratic legitimacy over time”. The insertion of the words ‘socialist’, ‘secular’ and ‘integrity’ needs to be looked into as part and parcel of Constitutional fidelity/sanctity thereby deepening Constitutional Governance. These words have acquired legitimacy over four-and-a-half decades and become part of the day-to-day life of the citizen.

By rightly rejecting these petitions, the court has nullified the politics surrounding the insertion of these words. More than a hundred Amendments indicate the resilience and evolution of the document as a living and dynamic nature of the Indian Constitution. It’s not static but emerges with each passing day with the socio-political and cultural changes of the country. The commitment to constitutional fidelity is the need of the hour especially in the constitutional office bearers so as to uphold the supremacy of the Constitution and Preamble.

(The author is lecturer at SVD Siddhartha Law College, Vijayawada. Views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Grave situation

It is a matter of concern that students in Telangana are under mental stress. Pressure to fare well in exams, good score and fear of failure prompt them towards suicide. It is a grave situation to be handled together by parents and teachers. It is the duty of parents to be friendly with children and create a bond of trust, empathy and happiness to keep them at ease. Undue mental pressure of studies will take them nowhere. They should be counselled and guided properly to take the studies in an easy manner.

ABHILASHA GUPTA,
Mahuli

Harmony through sound

Zakir Hussain’s contributions went beyond music, reshaping the artistic landscape, and his boundless creativity has left an indelible mark in the hearts of all who encountered his work. He brought the tabla to mainstream attention and made it a symbol of both virtuosity and cultural exchange. His work with the fusion band Shakti, which formed in 1973 and reformed in 2020, remains one of the most significant chapters in contemporary music. Zakir Hussain was more than a musician — he was a cultural ambassador, a bridge between east and west, and a tireless seeker of harmony through sound. His musical journey may have ended, but the rhythm of his legacy will play on forever. There is little doubt that heaven will savour his beats. As the popular flautist Rakesh Chaurasia has rightly said, tabla started with ‘A’ (Alka Rahga) and ended with ‘Z’ (Zakir Hussain).

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

Beats will resonate forever

In his career spanning six decades, Zakir Hussain worked with various renowned international and Indian artists and collaborated with greats like Ravi Shankar and Shiv Kumar Sharma. He was given the Ustad title by the late Pandit Ravi Shankar being impressed by his talent. When he won Padma Shri in 1988, he was the youngest to receive the award at that time. His groundbreaking work with Western musicians like Mickey Hart, George Harrison, and Charles Lloyd brought Indian classical music to the international audience. Hussain became a household name in India through the Taj Mahal Tea commercial. Not many know that he was offered the role of Salim in *Mughal-e-Azam* but due to his father’s objection he denied it. His beats will resonate forever in our hearts.

BAL GOVIND, Noida

Inflation relief for some

Inflation data released last week registered at 5.5% which is less than October’s 6.2%. But relief is only for some. The relief in headline numbers hides wide variation across the geographies and economic classes. Inflation in UP stood at 6.7%, while Delhi recorded 2.7%. Further, the inflation rate was far more palatable for the urban rich — 4.6% for those among the top 20% of the income segment of urban India — while considerably higher as one went down the income scale, from urban to rural India; inflation was at 6.1% for those in the bottom 20% of the income segment and living in rural India. This variation is because inflation is higher among essential items (such as food) that account for a greater share in the consumption basket of the relatively worse off. Shaktikanta Das reminded everyone of the age-old wisdom: Price stability is essential for sustained economic growth.

N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

India in the hotspot

■ BBC

Could this be what our home on Moon or Mars?

Could this egg-shaped structure be what the future home of Indian astronauts in space looks like? The Hab-1 - short for Habitat-1 - is Indian space agency Isro’s first-ever “analog mission” which means simulation of space conditions to prepare astronauts for real space missions. It was tested in Ladakh.

■ Dhaka Tribune

What lies ahead for Bangladesh-India relations?

Experts view talks between the foreign secretaries of Bangladesh and India as a positive development amid soaring diplomatic tensions. The political upheaval in Bangladesh on August 5 has led to a widening political rift and erosion of trust between Dhaka and New Delhi.

■ The Economist

Cricket as a geopolitical tool against Pakistan

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India’s foreign minister, believes that diplomacy is like cricket. Speaking at an event in November, he claimed that both pursuits feature multiple players, changing conditions and intense competition, which requires out-thinking “the other team”.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

How to secure entrance exams, stop leaks: expert panel's ideas

ABHINAVA HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 18

A SEVEN-MEMBER panel headed by former ISRO chairman K Radhakrishnan has made a set of 101 recommendations to the Ministry of Education for conducting national level entrance exams in a "transparent, smooth and fair" manner. The panel was constituted by the Ministry in June after the NEET-UG paper leak.

Here are some key recommendations made by the panel, categorised thematically.

Limit NTA's scope

The NEET-UG and UGC-NET paper leaks have put the functioning of the National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts these exams, under the scanner.

Noting that the NTA has "outstretched itself to accommodate diverse requests from many test intending agencies" including taking up recruitment tests, the panel has suggested that the agency should primarily conduct entrance exams till its capacity is augmented.

Since it was established in 2018, the NTA has administered 244 tests, and the number

of candidates registered for the tests has almost doubled from an average of 67 lakh per year during 2019-2021 to 122 lakh per year in 2022-23. In addition to entrance exams, the NTA currently conducts exams for recruitment in central universities.

The panel also noted the NTA's "high dependence" on service providers and outsourced agencies to conduct exams. The panel has recommended that the NTA Director General be assisted by two additional directors general, and directors assigned to specific tasks, and said that the agency should be staffed with "domain-specific human resources" and a "leadership team with domain knowledge".

Involve state, district officials

The panel has suggested involving state and district-level authorities "in the way elections are conducted". Specifically, it has recommended setting up coordination committees at these levels comprising officials of the NTA, the National Informatics Centre (NIC), police, and the Intelligence Bureau. These committees would prepare strategies to ensure transparent and fair exams, identify testing centres, and ensure safe trans-

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS

- Setting up state & district-level coordination committees
- A testing centre allocation policy
- Multi-session & multi-stage testing

OPERATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

- Strengthening grievance reporting & redressal
- Introducing a 'Digi-Exam' for authentication of candidates

INFRASTRUCTURAL IMPROVEMENTS

- Setting up a minimum of one secured testing centre per district
- Setting up mobile testing centres for rural, remote areas

DEVELOPING CORE COMPETENCE

- Developing guidelines for question paper setting & vetting
- Ensuring security in storage & delivery of papers

herence to a testing centre allocation policy in which candidates will be assigned a testing centre in their district. Each district should have a testing centre, with mobile testing centres for rural or remote areas, according to the panel.

For pen-and-paper exams, the panel's recommendations include setting more than three sets of question papers, and sending encrypted question papers to confidential servers at testing centres where they can then be printed. Another model suggested is delivering the question paper via computer to each candidate, with the candidates then recording responses in an OMR sheet.

To verify the authenticity of a candidate, the panel has suggested a "Digi-Exam" system, much like DigiYatra, where the primary data identifying the candidate is recorded at the application stage, and their biometrics are verified at the testing centre.

Long-term measures

The panel has suggested "harmonization and unification of tests" for admissions at the undergraduate level. This would include having a uniform eligibility and admission criteria, number of sessions, mode of testing, among other things.

The panel has also recommended the mi-

gration to "computer adaptive testing" — instead of the same set of questions being offered to everybody, in computer-adaptive testing a candidate is shown questions based on her ability, which is determined and updated based on responses during the test. With test-takers getting different combinations of questions, such a mode improves security and helps better assess individual capabilities. Noting that computer-based tests (CBT) "has now become the preferred mode of examination and a sure way forward", the panel has also recommended that the NTA collaborate with Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas to develop digital infrastructure that will allow them to serve as computer-based testing centres.

The panel has said that "a nationwide network of about 400-500 testing centres" be established "within a time frame of a year or so, which will provide about 2.0-2.5 lakh testing capacity for conducting CBT in one session nationwide".

So far, the NTA has been conducting its exams in government-run schools and colleges, institutes recognised by the AICTE, and private centres where service providers conduct the exams. Setting up more computer-based testing centres is also expected to help lower the NTA's reliance on service providers.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

HUGE MARINE HEAT WAVE KILLED 4 MN ALASKA SEABIRDS IN 2014-16: STUDY



The birds fell victim to a domino effect tied to warm water. Wikimedia Commons

A RECORD-BREAKING marine heat wave was behind the mass deaths of a species of Alaskan seabirds, known as the common murres, nearly a decade ago, according to a new study.

The analysis, "Catastrophic and persistent loss of common murres after a marine heatwave", was published in the journal Science last week.

"What we learned was that it was just way worse than we thought," said Heather Renner, one of the study's authors and a supervisory wildlife biologist at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

What were the findings of the study?

More than four million common murres died due to the marine heat wave, which was nicknamed "The Blob", between 2014 and 2016, according to the study. This was the largest documented die-off of a single species of wild bird or mammal.

A growing body of research believes that murres were the victims of a domino effect of oceanic changes tied to the warm water. It affected marine life from plankton to humpback whales. Critically for the murres, it led to a collapse in the fish they depend on.

One of the most sobering revelations in the new study is that the birds have not even begun to rebound.

"If the foraging conditions are good, I think there's hope," Renner said. "Our fear

is that events like this are predicted to become much more common, and we haven't seen any signs of recovery at all yet, eight years after the event."

For decades, the world's oceans have absorbed over 90% of the excess heat produced by human-burned fossil fuels and destroyed ecosystems like forests. That heat has taken a severe toll on coral reefs, kelp forests and other marine ecosystems. The ocean's surface temperature shattered records over the last two years.

How was the study carried out?

In 2020, a team of some of the same scientists estimated that half a million to a million of the birds had died from The Blob in Alaska. The new research uses a different and more reliable method, leveraging earlier data to analyse before and after counts at 13 breeding colonies throughout the Gulf of Alaska and the Eastern Bering Sea. The authors then extrapolated those declines across the entire population.

"We saw exactly the same really clear signal at every single colony," Renner said. "It wasn't some of them; it was all of them."

Notably, while various species were pummeled by the Pacific marine heat wave, including some fisheries stocks, not all showed declines. That suggests the oceanographic changes created "pinch points" in the food web rather than, say, taking out all predators.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The ongoing transition in Syria

10 days after the Bashar al-Assad regime collapsed, what is happening in Syria? What role is the HTS, which controls the regime in Damascus, playing in the transition, and what challenges does it face going forward?

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

OVER THE past 10 days, two broad developments have been unfolding in Syria. Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir has been trying to stabilise the country, consolidate its ethnic groups, and engage with the international community before the term of his transitional government ends on March 1 next year.

At the same time, Kurdish-controlled Northwestern Syria (Rojava) has been bracing for renewed hostilities following a potential Turkish invasion. The US-mediated ceasefire between the Kurds and rebel forces backed by Turkey has broken down, despite the Kurds ceding the key town of Manbij to the rebels.

How has the so-called 'transition' in Syria progressed since the fall of Bashar al-Assad on December 8? What role has the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Sunni Islamist group that led the overthrow of the Baathist regime played so far?

Progress of the transition

Prime Minister al-Bashir has a background as an administrator with the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) that has ruled rebel-held Northern Syria — especially Idlib — since its formation in 2017. Under him, the country's caretaker administration has focused on both internal and external fronts.

First, there has been an effort to present a united Syria.

Leaders of the HTS/SSG have said that all armed factions that fought to oppose Assad would be brought under the new defence ministry. Mohammad Yasser Ghazal, who has been brought from Idlib to head the Damascus City Council, has said the Salvation Government will be disbanded under the new Syrian Republic.

The new regime has also taken over key apparatus of the Assad state, including the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) on December 15. The success in commandeering state institutions, albeit with the objective of reforming them, has enabled it to focus on the second, external, aspect.

The caretaker administration has been working for the lifting of international sanctions on the groups that now run Damascus. Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of the HTS, has secured direct engagements with British, French, and German diplomats, as well as the UN Special Envoy for Syria Gert Pedersen. On December 16, the Syrian Secy



Mohammed al-Bashir, head of the interim government in Syria, at the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on December 13. The New York Times

General "welcomed" the commitment of the caretaker administration to full humanitarian access through all border crossings, continuity of essential services, engagement with the "wider humanitarian community", and the protection of minorities.

The issue of allowing humanitarian aid to pass through certain border crossings has long been contentious — Russia has used its UN Security Council veto to block the movement of aid without the "authorisation and in coordination with" the Assad regime. The efforts at ending this impasse help boost the international profile of the new government.

Differences between international and Syrian expectations and objectives continue to persist, however.

So, while the UN readout of Pedersen's meeting with Jolani highlighted the need for a credible and inclusive political transition based on UNSC Resolution 2254, SANA reported that Jolani had requested certain amendments to "update" the resolution before it could be implemented. Note that the preamble of 2254 calls for the inclusion of women in the UN-facilitated transition.

Indeed, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller has called for caution in dealing with the new administration, which the US does not yet officially recognise. The international community would be wary after the experience with the Taliban in Afghanistan, who have reneged on several promises even as they continue to seek sanctions relief.

On its part, the new Syrian administration has sought to reduce sources of tension with the West in other areas. Hence, while Jolani has criticised Israel's fresh occupation of the Golan Heights and its continuing bombardment of Syria, he has sought "diplomatic" solutions instead of committing to a

military response that would distract from the focus on rebuilding.

Role of the HTS

The HTS has at least seven years' experience in running an administrative arm (SSG) in Idlib that governed while it fought.

The SSG's rule was a mix of traditional state-like administration and ideological Islamist revivalism. While the latter meant social repression, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, the former allowed alternative avenues for the delivery of state services to the people in the face of sporadic bombardment by the Assad regime.

The local response to the SSG administration in Idlib mimicked that of the larger Syrian population under Assad's control. The SSG too, faced expressions of popular discontent — including protests over economic and humanitarian distress, and repressive actions of the HTS.

In terms of economic performance, the SSG-governed areas in Idlib did better than regime-held territories. Rebel-held regions were spared some international sanctions such as those imposed under the US Caesar Act on Assad-controlled Syria; however, the HTS's attempts to better economic conditions through the use of the Turkish Lira since 2020 backfired after Turkey's economy unravelled in subsequent years.

But the SSG did learn crucial lessons in administration and providing humanitarian services through its experience in running Idlib, especially during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquakes.

SSG leaders commissioned for duties in Damascus are now looking to apply their local experience on a country-wide scale. Their

challenge will be to check the jihadist inclinations of some of its affiliated fighters, as well as the potential armed and unarmed resistance to Islamist tendencies of the type seen in Idlib in 2022.

Risks and challenges

The HTS faces two clearly identifiable challenges going forward.

One, the group must reconcile its brand of "pragmatic" jihadism with the needs of a stable government — this means following norms that are accepted by the international community, but which will necessarily require concessions on their Islamism. Making this concession could mean ceding space to other jihadist forces, including remnants of ISIS, who might seek to fill the Islamist vacuum.

This is the reason that the Taliban ostensibly give for their inability to concede on women's rights, in the face of threats from groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). In Syria, the threat of jihadist violence by the Islamic State across the 2010s, this threat is arguably much higher.

Second, are the questions of Syria's relationships with Turkey and Israel.

The decision that Turkey makes on whether to militarily engage the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will determine its dynamics with HTS-controlled Damascus.

Israel has over the last five days, not only re-occupied the Golan Heights and decisively breached the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement with Syria, but has also focused on destroying Syria's military, especially its air power. On December 15, the Israeli government made a unilateral announcement that it was looking to build new settlements in the Golan Heights — deemed illegal by the international community, including India — to "double the population" of the region.

The Israeli bombardment of Syria's military infrastructure arguably presents a lesser threat to the new administration than Israel's expanded and entrenched occupation of the Golan does. The Israeli occupation, as it intensifies, will be increasingly harder to ignore for both Jolani the 'pragmatist' focused on rebuilding Syria and protecting its sovereignty, and Jolani the Islamist militant whose *nom de guerre* draws from the term 'Golan'.

It is useful to recollect that Jolani showcased his inherently sectarian motivations years after he rebranded himself as a pragmatist — in a 2020 speech to HTS fighters, he declared: "The enemies of God are striving against the Sunnis not only in al-Sham (Syria) but all of the region. Therefore, you are not just defending displaced people, but the *umamah* in its entirety."

Bashir Ali Abbas is a research associate at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, New Delhi

High cost of financing fiscal deficit: why the Gold Bond scheme could end

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 18

THE GOVERNMENT is considering discontinuing the Sovereign Gold Bond (SGB) Scheme due to the high cost of financing.

Officials are of the view that SGBs were issued with the objective of boosting investments in gold, but the announcement in Budget 2024-25 cutting the import duty on gold has already met that objective and helped raise the demand for gold.

Scheme and advantages

The Government of India finances its fiscal deficit through various instruments, in-

cluding dated securities, the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF), provident funds, and Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs).

SGBs are debt securities issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on behalf of the government. Each unit denotes a gram of gold. These bonds offer the flexibility of trading in the secondary market. The interest on SGBs is fixed at 2.5% per annum on the amount of initial investment.

The quantity of gold for which the investor pays is protected, since she receives the ongoing market price at the time of redemption or premature redemption. The interest is usually credited semi-annually to the investor's bank account. The last interest is payable on maturity, along with the principal.

However, the main attractive feature of SGBs is that on maturity, the bonds get redeemed in Indian rupees, and the redemption price is based on a simple average of the closing price of gold of 999 purity of the previous three business days from the date of repayment, as published by the India Bullion and Jewellers Association (IBJA) Ltd.

These bonds offer a better alternative to holding gold in physical form due to lower risks and costs of storage. Investors are assured of the market value of gold at the time of maturity and periodic interest. While the tenor of bonds is eight years, they can be redeemed after five years.

Realisation and concerns

The view in the government is that the cost of financing the fiscal deficit through SGBs is quite high, and does not align with the benefits accrued to investors from the scheme. Initially, there used to be 10 tranches of SGBs in a year; it came down to four, and then to two.

In July, the government reduced the customs duty on gold from 15% to 6% — the lowest in more than a decade.

While this duty cut led to a decrease in gold prices, it also resulted in increased demand for the yellow metal. Since SGBs are an investment option and not a social sector

scheme, the government is of the view that there are not many benefits in continuing with it.

In the Budget presented on July 23, the government reduced SGB issuances to Rs 18,500 crore from Rs 29,638 crore announced in the interim budget of February 1.

However, no issuance of Sovereign Gold Bonds has been made so far in the current financial year (2024-25). Net borrowing through SGBs has been cut to Rs 15,000 crore from previously estimated Rs 26,138 crore.

SGBs issued under Series I of 2016-17, which were released on August 5, 2016, were due for redemption in the first week of August. These SGBs were issued at a price

of Rs 3,119. The value appreciation was more than double as the price for final redemption on August 5 was announced to be Rs 6,938, in addition to the interest earned over the eight-year period.

SGB Series II bonds from 2016, which were redeemed in March this year, provided a return of 126.4% over the investment value, along with the interest paid over the eight-year holding period.

The RBI has also announced a window during October 2024 to March 2025 for premature redemption of gold bonds issued between May 2017 and March 2020. Premature redemption of SGBs is permitted after five years from the date of issue of such bonds.

Drishti IAS
Mukherjee Nagar Classes have Shifted to
Noida
SECTOR 15
Q-17/12, Block A, Sector - 15, Noida, UP
(Near Metro Station Noida Sector 15)
IAS GS Foundation Course
English Medium | 9 January | 6 PM
60 seats | 16 JANUARY | सुबह 11:30 बजे
9311 406 440

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

From aid to trade

Delhi-Colombo economic partnership can become a model for South Asia, enhance India's Neighbourhood First Policy and its status as a regional power



GANESHAN WIGNARAJA
AND MANJEET KRIPALANI

ON HIS STATE visit to India, Sri Lanka's new President Anura Kumara Dissanayake was given a ceremonial welcome by his counterpart, President Droupadi Murmu, and received with warmth by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. In the joint statement, India has pledged to supply LNG gas to Sri Lanka, enhance trade settlements between the two countries, boost education and technology exchanges and encourage Indian FDI in Sri Lanka.

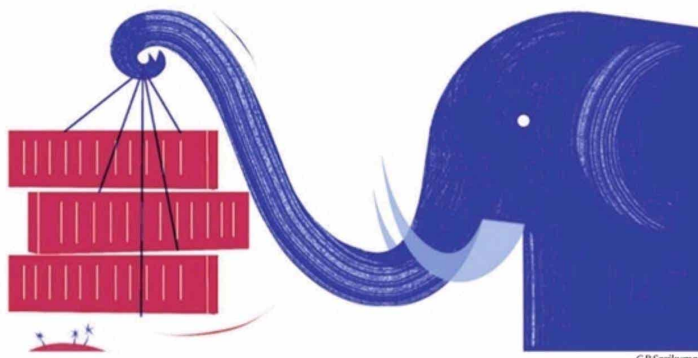
It is clear that India recognises a new Sri Lanka — one that has moved on from just security concerns to potentially a premier partner in making South Asia a progressive economic region in an uncertain global economy. Dissanayake brings a different politics to Sri Lanka domestically and internationally. His National Peoples Power (NPP) won the Presidential elections on September 21, and the November 12 parliamentary election with a two-thirds majority — a first for Sri Lanka, indicating that all Sri Lankans, across ethnic and economic lines, voted for his "clean Sri Lanka" manifesto. Within two weeks of Dissanayake's win, Foreign Minister S Jaishankar travelled to Colombo and invited the new President to make a state visit to India.

Sri Lanka has been South Asia's highest GDP per capita economy, reaching a peak of \$4,388 in 2017. Its fall, in five years, to \$3,343 per capita, was a blow to the country. Already, since he was elected President, Dissanayake has confirmed that Sri Lanka will continue with its 17th IMF programme but with increased social spending to reduce high poverty. He is improving governance by adopting anti-corruption measures, digitising government and modernising agriculture.

The bilateral agreements with India will help him continue these efforts and change the focus of the relationship from aid to trade. Dissanayake acknowledged India's significant assistance through Sri Lanka's economic crisis. India promised to continue that support. It has agreed to help Sri Lanka in digitalisation of its public services, a model which India has pioneered and which will help achieve some of the promises NPP made for targeted social protection and anti-corruption. On his part, Dissanayake reiterated he would respect India's security concerns. No specific mention was made of the \$440 million Adani wind power project for Sri Lanka, signed in 2023, which Dissanayake had said he would reconsider or annul if elected.

It's a promising start, and there's much more that can elevate the bilateral to make it like the close cooperation between Thailand, Cambodia and Laos PDR, for instance, in the Greater Mekong sub-region.

First, Sri Lanka can broaden its engagement beyond Tamil Nadu to all four southern Indian states, through business-to-business (B2B) ties. Traditionally, Indian and Sri Lankan business collaborations have been led by the two apex chambers of commerce in India, the CII and FICCI in New Delhi, and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in Colombo, which



C.R. Sasikumar

are big business focussed. As geography determines trade flows, these B2B ties can expand with the states and cities geographically closest to Sri Lanka and most importantly, between the smaller businesses chambers and firms. MSMEs are the basis of the economies of both countries.

Second, New Delhi and Colombo can consider piloting a national Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) 2 scheme in Sri Lanka. The PLI scheme lies at the core of India's efforts to build domestic capabilities in sophisticated manufacturing industries including solar panels, electric vehicles and electronics components. This has reduced India's dependence on imports of items into which it seeks to make headway. A limited extension of the domestic PLI scheme to Indian businesses to make solar panels in Sri Lanka will limit the risks of overseas investment and build regional supply chains in the neighbourhood — a key goal for India's China+1 strategy.

Third, it's time to conclude an upgraded India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (FTA). India-Sri Lanka trade negotiations resumed under former President Ranil Wickremesinghe and there was expectation of an early harvest investment agreement in 2024. However, the talks paused as the new Sri Lankan government took stock of trade negotiations in order to develop its FTA stance.

India's commerce ministry, which is negotiating FTAs with several countries, can restart bilateral FTA talks with a view to concluding an investment agreement in 2025 and a comprehensive trade deal in 2026, covering expanded goods coverage, services trade, investment and trade facilitation. There can also be a built-in agenda for including new trade issues such as intellectual property, competition policy and government procurement, when the conditions are right. To alleviate domestic Sri Lankan concerns about opening up, India can maintain asymmetric treatment for Sri Lanka in the new deal — and consider providing some aid for trade. This will help to foster B2B ties, stimulate inward investment, and provide for market access, and regulatory cooperation.

Fourth, improving connectivity is vital for trade and tourism. Indigo and Air India have increased flights between Indian cities and Colombo airport. Palay Airport in Jaffna has been modernised to enable flights to and from South India and the ferry service has been restarted to cover 60 nautical miles from

Sri Lanka's economy is stabilising from a crippling debt default and economic crisis. Indian aid and an IMF programme were instrumental in the economic turnaround.

Tourism arrivals during the European winter season have increased, bringing in much need foreign exchange. The country's new budget is eagerly awaited in early 2025. Apart from limited fiscal space for social spending, the island faces the serious risk of repayments (capital) on its external debt starting in 2028 if it is unable to generate sufficient foreign exchange through trade-led growth. Working in partnership with the IMF and World Bank, India should stand ready to help if Sri Lanka falters a second time.

Nagapattinam to Kangesanthurai. This is showing results particularly in northern Sri Lanka. The Adani Group has co-invested with John Keels holding, Sri Lanka's largest conglomerate, in developing the West Container terminal in Colombo port which largely tranships to India.

Indian finance for an undersea oil pipeline and an electricity transmission line, agreed to in 2023 but not yet started, are important next projects for Sri Lanka's energy security. So too is the upgrading of Sri Lanka's digital connectivity by drawing on India's successful national roll out of digital public infrastructure. However, the notion of a land bridge between the two countries such as motorway/railway bridge between Denmark and Sweden has evoked scepticism in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's economy is stabilising from a crippling debt default and economic crisis. Indian aid and an IMF programme were instrumental in the economic turnaround. Tourism arrivals during the European winter season have increased, bringing in much need foreign exchange. The country's new budget is eagerly awaited in early 2025. Apart from limited fiscal space for social spending, the island faces the serious risk of repayments (capital) on its external debt starting in 2028 if it is unable to generate sufficient foreign exchange through trade-led growth. Working in partnership with the IMF and World Bank, India should stand ready to help if Sri Lanka falters a second time.

India's ties with Bangladesh are strained and debt-distressed Maldives reluctantly accepted a short-term liquidity inflow of an RBI swap after China cooled about request for aid. Nepal's PM K P Sharma Oli just signed a framework agreement with China to implement the Belt and Road Initiative's infrastructure projects. Struggling economically under Taliban rule, Afghanistan risks becoming a regional centre for narcotics trade and illegal migration, as does Myanmar. Relations with Pakistan remain in cold storage.

These issues concern both India and Sri Lanka. An economic partnership in South Asia that works can become a model for others, enhance India's Neighbourhood First Policy and India's status as a regional power.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Given this history and the consistent failure of partisan governments to hold credible elections, it has become evident that the caretaker government system is one of the main safeguards for ensuring free and fair elections in Bangladesh."

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

An economic tightrope

A \$4 trillion economy will add to country's growing geopolitical heft. But 2025 could also be a year of uncertainties in the global economy



ISHAN BAKSHI

THE YEAR 2025 is likely to be pivotal for the Indian economy in many ways.

There is a possibility of India overtaking Japan to become the fourth-largest economy in the world. This will be a significant milestone and serve to reaffirm the more optimistic medium-term outlook for the Indian economy.

Size does bring with it significant advantages. A larger economy offers a bigger market and more investment opportunities for the private sector. It will also generate more resources for the government, which, if the political class so chooses, can be effectively deployed to build the foundations of a developed nation. A \$4 trillion-old economy will also add to the country's growing heft in geopolitical matters.

At the same time, there is also the very real possibility of the economy growing at less than 10 per cent in nominal terms for two consecutive years. This does not seem to be a temporary loss of momentum. As per a recent report, the upcoming budget may project a nominal growth of less than 10 per cent for the next year as well. That would make it three years in a row. If the economy settles into a lower growth trajectory — down from its decadal average of roughly 11 per cent — it will not only have implications for household incomes, employment and redistribution but also for the government's debt-deficit dynamics.

The big unknown for India, and the global economy, is what will happen after January 20 when Donald Trump is sworn in as US President. Trump has already stated his intention of imposing tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China. While this could well be a negotiating tactic, a period of volatility is likely to ensue.

This volatility, coupled with the likelihood of higher interest rates in the US and a strong dollar, will continue to test RBI's defence of the currency. With inflation moderating, the central bank will also be under pressure to cut interest rates to arrest flagging growth. However, rate cuts will put further pressure on the rupee. So far, the RBI has been trying to hold the line on both interest rates and the currency. But something has to give. It must be asked: Who should determine the level of the currency — the market or the central bank? And with growth slowing, how long can monetary policy be restrictive when the government is expected to continue on the path of fiscal consolidation?

As per the glide path announced in the Union budget, the fiscal deficit will fall from 4.9 per cent of GDP this year to 4.5 per cent next year. This implies a contractionary fiscal impulse to the economy. With government capital spending unlikely to sustain the momentum — its capex to GDP ratio has likely peaked — the question is: Will the private sector finally pick up the investment baton? None of the fiscal levers used so far have helped. So what makes one be-

lieve that the private sector will now step up? Hope is not a strategy.

Now may be an appropriate time to examine the efficacy of the production-linked incentive scheme — an integral part of this government's industrial policy. As per data from ICR, between 2021-22 and 2023-24 (RE), only Rs 11,535 crore was disbursed under the PLI and the subsequent design scheme. Another Rs 21,086 crore has been budgeted for this year, bringing the total to around Rs 32,620 crore over four years. But, of the 13 industry segments, data shows that roughly a third of the entire amount is being disbursed to one segment — mobile phones. Another quarter is allocated to the semiconductor segment. This implies that for most of the remaining sectors, disbursements are almost negligible.

Alongside, the unstated strategy that centres on extending either explicit or implicit support to a few national champions, bringing down the risks they are exposed to, also needs to be re-examined. As the last few years have shown, this is a flawed approach — in a globalised world, risks cannot be fully neutralised and the fluctuating fortunes of these big groups will adversely impact their investment commitments. Such a strategy is unlikely to move the needle significantly on investments and jobs. A much larger set of companies is needed to drive the investment cycle.

It is also pertinent to ask whether these firms should be protected behind high tariffs or be more closely integrated with the global economy. So far, the government's approach to trade has been inconsistent, displaying both fear — RCEP — and a hesitant approach — the Australia and UAE trade deals. But with other countries having benefitted more from the China plus one play, the question is whether the Indian government will continue to be protectionist and defensive about trade agreements. Will the FTAs with the UK and the EU finally conclude?

Unless private investments and exports pick up, growth is likely to be lower, especially as the government's capacity to increase capital spending will be further restricted by its rising committed expenditure — the Eighth Pay Commission is imminent. While the government has recently stated that it has no plans to set up a new commission — going by past trends, it should ideally be set up next year as the salary revision should be due in 2026 — the pressure from employees is only likely to increase. This will impact not only the Centre's finances but also that of state governments. Centre-state fiscal relations will also change with the 16th Finance Commission expected to submit its recommendations later next year. How the commission balances multiple competing interests will not only have consequences for fiscal architecture, but also on the fiscal contours within which political issues are raised, promises made, and elections contested.

In this uncertain global and domestic economic environment, perhaps a less hectic election calendar — the only state elections due next year are Delhi and Bihar — will give the government the space to focus on policy, not just manage the optics.

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ANEESH PRADHAN

His experiments with sound

Zakir Hussain's dialogues with other artistes created a new vocabulary for tabla

IT IS NOT uncommon for Hindustani music aficionados to grieve the loss of a senior musician by stating that the loss marks the passing of an era. The comment is driven by a respect for tradition and a sense of reverence. However, this appears superficial in many cases, as the body of work left behind by that musician is not truly epochal. The observation would be most appropriate in the case of renowned tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, who left us on December 16. His contribution to the world of tabla, to Hindustani music, and to the various musical dialogues across music systems that he initiated or was a part of, is unparalleled. Indeed, there have been great tabla players in every generation, but the content of what he expressed through the instrument and the manner of presentation is incomparable. Fortunately, much of his work is documented, but it needs to be analysed for us to comprehend its magnitude and the breadth of his vision. That will have to wait because musicians in India and across the world are struggling to come to terms with his sudden departure.

For students of music like me, Zakir Hussain and his music have been part of our musical reality since a very early age. I still remember the first time I witnessed a performance that featured him along with his father, guru and celebrated tabla maestro Alla Rakha. I was seven or eight years old. Over the years, I had more opportunities to hear him as a soloist and as an accompanist to Hindustani instru-

mental and vocal music and Kathak. These and other instances when he performed in inter-cultural musical ensembles like the path-breaking Shakti, are occasions that form a vital part of my musical memory.

Many music lovers today may not be aware of the context in which his father established himself as an important tabla player in Mumbai (then Bombay) after the 1950s. Maharashtra then was firmly rooted in the tabla tradition of the Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, and Farrukhabad styles. Alla Rakha arrived in Delhi from Lahore and moved to Mumbai, gradually capturing audiences with a style of playing that was unique in its choice of vocabulary and rhythmic perspective. He gained recognition in an atmosphere that was not the most inviting. It was this style that Zakir Hussain imbibed and took forward in a manner that seemed as if it always existed parallel to others mentioned earlier. His father's style of accompaniment was also novel and he went on to take it to new heights. However, he had experience that Zakir Hussain gained while accompanying great like world-renowned sitar exponent Ravi Shankar and sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan, and later with santoor wizard Shivkumar Sharma and bansuri virtuoso Hariprasad Chaurasia, evidently lent opportunities for him to experiment in the sphere of tabla accompaniment to instrumental music. His musical conversations with such celebrated artistes gave a fresh colour to styles of

tabla accompaniment. This captivated the imagination of tabla players of my generation.

Despite his experiments with the tabla at multiple levels, Zakir Hussain assimilated compositions from the traditional solo repertoire of ghazams other than the Punjab gharana to which his father belonged. His penchant for experimentation and reinvention led him to present these compositions in a way that came to be associated only with him. A milestone of sorts in the way traditionalists changed the way they regarded his solo presentations was their appreciation for his recital several years ago at the Chhabildas School in Dadar, Mumbai. Present at this concert were many senior and junior tabla players from Mumbai. His inclusion of traditional solo repertoire from different gharanas with the characteristic twist that he gave to these compositions came as a complete surprise to these listeners.

Perhaps, Hussain's courage to experiment and openness to absorb influences from various sources in India and overseas may not have been possible if he had not migrated to the US where he interacted with numerous leading musicians from the world of jazz. His travels resulted in several recording projects and live concerts involving musicians from various non-Indian musical systems.

The national and international awards bestowed on him are proof of the worldwide recognition he has received. Alongside these, was the public recognition he received after he

was featured in advertisements — the sight of a flight case containing a tabla would elicit cries of "Zakir Hussain" at airports and stations. Like his father, he too composed for feature films. He even acted in the Merchant Ivory film *Heat and Dust* and in *Saeed* directed by Sai Paranjape. Zakir Hussain was not one to be stopped by criticism of which he had a fair share. His inventiveness had led to explorations with tabla's vocabulary, the tonal palette of the instrument, its technique, all of which were presented with an uncanny command over rhythmic intricacies that were part of his musical persona and were equally informed by the nuances of the Carnatic system. During the Covid lockdowns, he addressed issues related to the instrument on social media. Reaching out to the audience came naturally to him.

In recent years, he had chosen to lead different sets of musicians in performance, some highlighting rhythmic exchanges and others focusing on Hindustani-Carnatic dialogues.

A detailed musical analysis of his work and its impact on musicians will surely be undertaken. But when we celebrate his life and work, we will need to understand and appreciate his creative urge and spontaneity, rather than imitate him. For, imitation is a gross injustice to the memory of geniuses like him who spent their lives constantly breaking new ground.

Pradhan is a tabla exponent, teacher, composer and scholar of Hindustani classical music

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CRITIC'S BURDEN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Supreme jury?' (IE, December 18). On what grounds would M S Subbulakshmi's grandson's plea be accepted by the Supreme Court? If it is to enforce M S's will, which forbade any award, grant or statue in her name, then it implies that all organisations, be it colleges or universities, who have instituted such honours in her name, have to be reassessed. If this is not the case, then T M Krishna, who was otherwise found suitable for the award, cannot be denied this privilege on grounds of being an intellectual critic of M S's legacy. This plea undermines the importance of criticism.

L.R. Mumm, New Delhi

FAITH OR FAIRPLAY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'An internal matter of Sikhs' (IE, December 18). Sukhbir Singh Badal's actions that drew the scrutiny of the Akal Takht were not strictly about his faith, and overlapped with his role as Deputy Chief Minister. The SAD is a registered political party regulated by the law of the country and the ECI. The intervention of any religious body in political decisions could send the wrong signals. An effective takeover of the party by the Akal Takht is harmful for both, and the larger polity.

Sankar Paul, Noida

CHRONICALLY ONLINE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Touch grass' (IE, December 17). The emergence of short videos on social media has shortened our attention spans. Every social media app has incorporated these concise texts and videos, which can be detrimental to our health. With this type of content being readily available to populations worldwide, it is very unsettling to see what being chronically online can do to us. The study in the editorial also confirms the environmental costs. While we cannot disregard the importance of social media, breaking away from it is equally important.

Nirat Daga, Howrah

DISSANAYAKE VISIT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Building bridges' (IE, December 18). The meeting between Sri Lanka President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and PM Narendra Modi in New Delhi marks a critical juncture in India-Lanka relations. Dissanayake's visit signifies Colombo's trust in the partnership for its recovery. The nation's significance as India's closest maritime neighbour ensures it occupies a central role in New Delhi's strategic outlook. By advancing mutual interests, India and Sri Lanka are poised to forge new paths for cooperation in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Kholan Das, Kolkata



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A STRIFE TOO LONG

Behind renewed farmers' agitation is Punjab's growing agrarian crisis. State and Centre must come together to frame solutions

IT'S ADO-OR-DIE battle. That appears to be the emerging sentiment at the 5-km-long encampment of farmers along the Khanauri border between Punjab and Haryana, where Jagjit Singh Dallewal is on a fast unto death. It's Day 23, and Dallewal, the co-ordinator of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Non-political) — which, along with the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM), is spearheading Kisan Agitation 2.0 in Punjab — has vowed not to end his fast until the Centre legalises the minimum support price (MSP). Punjab, whose farm unions led one of the longest agitations in independent India against the now-repealed farm laws appeared divided about waging another prolonged battle. Dallewal, a cancer patient, began his fast on November 26. He has rallied support not only from within the state but also across the country. A parliamentary committee on agriculture, chaired by former Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi, has added weight to Dallewal's demand by recommending a legal guarantee of MSP.

While SKM (Non-political) and KMM claim the backing of around 100 farm unions, the SKM, which spearheaded the previous agitation, had earlier distanced itself from them. Even so, the Union government engaged with the movement, holding several rounds of talks in February, leading to what Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann termed an "out-of-the-box solution", including the purchase of crops from Punjab farmers for the next five years. However, the unions rejected the proposal, insisting it be implemented nationwide. Meanwhile, tasked with preventing a repeat of the farmers' morcha on the Delhi borders, the Haryana police have turned the state borders at Shambhu and Khanauri into no-man's land. Farmers have been confined to these two sites since the widely televised February clashes, which saw the march to Delhi halted following the death of a 21-year-old protester.

The blockade at Shambhu and Khanauri has now lasted over 300 days. This disruption has dampened the groundswell of support seen during the previous agitation, especially among city dwellers who blame the blockades for business losses. Some have even approached the courts, leading the Supreme Court in September to set up a committee to address the farmers' grievances. Earlier this month, union leaders made another attempt to reach Delhi but they were beaten back by the Haryana police. However, Dallewal's failing health has brought renewed attention to the agitation. This comes as the Centre announced a draft national policy framework on agricultural marketing, which many in Punjab view with suspicion, fearing echoes of the now-repealed farm laws. At the heart of the matter is the growing agrarian crisis in Punjab. Farmers know that diversification is a potential solution. Yet wary of market forces that have failed them in the past, they continue to demand a guaranteed price. It's an old problem that requires a new solution. The state and central governments must join hands with farmer leaders to find a way forward. Problems left unresolved for too long often have unintended and unfortunate consequences.

TRADE BARRIERS

India's exports fall as global outlook turns uncertain. Trump's tariff threat calls for deft handling

INDIA'S TRADE DATA continues to witness sharp fluctuations. In October, merchandise exports grew at a spectacular 17.2 per cent. However, this momentum was not sustained thereafter. As per the latest data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, exports contracted by around 5 per cent in November. On the other hand, imports continue to trend upward, surging by 27 per cent in November. As a consequence, the trade deficit has widened to \$37.84 billion — this is significantly higher than the average deficit registered in the first seven months (April-October) of this year. This deterioration suggests that the current account deficit for the full year will be higher than previously expected.

The disaggregated data shows that the decline in exports was largely driven by petroleum. Excluding oil, exports grew by 7.7 per cent in November and 7.4 per cent so far this year. Exports of electronic and engineering goods have continued to fare well, growing by 54 per cent and 13.75 per cent respectively in November. The surge in imports was driven by a staggering rise in gold imports which increased to \$14.9 billion in November compared to \$3.4 billion last year. While some analysts have linked the sharp rise in gold imports to festive and marriage-related demand, so far this year, gold imports are up almost 50 per cent. Other commodity imports have witnessed diverging trends. For instance, crude oil imports picked up in November, after a 12-month low in October, while iron and steel imports fell sharply. The services data accompanying this data release indicates that services exports surpassed merchandise exports in November. However, this data is an estimation and will be revised following RBI's release.

The outlook for global trade is marred by uncertainties. US President-elect Donald Trump has already stated his intention to raise tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China. Trump has also criticised India's tariffs, pointing specifically towards the 100 per cent tariff rate for some products. The President-elect is reported to have said on Tuesday that — "India charges a lot. Brazil charges a lot. If they want to charge us, that's fine, but we're going to charge them the same thing." This raises the possibility of Washington imposing reciprocal taxes on Indian products. During the first Trump presidency, India had lost duty free access under the Generalised System of Preferences programme which affected \$5.7 billion worth of exports. Considering the implications of Trump's possible trade moves, India must deftly navigate this period of uncertainty as it negotiates with the Trump administration.

WELL PLAYED, ASHWIN

He had all tricks to bamboozle the best batsmen. His record speaks for his prowess with the ball

THERE HAD BEEN signs of his diminishing powers and fitness problems of late, but when Ravichandran Ashwin called time on his India career on Wednesday, it came as a surprise. He had played the recent pink-ball Test in Adelaide and was impressive on a surface which offered him precious little. India are still in the running for a place in the World Test Championship final and getting his hands on a trophy that has remained tantalisingly out of reach thus far could have been a strong temptation. But Ashwin, the cerebral cricketer that he is, would know best where his game and body are at the moment and the thinking of the team management and selectors. With uncertainty about his prospects in the near future and India's next Test assignment several months away, he must have felt that this was as opportune a time to hang his boots. Ashwin has anyway not been in the selectors' scheme of things in white-ball cricket for a while now.

Numbers tell the story of his amazing prowess with the ball, even if Ashwin's batting capability that brought him six Test centuries is set aside. But the real measure of Ashwin as a player was the immense respect he was shown by batsmen regardless of conditions. They knew that he was not dependent on the pitch to bamboozle batsmen and possessed all the tricks — flight, guile, drift, accuracy, side-spin, over-spin and above all, arguably the sharpest brain in cricket. The list of batsmen he has dismissed most often proves that he raised his game against the best in the business.

Understandably, his numbers in India are much better than they are for away games, for which he was often not considered. Ashwin, more than anyone, was instrumental in India's 12-year 18-series winning streak at home, but he has never been a one-trick pony. India's last home series — a 3-3 whitewash by New Zealand — showed that without Ashwin being somewhere close to his best, there is no guarantee of success in their own den.



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

IT IS DIFFICULT to say whether the ongoing posturing over the Constitution is funny or tragic. In this year, when the Constitution entered the annals of history — 75th year — there has been a lot of unfruitful mantram — churning — in the political arena over what our Constitution means and why we should protect it. Unfortunately, the noise generated does not seem to have led to any meaningful lessons for political players and citizens.

Following the Bharat Jodo Yatra, the top leadership of the Congress went into overdrive over the "red book". They attacked the ruling party for its violation and subversion of the Constitution and, to some extent, made it an election issue. While there is no evidence that voters were swayed away from the BJP because of this, at least the Constitution became a talking point. However, this initiative of the Congress was rather vacuous because the party did not convert it into a mass movement. In all probability, Congress workers continue to be clueless about the substantive import of this invocation of the Constitution. Cynically, this move was seen as an attempt to win over the Dalits — as if the Constitution mattered only to them.

As the year comes to an end, the Prime Minister has paid back in the same coin of empty symbolism and harsh polemic, arguing that the Congress always subverted the Constitution. The small difference is that while Congress argued that the Constitution was being violated today, for the ruling party, the violations of yesterday matter the most. Isn't this both funny and tragic?

There seem to be three different ways in which the Constitution has come under attack. Right from the time of its commencement, criticism was offered that the Constitution was an alien document, that it was not Indian enough; more specifically, it was not based on the values of the Hindu society. Through the Seventies, when those offering this criticism realised the value of political/civil liberties, this criticism became somewhat muted. Today, even as the PM is extolling the values of the Constitution, criticism in the English language is gaining intellectual respectability. It argues that the Constitution exemplifies colonial legacy. So, it becomes a complicated question whether to be proud of what our forefathers drafted or

What could have been a moment of introspection transformed into theatrical exchanges in Parliament

As is customary these days, no analysis is complete without blaming Jawaharlal Nehru. PM's attack too implied the mistake Nehru made in the matter of the First Amendment. While it is a political tragedy that a PM presiding over the most vicious application of existing laws targeting dissent should remind us of this, let us face Nehru's mistake. Nehru's mistake was that he was a child of the democratic movement which believed in the capacity of the power-holders to be constrained — it trusted their discretion and ability for self-regulation.

to bring a rupture and build a new Constitution. The PM would have done better if he had clarified this. The urge for indigenous laws, ideas, interpretations and indeed for an indigenous founding document is expanding under his leadership in the judicial, legislative and academic universes. Is this funny or tragic?

The second attack has been through practice. Unless those for whom the Constitution is drafted adopt a healthy respect for it and translate it into actual practice, it is bound to remain a mute idol. In India, even as the Preamble was recited in schools and colleges, we the people always gave short shrift to its objectives — liberty, equality, justice and, above all, fraternity. No wonder the government and its institutions often found ways of using the Constitution as an instrument of repressive control rather than reasoned regulation. If today the government is undermining the Constitution, it is due to the deep-rooted rejection of the idea of limited government. The last 75 years stand testimony to our penchant for sacrificing constitutional morality at the altar of the wisdom of rulers. This line of attack often invokes national interest, collective good, welfare, etc. to underplay the importance of constitutional morality.

Against this backdrop, the third attack has often been through attempts to amend, change, reform, review — and now, Indianise the Constitution. In his speech in Parliament, the PM spoke of controversial amendments. If he meant the Emergency-era amendments, then most changes have been wisely undone subsequently. If the PM had the amendments from the late Sixties in mind — the 24th and 25th amendments for instance — then those have been corrected by the 1973 Kesavananda Bharati ruling.

But as is customary these days, no analysis is complete without blaming Jawaharlal Nehru. PM's attack too implied the mistake Nehru made in the matter of the First Amendment. While it is a political tragedy that a PM presiding over the most vicious application of existing laws targeting dissent should remind us of this, let us face Nehru's mistake. Nehru's mistake was that he was a child of the democratic movement which believed in the capacity of the power-holders

to be constrained — it trusted their discretion and ability for self-regulation. Therefore, he sought to empower the state with a belief that democratic politicians will not trespass and also that institutional mechanisms will function against misuse. Both were misplaced.

What needs to be learned from this mistake? One lesson could be the need to evolve political consensus on adequate protection for citizens from the state and ensure that unseemly effects of the First Amendment are undone. Since both the BJP and the Congress stand by the Constitution, that should not be difficult. Pending this, all parties can pledge that they will not harass dissenters, arrest citizens at the drop of a hat, oppose ball except when evidence or witnesses are likely to be tampered with, or unleash government agencies against opponents. Moreover, self-doubt rather than self-assurance should mark law-making and its implementation when there is a clash between state power and citizen rights.

As for the government, lofty praise for the Constitution sits ill with a Chief Minister coming out in support of a judge who openly defied the Constitution. The criticism about amendments could not have come at a more inopportune moment when the government is set to fundamentally rewrite parts of the Constitution in its ambition to streamline the electoral cycle.

While the contradictions in our political life between intent and rhetoric, claims and practices are indeed funny, it is only tragic that a solemn moment is transformed into theatrical exchanges rather than introspection.

Above all, what we can learn from the experience of constitutional democracy over the last seven decades is that there can be tension between public sentiments (about what is right and wrong) and constitutional norms (of fairness). There is also tension between the ambition of rulers and the scope of what governments can legitimately do. In such moments, public sentiments and goals adopted by the rulers appear democratic and attractive but in the long run, unless the Constitution is adhered to, we run the risk of Bonapartism. That certainly is not funny.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science



ARUN KUMAR

THE EDITORIAL, "PICKETTY'S rights, wrongs" (IE, December 17) is correct in its assessment of inequality, demand and taxation in India. But, one could disagree with the conclusion that taxation of wealth would be disruptive while not generating revenue for public goods. It is argued that recent reforms have broadened the tax base, which should lead to additional revenue.

As per the Union Budget 2024-25, the Centre's tax collection according to the estimated GDP would be 11.78 per cent with direct taxes contributing 7 per cent. Additional taxes are collected by the states and the local bodies, taking the total tax to GDP to around 17 per cent. This is low compared to most other countries, which means inadequate expenditure on social sectors like education and health leading to low productivity and low incomes for a majority, resulting in weak demand and slowdown of growth.

Low tax collection is a result of black income generation. According to Oxfam estimates, the top 1 per cent on the income ladder earn 22 per cent of the national income. Projecting that further, the top 5 per cent may be earning about 40 per cent of the income. This means income tax collection from this 5 per cent should be about 10 per cent of GDP at an average tax rate of 25 per cent. Much more tax could potentially be collected if black income generation by the

MORE MONEY, LESS PROBLEMS

Wealth tax in India will boost economic growth. The roadblock is political will

DEAR EDITOR, I DISAGREE

A fortnightly column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

Despite tax reforms, there are only 90 million (6.5 per cent of the population) taxpayers. But, only about 15 million are effective taxpayers. About half of the 90 million file nil returns and the rest pay negligible tax. So, the tax base remains narrow and the distribution of income is highly skewed.

top 3 per cent in the income ladder could be checked.

Despite tax reforms, there are only 90 million (6.5 per cent of the population) taxpayers. But, only about 15 million are effective taxpayers. About half of the 90 million file nil returns and the rest pay negligible tax. So, the tax base remains narrow and the distribution of income is highly skewed. Even if agriculture incomes are taxed, the numbers will not rise much. The real problem is the taxation of services — the dominant sector of the economy.

How can more revenue be raised for development? Not by indirect taxes, since they are inflationary and regressive.

That is where wealth tax comes in. Wealth and its value are largely visible and/or recorded, so it can be taxed. Billionaire wealth is largely financial, in the stock market and the rich in India also hold real estate which is registered, even if benami. The reason wealth tax failed earlier is because it was deliberately made complicated by allowing concessions, loopholes, etc. Now, with digital records, it should be easier to implement, if there is political will.

Most assets are overvalued due to speculation. A wealth tax would bring down the prices. Take Reliance Industries; its share price is Rs 1,250. At a P/E ratio of 25, the return is 4 per cent or Rs 50 on the share value. The

wealth tax at 2 per cent would be Rs 25. So, the net income would be Rs 25 per share. On this, there would be a 40 per cent income tax so that the net income becomes Rs 15. This return of 12 per cent would be way below that on bank fixed deposits.

So, funds would move from shares to the banks and industries and share valuations would decline from their stratospheric levels. As investments move to other productive investments, growth will be boosted.

The real problem could be the flight of capital, the decline of the Rupee and the BOP. Stricter capital controls would be needed temporarily. Animal spirits may be dampened till the rate of growth picks up and profit rise due to increased demand. Currently, financial bubbles build up and continuous stimulation of stock markets is required.

In brief, wealth tax is feasible in India. It will boost tax collections to fund greater investments in social sectors, resulting in a more productive workforce, higher economic growth and reduced inequality. If structured right, the black economy will decline, yielding even more direct taxes. The roadblock is political will.

Kumar is retired professor of Economics, JNU and author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

DECEMBER 19, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PAK AID TO HIJACKERS

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT has lodged a strong-worded complaint with the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) against Pakistan for having resorted to an "unlawful act" by giving a pistol to the hijackers of an Indian Airlines Boeing 737 taken forcibly to Lahore on August 24 in 1984.

US ON BHOPAL TRAGEDY

US SENATOR STEPHEN SOLARZ said he plans to introduce a legislation in Congress necessitating US companies abroad to have the same safety and environmental regulations as in the

United States. "The administration till now had not been in the forefront in imposing restrictions on American companies outside the US," the Democrat Senator said. "I hope this gas tragedy will awaken them," he added.

POLL POSTPONED

THE ELECTION COMMISSION has postponed the Lok Sabha election in the entire Bhopal constituency because of the disruption in life after the gas leakage from the Indian Carbide pesticide factory. Election Commission secretary, K. Ganeshan, told newsmen that a new date was being considered and would be known later. The election in Bhopal may most

probably be held in the last week of January, according to R P Bhatta, EC secretary.

PM: VOTE FEARLESSLY

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV GANDHI asked the people to cast their votes fearlessly. The central and state governments would deal firmly with elements attempting to frighten voters in any part of the country, he said. Gandhi said he was told that some Opposition leaders were determined to intimidate voters in certain constituencies "as they used to do in the past." The government this time would not allow anyone to deprive the people of their voting rights, Gandhi said.



How scientists are exploring what extraterrestrial life could look like

Advanced forms of life on alien planets could be so strange that they are unrecognisable. As astrobiologists try to detect life off earth, they will need to be creative. One strategy is to measure mineral signatures on the rocky surfaces of exoplanets, since mineral diversity tracks biological evolution

Chris Impey

We have only one example of biology forming in the universe: life on earth. But what if life can form in other ways? How do you look for alien life when you don't know what alien life might look like?

These questions are preoccupying astrobiologists, who are scientists who look for life beyond earth. Astrobiologists have attempted to come up with universal rules that govern the emergence of complex physical and biological systems both on earth and beyond.

I'm an astronomer who has written extensively about astrobiology. Through my research, I've learned that the most abundant form of extraterrestrial life is likely to be microbial, since single cells can form more readily than large organisms. But just in case there's advanced alien life out there, I'm on the international advisory council for the group designing messages to send to those civilisations.

Detecting life beyond earth

Since the first discovery of an exoplanet in 1995, over 5,000 exoplanets, or planets orbiting other stars, have been found. Many of these exoplanets are small and rocky, like earth, and in the habitable zones of their stars. The habitable zone is the range of distances between the surface of a planet and the star it orbits that would allow the planet to have liquid water, and thus support life as we on earth know it.

The sample of exoplanets detected so far projects 300 million potential biological experiments in our galaxy – or 300 million places, including exoplanets and other bodies such as moons, with suitable conditions for biology to arise. The uncertainty for researchers starts with the definition of life. It feels like defining life should be easy, since we know life when we see it, whether it's a flying bird or a microbe moving in a drop of water. But scientists don't agree on a definition, and some think a comprehensive definition might not be possible.

NASA defines life as a "self-sustaining chemical reaction capable of Darwinian evolution." That means organisms with a complex chemical system that evolve by adapting to their environment. Darwinian evolution says that the survival of an organism depends on its fitness in its environment. The evolution of life on earth has progressed over billions of years from single-celled organisms to large animals and other species, including humans. Evolution is the process of change in systems. It can describe how a group of something becomes more complex – or even just different – over time.

Exoplanets are remote and hundreds of millions of times fainter than their parent stars, so studying them is challenging. Astronomers can inspect the atmospheres and surfaces of earth-like exoplanets using a method called spectroscopy to look for chemical signatures of life. Spectroscopy might detect signatures of oxygen in a planet's atmosphere, which microbes called blue-green algae created by photosynthesis on earth several billion years ago, or chlorophyll signatures, which indicate plant life. NASA's



A slice of the Esquel meteorite. This type of meteorite is from the core-mantle boundary of an ancient planetoid that was smashed apart billions of years ago. DOUG BOWMAN

definition of life leads to some important but unanswered questions. Is Darwinian evolution universal? What chemical reactions can lead to biology off earth?

Evolution and complexity

All life on earth, from a fungal spore to a blue whale, evolved from a microbial last common ancestor about 4 billion years ago. The same chemical processes are seen in all living organisms on earth, and those processes might be universal. They also may be radically different elsewhere. In October 2024, a diverse group of scientists gathered to think outside the box on evolution. They wanted to step back and explore what sort of processes created order in the universe – biological or not – to figure out how to study the emergence of life totally unlike life on earth. Two researchers present argued that complex systems of chemicals or minerals, when in environments that allow some configurations to persist better than others, evolve to store larger amounts of information. As time goes by, the system will grow more diverse and complex, gaining the functions needed for survival through a kind of natural selection.

They speculated that there might be a law to describe the evolution of a wide variety of physical systems. Biological evolution through natural selection would be just one example of this broader law. In biology, information refers to the instructions stored in the sequence of nucleotides on a DNA molecule, which collectively make up an organism's genome and dictate what the organism looks like and how it functions. If you define complexity in terms of information theory, natural selection will cause a genome to grow more complex as it stores more information about its environment.

Complexity might be useful in

All life on earth, from a fungal spore to a whale, evolved from a microbial last common ancestor about 4 billion years ago. The same chemical processes are seen in all living organisms on earth, and those processes might be universal

measuring the boundary between life and nonlife. However, it's wrong to conclude that animals are more complex than microbes. Biological information increases with genome size, but evolutionary information density drops. Evolutionary information density is the fraction of functional genes within the genome, or the fraction of the total genetic material that expresses fitness for the environment. Organisms that people think of as primitive, such as bacteria, have genomes with high information density and so appear better designed than the genomes of plants or animals. A universal theory of life is still elusive. Such a theory would include the concepts of complexity and information storage, but it would not be tied to DNA or the particular kinds of cells we find in terrestrial biology.

Implications for search for life

Researchers have explored alternatives to terrestrial biochemistry. All known living organisms, from bacteria to humans, contain water, and it is a solvent that is essential for life on earth. A solvent is a liquid medium that facilitates chemical reactions from which life could emerge. But life could potentially emerge from other solvents, too. Astrobiologists William Bains and Sara Seager have explored thousands of molecules that might be associated with life. Plausible solvents include sulfuric acid, ammonia,

liquid carbon dioxide, and even liquid sulphur. Alien life might not be based on carbon, which forms the backbone of all life's essential molecules – at least here on Earth. It might not even need a planet to survive.

Advanced forms of life on alien planets could be so strange that they're unrecognisable. As astrobiologists try to detect life off earth, they will need to be creative. One strategy is to measure mineral signatures on the rocky surfaces of exoplanets, since mineral diversity tracks terrestrial biological evolution. As life evolved on earth, it used and created minerals for exoskeletons and habitats. The hundred minerals present when life first formed have grown to about 5,000 today. For example, zircons are simple silicate crystals that date back to the time before life started. A zircon found in Australia is the oldest known piece of earth's crust. But other minerals, such as apatite, a complex calcium phosphate mineral, are created by biology. Apatite is a primary ingredient in bones, teeth, and fish scales.

Another strategy to finding life unlike that on earth is to detect evidence of a civilisation, such as artificial lights or the industrial pollutant nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere. These are examples of traces of intelligent life called technosignatures. It's unclear how and when a first detection of life beyond earth will happen. It might be within the solar system, or by sniffing exoplanet atmospheres, or by detecting artificial radio signals from a distant civilisation. The search is a twisting road, not a straightforward path. And that's for life as we know it – for life as we don't know it, all bets are off.

(Chris Impey is University Distinguished Professor of Astronomy, University of Arizona. This article is republished from The Conversation.)



Space One President Masakazu Toyoda announces the failure of the second attempt to launch the Kairos No. 2 rocket on Wednesday. AP

Japan space startup aborts second launch minutes after liftoff

Associated Press

A Japanese space startup said its second attempt to launch a rocket carrying satellites into orbit had been aborted minutes after liftoff Wednesday and destroyed itself, nine months after the company's first launch attempt ended in an explosion.

Space One's Kairos No. 2 rocket lifted off from a coastal site in the mountainous prefecture of Wakayama in central Japan.

The company said it had aborted the flight after concluding that it was unlikely to complete its mission.

"We are very sorry that we could not achieve as far as a final stage of the mission," Space One President Masakazu Toyoda told a news conference Wednesday. "We don't consider this a failure because we are getting valuable data that will help our pursuit toward a next challenge."

He said he hoped to find the cause to address the problems as soon as possible to achieve success next time.

Company executive and space engineer Mamoru Endo said the abnormality in the

system is likely to have caused an unstable flight of the rocket, which started spiralling in midflight and eventually destroyed itself about three minutes after liftoff, using its autonomous safety mechanism.

The rocket, which rose higher than 100 kilometers above ground, entered space

Issues with the first-stage engine nozzle are likely to have caused unstable flight, and the rocket started to spiral. It eventually destroyed itself about three minutes after liftoff

before it was destroyed, officials said. Space One aims to be Japan's first company to put a satellite into orbit, hoping to boost Japan's lagging space industry with a small rocket for an affordable space transport business.

Wednesday's flight, postponed twice from Saturday because of strong winds, came nine months after a failed debut flight in March, when the rocket was intentionally exploded five seconds after takeoff. The flight was carrying a government satellite that was intended to monitor North Korea's missile launches and other military activities.

Kairos No. 2 rocket was carrying five small satellites, including one from the Taiwanese space agency and several from Japanese startups.

Space One said it had fixed the cause of the debut flight failure, which stemmed from a miscalculation of the rocket's first-stage propulsion.

Japan hopes the company can pave the way for a domestic space industry that competes with the United States.

Tokyo-based Space One was set up in 2018 with investments from major Japanese companies, including Canon Electronics, IHI, Shimizu, and major banks, to commercialise space delivery services at lower costs and regular flights as many as 20 times a year, compared to six currently planned by the government-led space program.

Japan's space development programmes are led by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, and industry leaders such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and IHI, as they develop two main flagship rockets, the large H3 rocket and the much smaller Epsilon, to cater to the growing satellite transport business.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Nobody can hear your answers in the void...

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

In 1654, X filled a tall cylindrical container closed at one end with liquid mercury, then turned it upside down on a basin of mercury until the container was fully vertical. The mercury in the container dropped by some height but not further, leaving behind a vacuum in the receptacle. Name X. Hint: One unit of measuring vacuum is named for him.

QUESTION 2

An incandescent light bulb contains a vacuum or an inert gas so that the filament doesn't undergo a chemical reaction called _____ when it is heated to produce light. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 3

The world's first practical Y consisted of a chamber containing a vacuum, a heated cathode, and an anode. When an alternating current was applied to the circuit, electrons could only flow from the heated electrode to the unheated one. Thus, Y allowed current to flow in only one direction. Name Y.

QUESTION 4

An important part of quantum field theory describes the vacuum of empty space as being full of _____, which are subatomic particles rapidly popping in and out of existence. If these particles didn't exist, the electron's bare charge would be infinite. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 5

While space is mostly empty, it's nowhere a perfect vacuum. It's filled instead with photons – the particles

of light – and _____, the second most abundant particles in the universe. Fill in the blank.

Answers to the December 17 quiz:

1. Codename of USAF exercise to study UFOs until 1969 – **Ans: Project Blue Book**
 2. Constellation whose stars Larry Hogan mistook to be drones – **Ans: Orion**
 3. World War II pilots' names for orbs of bright light – **Ans: Foo fighters**
 4. Colloquial name for light seen above ships' masts – **Ans: St. Elmo's fire**
 5. Harvard scientist who launched Project Galileo in 2021 – **Ans: Avi Loeb**
- Visual: **Sun dogs**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Chandan Kumar Singha | Ankurjyoti Hatimuria | Anmol Agrawal | Amitha B.



Visual: Name the two hemispheres at the centre of the famous experiment depicted in this 1657 engraving. When they were latched, had their air pumped out, and sealed, they couldn't be taken apart by multiple horses pulling from either side. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

INDIA'S CITIES ARE YEARNING TO BREATHE BETTER

It is a winter of discons, and despair, too, every year for Delhiites. Why it's more in winter? Cold air is denser and moves slower than warm air, thus, it traps pollutants and doesn't whisk it away. In winter, the air quality index (AQI) in Delhi shoots up above 499 at some places, marking a "severe plus" on India's System of Air Quality Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) scale. It is considered "hazardous" as per the US AQI standards. Government takes several measures such as declaring holidays for schools, banning construction for particular periods, installing anti-smog guns, introducing odd-even number system for easing traffic density on roads etc. - all to prevent illnesses among the people.

With air pollution levels turning severe plus, the Commission

for Air Quality Management has implemented Stage 4 of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), whereby strictest emergency measures kicked in, such as school holidays, construction ban, advising employers to shift 50% of their work online, bar-ringing all trucks, and except those carrying essential items, from entering Delhi. Any level above 300 is considered hazardous as per international AQI norms. Many parts of Delhi recorded an AQI of more than 600 last month. Every winter, several factors, including farm waste burning in neighbouring states of Haryana and Punjab, burning of fireworks, construction waste, and increasing vehicles on the roads add up to turn Delhi into a sort of gas chamber.

Last month, the Supreme Court

reprimanded the Delhi government for letting things go out of control. It even asked the Central government to share real-time satellite data to pinpoint the causes for the pollution spike. A month later, on December 16, the apex court again took stock of the situation. This time, it said it would expand the scope of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to other areas and states outside the National Capital Region (NCR).

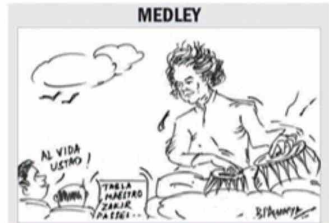
What's more, the highest court of the land noted that the air pollution is a pan-India problem and asked the Central government to take a list of highly polluted cities. This should hearten those people suffering in other cities reeling under the adverse impacts of air pollution. The court observation that there is a need for all governments to set up the Commission for Air Qual-

ity Management (CAQM) is highly laudatory. It should make them mandatory across the country, so the lax state governments will act for better air quality monitoring as well as man-agement in trouble-some areas.

One wishes fervently that the apex court expands its intervention in the air pollution matter to states across the country, and not merely to those outside the NCR. Pollution not only affects public health, it also takes a toll on economic growth. It causes higher absenteeism in offices, reduces labour productivity, causes spurt in respiratory illnesses, increases healthcare costs, and leads to premature deaths. As construction bans are imposed, lakhs of migrant labour who flock to cities to escape ru-ral distress are deprived of livelihoods, and are forced to lead

miserable lives. Experts reckon that worsening pollution levels could reduce GDP as much as by 3% or \$95 billion. It also scares away prospective investors, or deters expansion in brownfield projects.

Whether or not the Supreme Court prods, or even issues any dicta, the state governments should wake up from their slumber, and set about bringing air quality levels to safe levels. The benefits are enormous in terms of removing negative impact on educational institutions, offices and economic activities such as construction and transport sectors. It should worry all that India's susceptibility of air pollution increases every year, taking a toll on health, or even lives, of millions. The governments should not wait for the Supreme Court to 'clear the air' for the better.



LETTERS

ONOE Bill row crowds out real issues

THE introduction of 'One Nation One Election' Bill is a conscious attempt to waste the precious time of Parliament and it is definitely tilted to divert the attention of all from crucial issues such as Manipur, se-rious allegations over Adani group's misconduct, inflation, declining growth rates, stunningly widening gap between the haves and the have-nots and fast deterioration of relationship with many countries. The ruling dispensation, in spite of being aware of lack of enough strength to get this amendment Bill through, tabling it in the parliament displays the intention behind its introduction. Losing majority support and deciding to refer the Bill to Joint Parliament Committee is a pre-planned act deliberately meant to divert the course.

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

DESPITE opposition's resistance to ONOE, the bills upon being put to vote after introduction in the house crossed a simple majority even though 20 MPs were absent. This gave room to the opposition to argue that there was lack of support for the bills within BJP. This upset the BJP leadership due to the fact that at present constitution, two-thirds majority of members present are required, which appears a mam-moth task. Overall, it seems the opposition is not inclined for reforms. Since the government has nothing to lose as bills will be referred to JPC panel for scrutiny and wider deliberations at every level and, thereafter, will be discussed in Parliament, Congress demand is unjustified.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

No sign of Super Six in AP state

THE opposition party YSRC is making wild allegations against AP CM for neglecting the Polavaram project while the latter is blaming Jagan for everything negative happening in the State. In the course of blame game, the people are already suffering due to heavy power tariff, rising cost of all essential commodities, defective Excise and sand policies, etc., in the State while the education and health sectors are subjected to gross neglect so as to help the corporate companies in the said fields to make a fast buck. There is no sign of the implementation of the Super 6 guarantees in the State.

Govardhana Myneddu, Vijayawada

High-stakes battle for Team India

THANKS to the last wicked stand of Bumrah and Akashdeep and rain, India were able to salvage a draw against the Aussies. Unless seniors Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli do something extraordinary in the re-remaining tests, this series is more than likely to be the final curtain on their long and distinguished careers. Girls play is also in danger and the batter has done nothing to further his cause and could be re-placed. Save for 'Boom Boom', none of other Indian pacers looks menacing and capable of taking wickets. If India has to win, they must get Head out early. The last few Indian victories in Australia came without the top players in the team.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

BJP must stop taunting Congress

FINANCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, during a discussion on the commemoration of 75 years of adoption of the Constitution in Rajya Sabha, accused the Congress of making major amendments to the Constitution to 'help the family and the dynasty'. The treasury benches must defend from drumming up the Congress fault on the Constitution, and instead focus on functioning by honoring the Constitution in letter and spirit. The Congress is anyway on the back foot vis-à-vis the Constitution, thanks to the 1975 Emergency imposed by Mrs. Gandhi, the shadows of which will follow the party for time immemorial.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

thehansreeder@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to give keynote address at UN on World Meditation Day

BENGALURU: Global spiritual leader and humanitarian, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, will guide a live World Meditation on Saturday, following the unanimous adoption of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution declaring 21 December as the World Meditation Day.

This historic event establishes an annual global celebration of meditation, recognising its transformative benefits for mental and physical health, as well as its power to foster peace and unity, an official release by the Art of Living stated on Wednesday.

The Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in New York is marking the first-ever World Meditation Day at the UN headquarters on December 20. The commemorative event at the UN will feature a keynote address by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. This momentous occasion, themed 'Meditation for Global Peace and Harmony', would mark the First World Meditation Day.

"The recognition of meditation by the United Nations is a profound step forward," said Gurudev. "Meditation nurtures the soul, calms the mind, and offers a solution to modern challenges," he added.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Pros & cons of simultaneous polls

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

DURING the first four general election cycles in 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967, elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies were held simultaneously. However, on account of the subsequent premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha on seven occasions, and State Legislative Assemblies on various occasions, elections to the Lok Sabha and the various State Assemblies were held at different times.

With the approval of the proposal for simultaneous elections nationwide, on 12 December 2024 by the Union Cabinet, the report submitted by a High-Level Committee (HLC), chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, on the idea of a 'One Nation, One Election (ONOE)' has once again gained significant traction in India's political landscape.

The central government feels that the move will improve the quality of governance by reducing the frequent interruptions caused by staggered elections, and allowing governments to focus on long-term policy implementation rather than short-term electoral strategies. And that it will avoid the costs of multiple elections and streamline the electoral process.

The proposal has also sparked considerable debate, raising serious concerns about

its implications for federalism and political representation. Critics have warned that simultaneous elections may overshadow local issues and marginalise regional parties, favour national parties and reduce political diversity. They point out that the logistical challenges, and the need for fair representation across diverse demographics, need careful consideration.

While there are tangible benefits that accrue on account of simultaneous elections. There are also significant issues that surround such a proposal, both from democratic and constitutional perspectives.

The issue of simultaneous polls to the State Assembly and Parliament, once led to an interesting, if somewhat embarrassing, situation in my own case, in 2004. I was the Chief Secretary to the Government of Andhra Pradesh in 2004, and N Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister, felt the need for a snap poll to the State Assembly, and was able to persuade his Cabinet colleagues, and the party rank and file, to fall in line with his decision. A resolution to that effect was accordingly passed by the State Cabinet, and forwarded to the Governor of the state who dissolved the Assembly and I wrote to the Election Commission (EC) to order elections as early as possible.

While matters stood thus, Parliament was dissolved and general elections notified in the entire country. Considering the somewhat anticipated new development, the State Cabinet decided to request the EC to cause both elections to be held at the same time in the state. I felt that it was an administratively sound, and financially sensible, de-

PART-I Critics have warned that simultaneous elections may overshadow local issues and marginalise regional parties, favour national parties and reduce political diversity. They point out that the logistical challenges, and the need for fair representation across diverse demographics, need careful consideration. While there are tangible benefits that accrue on account of simultaneous elections. There are also significant issues that surround such a proposal, both from democratic and constitutional perspectives



cision accordingly. My action was questioned by the opposition parties. But I was able to satisfy them, as well as the public, of the rationale behind it. Then followed a period of uncertainty, with an interim arrangement in place, in the shape of a caretaker government. The caretaker Cabinet, by its very nature, was not expected to take any decisions which might influence the outcome of the oncoming polls. At the same time, situations were bound to arise, from time to time, requiring major decisions to be taken. No matter what their background, experience and ability to handle complicated situations, civil servants are simply neither equipped nor expected to handle such situations. My long service in the state, my equation with the political matters and the confidence reposed by the public in me, notwithstanding, I found myself in an extremely awkward situation. Elections

to the Legislative Assembly did not follow as quickly as expected. The caretaker government continued in office longer than anticipated, much to my acute discomfort. I had a pleasant, and easy, relationship with I M Lyngdoh, Chief Election Commissioner at that time, having known him earlier as an Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture in the Government of India, when I was the Secretary (Food and Agriculture) in the state. I travelled to Delhi and met him, hoping to be able to persuade him to advance the date of the elections to the extent possible. Typical of him, Lyngdoh was all grace and affection, and extremely receptive to my pleas. He was, however, insistent that the revision of the election rolls of the state be completed, in a thorough and exhaustive manner before elections took place. And rightly so, too. I returned to Hyderabad, satisfied that I had made a good attempt, but

disappointed that I had failed. Largely an account of the confidence the Chief Minister had in me, the cooperation of my service colleagues, and the grace of God, I was able to survive those testing times, scraping through with my image unscathed, and the fair name, of the State's administration, intact.

Y S Rajsekhar Reddy, the Leader of the Opposition at that time, had been at the forefront of the criticism, by the opposition parties, of my decision to write to the EC, asking for simultaneous polls. He also led the campaign by his party to criticise the manner in which the revision of electoral rolls was being done. In the event, however, the elections went off peacefully and in an orderly fashion. The Congress (I) party won and Rajsekhar Reddy was elected as the Leader of the Congress (I) Legislative Party, and sworn in as Chief Minister.

At the request of the new Chief Minister, I stayed on as the Chief Secretary, duly keeping Chandrababu Naidu informed, and at the request of Rajsekhar Reddy. And later, to my satisfaction, and by way of a pat in the back for the administration, Raja-sekhara Reddy, the Chief Minister by then, openly acknowledged the good work done by the officials in the matter of electoral roll revision, which, he conceded, was responsible for the victory of his party!

The earlier reports of the Law Commission, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, have dealt with the issue of simultaneous elections. The crux of those discussions, and recommendations, was that the elections to the Lok Sabha

and nearly half of the State Assemblies may be dubbed together in one cycle, while the rest of the State Assembly elections can be held in another cycle after two-and-a-half years. This will require curtailing or extending the tenures of existing State Assemblies, entailing amendments to the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

The subject of elections never fails to remind me of an amusing experience I had in 1990.

I was then the Secretary of the Planning Department and also a Secretary in the Chief Minister's office. The charming, and extremely popular, former cricket Captain of India Ghulam Ahmed walked into my office. He had just retired from the IAS. To my surprise Ghulam Saab asked me to contest the forthcoming election to the Vice President of the Hyderabad Cricket Association (HCA). Apparently, he felt that the affairs of the Association were in a mess, and needed to be cleaned up. A bit reluctant, but in deference to the wishes of a person who was my childhood hero, I accepted. I felt much more confident and reassured when the matinee idol of Hyderabad cricket, M L Jaisimha, called me to tell me how happy he was that I had agreed to join the fray.

One day, Chief Minister Nedurumalli Janardhana Reddy, upon reacting to a complaint made to him that I was interfering in the affairs of HCA, only said cryptically, "I hope only you are sure of winning!"

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Empowering farmers thru PM-AASHA

In Rabi 2023-24, 6.41 LMT of pulses procured, benefiting 2.75 lakh farmers

NEW DELHI: The Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare has initiated several measures to help farmers to enhance their income. The Government's MSP policy for major agricultural commodities seeks to ensure remunerative prices to the growers for their produce with a view to encourage higher investments in farming and boost production and productivity.

The minimum support price (MSP) is the minimum price for select crops covering major cereals, Shree Anna (millets), pulses, oilseeds, copra, etc. The MSP is revised annually in Kharif and Rabi seasons that the Government of India considers as remunerative for farmers and hence warrants price support. The government fixes MSP for 24 crops at 1.5 times the Cost of Production (CoP).

The Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare implements the umbrella scheme of Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanraksha Abhyan (PM-AASHA). The scheme is implemented

for notified pulses, oilseeds & copra. The PM AASHA was launched in September 2018 with an aim to provide price assurance for pulses, oilseeds and copra, ensuring financial stability for farmers, reduce post-harvest distress selling & promote crop diversification towards pulses and oilseeds. In September 2024, cabinet approved the continuation of Integrated Scheme of PM AASHA with Price Support Scheme (PSS), Price Deficiency Payment Scheme (PDPS) & Market Intervention Scheme (MIS) as its components.

Price Support Scheme (PSS) is implemented on the request of the State Govts./UTs that agree to exempt from levy of Mandi tax on the procurement of notified pulses, oilseeds and copra in the interest of farmers. From 2024-25 procurement season onwards, the sanction for the procurement of notified Pulses, Oilseeds and Copra under PSS are given to the State/UT up to a maximum of 25% of the national production after necessary approvals. To achieve Atmanirbhar-ta in pulses,



A look at the procurement data since 2018-19, shows that around 195.39 LMT of pulses, oilseeds & copra have been procured at MSP value of Rs 1,07,433.73 crore benefitting 99,30,576 farmers confirm-ing the positive impact of the scheme on lives of farmers especially small and marginal farmers

Thereafter, if the State exhausts its limit of 25% of the State's production, the sanction for additional procurement under PSS would be given to the State/UT up to a maximum of 25% of the national production after necessary approvals. To achieve Atmanirbhar-ta in pulses,

the procurement ceiling has been lifted in respect of Tur, Urad and Masoor for the year 24-25. During the Rabi 2023-24 season, 6.41 LMT of pulses of Rs 4,820 crore of MSP value were procured from 2.75 lakh farmers which included procurement of 2.49

LMT of Masoor, 43,000 MT of Chana and 3.48 LMT of Moong at MSP to support the farmers. Similarly, 12.19 LMT of oilseeds worth Rs 6,900 crore of MSP value were procured from 3.29 lakh farmers. During the start of ongoing Kharif season, market prices of Soyabean were ruling much below MSP prices leading to great hardship to farmers. With the intervention of GoI under PSS scheme (component of PM AASHA), the Govt. has procured (as on 11.02.2024), 5.62 LMT of Soyabean at MSP value of Rs 2,700 crore, benefitting 2,42,461 farm-ers which is the highest quantity of soyabean ever procured. This proves the unwavering commitment of the Govt. of India towards the welfare of farmers.

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scheme on lives of farmers especially small and marginal farmers.

Another important and game changing component of PM AASHA is Market Intervention Scheme (MIS) meant for perishable agriculture/horticulture commodities such as tomato, onion and potato etc. not covered under MSP. The scheme is implemented on the request of the State/UT government when there is a reduction of prices in the market by at least 10% over the rates of previous normal season in the States/UTs.

Under MIS, in place of physical procurement, states may have an option to make differential payment between Market Intervention price and selling price, subject to coverage of 25% of production of crops and maximum price difference up to 25% of MIP.

Further, in case of TOP crops, where there is a price difference between the production and consuming states, in the interest of the farmers, the operational costs incurred by Central Nodal agencies (CNAs) like NAFED and NCGF in storing and transporting crops from producing states to other consuming states will be reimbursed by the government.



FIRST COLUMN

THE POWER OF POSITIVITY

By embracing spiritual self-reflection and cultivating positivity, we can rise above turmoil



RAJYOGI BRAHIM KUMAR NIKUNJJI

Nowadays there seems to be a crisis, disappointment and conflict of duality at every step of life. How do we deal with this? How do we prevent the self from becoming pessimistic or disheartened? Today the great modern disease of human consciousness is all about looking outward to find means to derive happiness without examining the inner self, values, attitudes and motives; relying and depending more on the external signals and hoping for the best. However, in practicality, life cannot be created with such hopes, as there are no shortcuts to achieving happiness. In today's world, no individual and nothing can create a permanent state of wellbeing within us, as it is our prerogative and responsibility. The external factors can contribute, guide and inspire us but ultimately our life is what we make out of it.

True happiness or a lack of it does not come from external things but from what is inside oneself. For example, money is not the means to happiness nor is it the cause of one's unhappiness. In reality, it is our attitudes and values that determine the use or misuse of external instruments, whether that is money, a person, an event or an object. A life that has value and is worthy of living is only possible when there is a reflective examination through which there can be illuminating change. So, to reorientate our consciousness, we would require a consciousness based on self-knowledge i.e. the knowledge of the spiritual self which creates self-respect and positivity, enabling us to gain the right perspective on life which in turn would help us to deal with any kind of negativity in a balanced and less painful way. Accordingly, with positivity, we



experience inner strength to cope with external issues affecting the sense of balance in our lives. When we are more positive towards ourselves, obviously we express the same attitude towards others and in all situations. Inner strength also comes when we interact with others in such a way that love, peace and happiness are honestly expressed and experienced.

The pivotal point is "honesty" because there cannot be a sense of fulfilment through falsehood, imitation or duality expressed through attitude. Hence the need of the hour is to live a life based on "Eternal Spiritual Principles" that would allow us to keep a positive attitude towards the self and others, thereby making our life joyful rather than conflicting or a bundle of confusion. Spirituality is not a system or technique of worship or ritual, it is in essence, knowing how to lead a life and through this knowing there is happiness. A spiritual person has found that spark of eternal reference within, which gives him or her not only deep contentment but also a sense of purpose. The first prerequisite for spirituality is a life that functions appropriately and thinks and cares about one's self in the most decent way. Thinking and caring about one's self inappropriately creates too much dependence on others, too many needs, too many demands, too much possessiveness.

So the right way to proceed is to first examine oneself and then acknowledge the positive and the negative traits within us. By doing so, we get the courage to change whatever needs to be transformed without any kind of fear and, without pretence. The basis of successful change for betterment is to understand the attitudes, feelings and motives that drive us for the change by accepting the original positivity of the self, the immortality of the soul. It is this goodness of the self that forms the foundation of our dignity as human beings. The expression of this original goodness in our life is what is called 'divinity' which makes us truly human. So let us awaken the expression of the divine within us to live a fulfilling joyful life amidst all the chaos & crisis around.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist; views are personal)

Education: From Kothari Commission to NEP-2020



J.S. RAJPUT

The educators and policymakers are called upon to transcend ideological divides and lead India toward inclusive progress and innovation



The most comprehensive initiative in education in post-independence India was the report of the National Commission on Education, usually referred to as the Kothari Commission. It submitted its report entitled "Education for National Development" on June 29, 1968. The first two sentences say it all: "The destiny of India is now being shaped in its classrooms. This, we believe, is no rhetoric." It was this report that led to the first national education policy of 1968. For the first time, science and mathematics became compulsory for both boys and girls up to tenth standard!

Yes, it was generally believed that only boys could handle the tough subjects of science and mathematics, and girls could opt for lighter options of spinning weaving, home science, and the like! The compulsory study of science and math was resisted and opposed as being unjust and unfair to girls! This one change transformed the lives of millions of girls and has brought global accolades to the Indian advancements in the world of science, technology, ICT and space research. Policies once formulated and formalised deserve support in vigilant implementation, persistent monitoring, and scrutiny based on their relevance "in the great enterprise of national reconstruction". India today has great challenges ahead, both national as well as global.

It has the manpower and enough experience to confront these successfully. In the third decade of the 21st century, it's the quality of education and skill acquisition that would equip India shall remain its prime contributory tool against every challenge. The content and process of education shall have to specifically equip itself against nurtured negativity, increasing mutual distrust and ballooning bitterness in public life. Solutions shall certainly not emerge from those that thrive only on negativity and are ill-equipped to see light and positivity around them.



THE CONTENT AND PROCESS OF EDUCATION SHALL HAVE TO SPECIFICALLY EQUIP ITSELF AGAINST NURTURED NEGATIVITY, INCREASING MUTUAL DISTRUST, AND BALLOONING BITTERNESS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Who must come forward and accept responsibility to normalise such an unacceptable socio-cultural environment? Why not ask the Gandhi ji? Once, before independence, one Dr Mote posed a query to Mahatma Gandhi: what he thought was the greatest problem facing his country! The expected answer could have been, in those days, related to slavery, poverty, illiteracy, ill health, or in the social context.

While narrating it in his Gandhi Katha, Narayan Desai tells the audience: that the answer was the 'callousness of the intellectuals'. Narayan Desai goes ahead: "Give it a thought. If we stand by and watch the poor blaming their poverty on fate, Gandhi is relevant today. If we can see the callousness of the intellectuals, then Gandhi is relevant today. What are the problems according to intellectuals?"

'Why X or Y has become Vice-Chancellor and not me! They think only of this and are unaware of other social issues'. Their concerns for critical social, cultural, social cohesion and religious amity are minimal. One's obvious inference would be that solutions to major national concerns shall - and must - emerge from institutions and the educated and the learned responsible for attaining their stated objectives. It includes the dilapidated structures running Sarkari schools, much sought-after private schools, and the universities. It also includes the glittering campuses of national institutions that have brought international repute to our educational enterprise.

So, mainly it points out to teachers; from primary schools to

professors of the universities, and researchers working in institutions of science, technology, psychology, social sciences and every other area.

One wishes each one of them recalls the assessment of Gandhi shuns away the dreaded callousness and strives to create centres of dialogue and discussions on improving the life and living standards of our people, particularly the 'last man in the line' who was so dear to the Mahatma! At first glance, the existing climate makes such a transformation rather impossible!

Despite all the odds, sincere attempts must be launched to create institutional think tanks with open boundaries that provide for healthy academic, scholarly and intellectual deliberations, not constrained but individual ideological affiliations. For an academic, who shapes the lives of numerous individuals, it is the well-being of others that must precede his own!

And this is no rhetoric or a cliché in the Indian context and culture. For a broad-minded person, this becomes a must, an integral part of his thought and action and hence, an achievable premise.

This is the main task of every teacher preparation institution, from where it shall percolate to schools via teachers trained there, and then to the establishment and the society. After the education policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992, and a gap of around three decades, another policy formulation comes before the nation in the shape of the National Education Policy: NEP-2020. It has been under implementation for the last four years. Having

been associated with the implementation and also policy formulations, one could venture to infer that the NEP-2020 was prepared with unprecedented enthusiasm from teachers, scholars academics institutions, organisations and individuals.

As the process was long overdue and rightly very extensive, it inspired active participation from practically every section of society. Unfortunately, its implementation stands hampered in certain states on grounds that may not necessarily be academic.

India has a developed well-knit interactive system of the national and state-level bodies and institutions that have learnt over the years how to arrive at a national consensus in the sectors of education and teacher education. This institutional strength of consultation, collaboration and cohesion need not be diluted in cases where the union and state governments belong to different ideological affiliations.

Intellectuals in education and research must convincingly internalize that they are making the future of individuals and creating the future of India. No one else is destined and better placed than them to reconstruct India. The moment each one of them expands his horizons, thinks holistically, and takes a long-term view, the road ahead would emerge very clearly: how to proceed individually and also collectively to lead the intellectual callousness and lead the nation on the right path.

(Professor Rajput works in education, social cohesion and religious amity. He is Atal fellow with the PMML, New Delhi; views expressed are personal)

Guarding digital India: The urgent need for cybersecurity in a rapidly evolving digital space

India has the potential to lead the world in cybersecurity innovation, but achieving this requires more than technological solutions

In the fast-evolving digital landscape of India, a silent battle is being fought—not with traditional weapons but through malicious code, complex algorithms, and increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks. As the country embraces its "Digital India" initiative, the rise of cyber threats demands immediate attention. Protecting the digital future requires strong cybersecurity frameworks, skilled professionals, and widespread public awareness. The call for "Digital Guards" or "Cyber Warriors" has never been more urgent.

The scale of the digital threat is staggering. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) recorded 53,117 security incidents in 2017. By October



VINAY PATHAK

2023, this number soared to an alarming 1.32 million—a twentyfold increase that exposes critical national vulnerabilities. Globally, the situation is no less concerning. Operations like INTERPOL and AFRIPOL's 2024 Operation Serengeti, which arrested over 1,000 cybercriminals across 19 African nations, underscore the scale of the problem. These operations identified over 35,000 victims and uncovered

financial losses nearing \$193 million, demonstrating the global reach and devastating impact of cybercrime. Phishing remains a primary weapon for cybercriminals, accounting for 22 per cent of all incidents. These attacks manipulate victims into revealing sensitive information or downloading malicious software. Credential theft, responsible for 16 per cent of incidents, further exposes individuals and organisations to system breaches, financial fraud, and corporate espionage. Emerging threats like mobile app malware are amplifying risks. For instance, 15 SpyLoan malware apps on Google Play, downloaded over 8 million times, went beyond data theft to harass and extort victims, underscoring cybercriminals'

growing ingenuity. The economic toll of these attacks is devastating. About 65 per cent of Indian enterprises have been forced to pay ransoms to recover critical data, with average demands reaching \$4.8 million. Recovery costs add another \$1.35 million per incident, straining even large corporations. Smaller businesses, lacking resources for robust cybersecurity measures, are particularly vulnerable. This systemic vulnerability has been termed the "cybersecurity poverty line", where approximately 60 per cent of Indian companies lack the infrastructure and expertise to defend themselves against cyber threats. High-traffic online shopping periods, such as Black Friday and Cyber Monday, are prime



targets for cybercriminals. During these events, fraudsters employ phishing scams, fake e-commerce websites, and malware to exploit consumers and businesses alike. Recent high-profile incidents highlight these vulnerabilities. In November 2024, a ransomware attack on Blue Yonder disrupted Starbucks' operations, forcing a return to manual processes. Similarly, McLeod Russell's system com-

promise sent shockwaves through the corporate sector, emphasising the interconnectedness of digital systems and the widespread disruptions that a single attack can cause. India's cybersecurity preparedness is worryingly insufficient. Only 4 per cent of Indian enterprises have robust infrastructure capable of withstanding advanced attacks. This shortfall is a national security concern, as cyberattacks transcend corporate interests, threatening essential services and critical infrastructure. Initiatives like the Cyber Challenge 2024, a joint effort by the Delhi Police and CyberPeace Foundation, offer hope. This programme engages developers, engineers, and cybersecurity experts to

craft innovative solutions using cutting-edge technologies such as AI, blockchain, and quantum computing. Collaboration with institutions like DRDO, MeitY, and the National Forensic Science University underscores the comprehensive approach needed to address these challenges. Experts emphasise that cybersecurity must move beyond being an IT department's responsibility to become a core component of every organisation's strategy. This shift involves continuous employee training, regular security audits, investments in advanced technologies, and fostering a culture of vigilance. Drawing inspiration from global models like the European Union's GDPR, India could implement strin-

gent cybersecurity standards, offering subsidies for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to invest in security measures and penalising negligence in cyber protection. As digital transformation accelerates across sectors such as finance, healthcare, education, and government services, robust cybersecurity is no longer optional—it is a fundamental necessity. The path forward demands a collaborative effort. Government agencies, private enterprises, educational institutions, and cybersecurity professionals must unite to build a resilient digital ecosystem.

(The writer is Assistant Professor Indian Institute of Information Technology sonapat Haryana; views are personal)

"Why every home must get a newspaper"

SRINIVAS MADHAV

Print journalism is in a state of crisis. The circulation of newspapers in India seems to have stagnated in relation to population growth, meaning the proportion of people reading printed news has dropped. More readers are turning to free online news sources and circulation growth is failing to keep up with demographic expansion.

Given India's vast population - nearly ten times that of Japan - it is concerning that India has only as many newspapers with over a million in circulation as Japan. If this decline in print journalism is not addressed, it could as well pose a serious threat to the fundamental values of our democracy. The potential consequences of this decline are too grave to ignore.

There is no such thing as free news, just as there is no such thing as a free lunch. Free online news is not truly free; it comes with hidden costs, such as algorithms - similar to those on social media - that prioritize sensationalist stories, fuelling misinformation and polarization.

"Brain rot", named Oxford Word of the Year 2024, is defined as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging." The usage of the word saw an increase of 230 per cent in its frequency from 2023 to 2024.

Oxford University Press's announcement of the Word of the Year sparked debate about the potential negative impact of excessive online content consumption on mental health, particularly in children and young people.

According to Newport Institute in the US, one brain rot behavior is doomscrolling, involving long peri-

ods of searching for negative and distressing news online; and consequences include difficulty organizing information, solving problems, making decisions, and recalling information. The Institute advises, "Don't succumb to sensationalistic and negative news. Diversify your media sources so you maintain a more balanced world perspective."

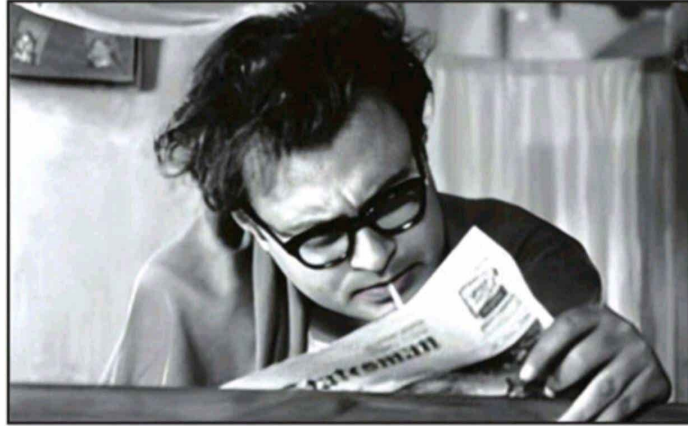
Unlike online outlets focused on short, click-driven pieces, print newspapers offer curated in-depth coverage of current events. The details that could be captured by such reporting are things the small articles or social media posts dominating the digital landscape will never be able to capture. Printed newspapers have kept high editorial standards and leave a permanent record that is also transparent.

Digital tools, by contrast, can be edited, removed or simply lost. In an era where fake news spreads rapidly on social media, print newspapers remain a trusted source of verified information.

Japan's strong newspaper circulation demonstrates the enduring value of print media. Leading dailies like Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun sell millions of daily copies.

This cultural preference for physical newspapers is reflected in the popularity of newspaper clubs, found in schools, universities and community centres. By discussing and analyzing news stories, members of these clubs develop deep appreciation for journalism and learn to be active, responsible citizens, which is crucial for a healthy democracy.

Commonly, online news platforms use algorithms that only feed the users news they are already interested in, reducing exposure to a broader range of information. This trend undermines the financial viability of traditional media while promoting a media landscape dominated by clickbait reporting.



Ironically, when print newspapers disappear, the future of online news is also at stake. The sustainability of digital journalism depends on the investigative and qualitative reporting that traditional print media does. Without print outlets holding power to account and investing in journalism, the quality of online news could significantly decline, littered with sensationalism and disinformation.

Australia has recognized this challenge and taken bold initiatives to protect journalism. In 2021, Australia introduced the Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021 - a world-first legislation aimed at helping to sustain public interest journalism. The law requires tech giants like Google and Facebook to pay news organizations

for sharing their content. Australia's success motivated other nations: Canada and Indonesia are planning similar codes.

During his National Press Day address, Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting Ashwini Vaishnaw remarked that traditional content must be fairly compensated to preserve its value. India should follow Australia's example by ensuring tech platforms pay for news content while media houses promote affordable digital subscriptions to compete with free aggregators. The government and media need to act together.

We must recognize the value of paying for credible news, particularly by subscribing to print newspapers. Purchasing a newspaper supports quality journalism and ensures that high standards of reporting continue.

A national campaign should be launched to encourage every household in India to subscribe to at least one print newspaper. Campaigns could include media literacy programmes highlighting the risks of free online news and the importance of investing in credible sources.

Increased circulation boosts advertising revenue, providing newspapers with resources to fund high-quality journalism. Participating in democracy is not just about casting a vote—it is about staying informed and supporting credible journalism.

It is time for a campaign encouraging every home in India to subscribe to a print newspaper, as the future of our democracy depends on it.

(The writer is a transparency and equality advocate and an author. The opinions are personal)

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE most serious aspect of the decision to defer the evacuation of Cologne is that what Germany accepts as, a bitter blow Paris rejects as. The only satisfaction is that the decision of the Ambassadors' Conference was unanimous. The Belgian, French, British, Italian and Japanese Governments were in accord, though their finding does not take the matter much further. The evacuation is postponed because the Allied Commission of Control will not have reported by January 10, and because there are signs that the final report will be unfavourable to Germany. The Paris paper L' Eclair has published what it alleges to be the text of a report dated April 24 of General Nollet, formerly President of the Commission, in which Germany is accused of violating the Treaty of Versailles in many respects, by way of preparing for another war. This publication has apparently come as a blow to the French Government, which has prosecuted the editor, describing his act as espionage. It is not surprising that feeling in Cologne is bitter, and that England is once more accused of trucking to the French desire to perpetuate the system of sanctions.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GOVERNMENT REPORTS

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."

SIR,—It is a matter of great regret that the "Montfort" Report and the Aicworth Committee Report are out of print. The reports published by the Government of India are in constant demand. Apart from a general demand on the part of the public there is a special demand for them on the part of students of Indian Economics. The report of the Indian Industrial Commission and the report of the Indian Fiscal Commission—to name a few of a valuable series—contain useful information as regards Indian industries and agriculture tariffs and railways. To students of Indian economics they are as indispensable as text books. In fact, they are part and parcel of Indian economic literature. It is highly desirable, therefore, that Government should always keep a ready supply of them. High cost of printing of course presents a difficulty; but that is no reason why these useful books should not be available, especially to the students who need them most. What harm is there in raising the price, if it be at all necessary? In the case of the Tariff Board Report 4 annas has actually been added to the usual price of one rupee. Let us hope the Government will reprint the reports in question at their earliest convenience.

—Yours, etc.

NIRMAL KANTI MAJUMDAR,
North Chakrabare Road

COAL INDUSTRY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."

SIR,—It is reported that the order for the current year's requirements of coal on the Sukkur Barrage has been placed in South Africa.

The Indian coal industry is one of the chief if not the chief industrial enterprise of the country and is suffering at present from acute depression due to loss of markets which have in many instances been captured by the South African coalfields.

Tat's steel works and the allied concerns at Jamshedpur represent a nascent industry. This, being bolstered up by Government in the face of economic facts at the expense of every user of steel and every tax-payer in India, which is practically synonymous with every inhabitant of India. Yet the coal industry is being further handicapped by placing orders for the Sukkur Barrage coal in South Africa. Where is the consistency between these two policies?

E. A. J.
Dibrugarh,

A COISSIPORE-CHITPORE COMPLAINT

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."

SIR,—The newly-made Ward No. XXXII of the Calcutta Corporation (the old Coissipore on its Municipal area) is in a very bad way indeed for want of road-watering, and the ratepayers do not know where to turn for relief. The first breath of "Swaraj" they have begun to inhale in mixed up here with such a thick cloud of dust that their lives have become unbearable to them, at least to those who happen to live by the roadsides. It is now some time since the jute season commenced, and long strings of jute-laden carts, not to speak of motorcars or lorries and, last though not least, the herds of homeward-bound cattle wending their way through the gloaming and through three inches of fine dust on the centre of the roads, and six inches on the road-sides (be the same a little more or less) have made life so very not living not only for the venturesome wayfarer and the joy-riding but for the timid householder as well, who fails to muster courage to count suffocation on his dusty highway.

In previous years the road-watering used to commence shortly after the rains, and generally from the beginning of October. But this year the old arrangements have been completely wiped out, with nothing to replace them save and except the watering motor-car of the old municipality—which, again, was laid up for some months in the Corporation motor hospital, and was only very recently cured and discharged, in order to water, ineffectually, only the Barackpore Trunk Road

Will Xi play ball with Trump on Ukraine?

STEFAN WOLFF and TETIANA MALYARENKO

US president-elect Donald Trump has invited China's president Xi Jinping to his inauguration on January 20 in a surprise move which appears to be part of a plan to involve Beijing in ceasefire negotiations in Ukraine.

Just after his recent meeting with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Paris, Trump posted, "There should be an immediate ceasefire and negotiations should begin," and "China can help." That latter remark has suddenly gained more significance after Trump extended the unusual invitation for the foreign leader to attend the January 20 ceremony.

Leaving aside whether Xi will accept Trump's invitation to Washington DC (he probably won't), the more important question is whether he would indeed help Trump end the Russian war against Ukraine.

China has had a strong economic and trading relationship with Russia throughout the war, and has refrained from criticising Putin. While it has denied providing Moscow with military assistance, reports suggest that China has allowed some goods that have been battlefield used to be sent to Russia.

On the surface, Trump's initiative and what China has most recently put on the table with Beijing look like two reasonably well-aligned peace proposals.

Both call for a ceasefire along the current frontlines, followed by negotiations on a permanent settlement. Both seem to accept Russia's demand to freeze the territorial status quo, which would mean Ukraine would lose the near-20 per cent of its territory that Moscow's forces have illegally occupied since 2014.

Ukraine and most of its western partners continue to reject this as unacceptable. Before Trump's election victory, this was a sustainable position because the West was able to prevent Ukraine from being militarily defeated on the battlefield.

This position may be slowly changing, but it is not clear that it would suddenly make China a welcome partner for the West in any peace negotiations - least of all for Ukraine.

Kyiv has always been wary of China and its international policies, from the economic and trade Belt and Road Initiative to the recent peace proposal. Zelenskyy called the China-Brazil peace initiative "destructive". He also accused China and Brazil of being "pro-Russian".

Zelenskyy is personally deeply invested in his own peace plan, particularly as Ukrainians have made enormous sacrifices in the war so far. This does not rule out compromises, but it makes concessions to China, widely seen by Ukrainians as one of Russia's main supporters in the war, very unlikely.

Even if there was a sudden change of heart in Kyiv, it is highly doubtful that a Trump-brokered deal would serve Beijing's interests. For Xi it is always about strengthening China's role and influence as a global power. China will be concerned if the war is over, the US may become even more focused on its trade war with Beijing.

So far, the war in Ukraine has allowed China to benefit from the strain that it has put on the West.

US suggestions that it will pull back on its alliance commitments in Europe have raised doubts over the dependability of the US as an ally for Ukraine. This is becoming more acute



as Trump prepares to move into the White House.

The longer the war in Ukraine continues in this way, the longer China will reap the benefits from the reduction of the relative weight of the United States as its main geopolitical and geo-economic rival.

A carefully managed continuation of the war against Ukraine, by contrast, benefits China in asserting its global leadership. China's approach to managing the "Ukraine crisis" was reiterated by Xi at the recent Brics summit in Kazan, Russia, and in a meeting with former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev in Beijing on 12 December. It is focused on upholding "three key principles: no expansion of the battlefields, no escalation of hostilities, and no fanning flames, and (striving) for swift deescalation of the situation".

This is a far cry from an end to

the war as envisaged by Trump. A Trump-brokered deal would likely lift sanctions and provide a possibility of renewed, more cooperative relations between the west and Russia.

It would significantly strengthen Putin's position, contribute to Russia's international rehabilitation, reduce his country's dependence on China, and potentially rekindle historical Russia-China rivalries.

From a Chinese perspective, helping Trump to broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine offers few incentives, except potentially ton-

ing down the US trade and tariffs war against it. Draining the West's resources in defending Ukraine keeps it away from the Indo-Pacific region in which most of the competition between China and the US will play out.

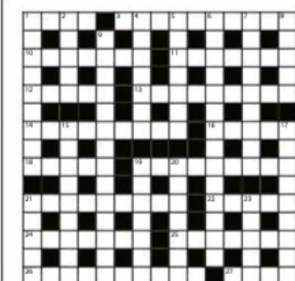
Xi has no interest in seeing Putin being strategically defeated in Ukraine, but keeping Russia bogged down in its war against Ukraine will ensure that the partnership between Beijing and Moscow will stay on current terms with the balance of power tilted towards China.

Keeping the war in Ukraine going, rather than helping Trump to end it, therefore is the most likely choice that Beijing will make.

The writers are, respectively, Professor of International Security, University of Birmingham, and Professor of International Relations, Jean Monnet Professor of European Security, National University Odesa Law Academy. This article was published on www.theconversation.com

CROSSWORD

NO-292994



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

COMPUTERS DIFFUSION
TINNERSHIP RATION
NORSEMANSHIP
BENEFIT
RUSSELL
SPRING
JIMMIE
LUNATIC
EMOTIONAL
INSTANT MATING

ACROSS

- Satanists leader breaks mirror in church recess (4)
- Challenging type seen in different locations around clubs (10)
- Storm to trouble British sailors being sucked in (7)
- Search vigorously given time to find (9)
- Tree-dweller in shade endlessly (5)
- in still need the whole bar (9)
- Waxy substance, resin, alongside rigs at sea (9)
- Hotel in pleasant position (5)
- Saw things in Societe Ethnologique? (5)
- Ill-fated soldier with youngster returning is embraced (8)
- Inexperienced fellow mentioned stock market activity (9)
- Joke about uniform left in labour camp (9)
- Scandinavian woman last in queue stretching across (7)

DOWN

- One to depart this world like man strapped in tight? (9)
- Country square's first visionary sent heavenward (5)
- Serpent possibly existing now (7)
- Rowers hope to develop measure of strength (10)
- Something wrong swallowing hot piece of beef (4)
- Involved a mystery whose point is concealed? (5-4)
- Associations formed with canine shaky at first (8)
- Complete wreck (5)
- Very colourful - like actors on the cinema screen? (6-4-4)

- Mob down by 500 attending pub one used to open (7)
- Invaders succeeded with right to enter Donne's island? (9)
- Drug substitute in location - Illinois's outskirts (7)
- Sink back - water at last to slip away (7)
- Result produced by pests? (5)
- Cold fish served up with hot worm (5)

Style and substance

Specialised funds will increase choices

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has notified the so-called "specialised investment funds", or SIF, and clarified the rules and regulations of this new asset class, which it conceptualised a few months ago. The SIF has been designed to offer an investment option midways between a portfolio management scheme (PMS) and "vanilla" mutual funds (MFs). Asset-management companies (AMCs) can use these instruments to offer high-risk, high-return trading strategies to sophisticated investors who possess the requisite risk appetite and financial capacity. The minimum investment value is ₹10 lakh, which is less than the minimum ₹50 lakh threshold for the PMS, though accredited investors can invest less. AMCs launching these schemes would have to appoint chief investment officers with at least 10 years' experience in managing assets worth at least ₹5,000 crore, and additional fund managers with at least seven years' experience handling at least ₹3,000 crore. The AMC itself must have been in operation for at least three years, with assets of at least ₹10,000 crore.

The regulator has laid down a few investing rules and regulations for this strategy. The new product line may have offers across open-ended, close-ended, and interval investment strategies. The list of permissible strategies will likely be announced by Sebi later. A few limits have been set out by the notification. No SIF can allocate more than 20 per cent of its net asset value (NAV) to debt instruments issued by a single issuer. However, the 20 per cent rule would be waived if the SIF invests in government securities. This limit can be extended to 25 per cent with approval from the board of trustees and the AMC's board of directors. Further, SIFs can't invest more than 15 per cent of the company's paid-up capital with voting rights. And neither can they put in more than 10 per cent of their NAV in equity shares of any company. When it comes to real estate investment trusts (REITs) and infrastructure investment trusts (InvITs), SIFs can invest up to 20 per cent of their assets in these instruments but no more than 10 per cent in any single REIT or InvIT.

Sebi has further directed AMCs to clearly distinguish SIFs from MFs through branding, advertising, disclaimer guidelines, and maintaining separate websites for the new asset class. The expense structure is roughly equivalent to that permitted for MFs. The maximum fee that can be charged by MFs is determined by the size of the fund. For equity schemes up to ₹500 crore, the maximum chargeable expense has been capped at 2.25 per cent of the assets under management (AUM). The cap reduces as AUM increases. SIFs will allow AMCs to tap wealthy individuals and families with comparatively high surplus funds to invest and willingness to bear the extra risks. This class of investor is generally targeted by PMS. SIFs have a degree of flexibility that enables AMCs to compete with PMS but the houses would have to work out features that make SIFs more attractive than PMS. They would also have to do their internal assessments and work out what sort of schemes would be financially lucrative enough to make it worthwhile to enter this space. Sebi has done well to frame the SIF, which will fill a gap for relatively wealthy investors. MFs have played an important role in building the equity culture in India and channelling savings into productive investments. For SIFs, a lot will depend on performance in the initial few years.

The spirit of governance

Directors must exercise fiduciary duties

India Inc appears to be steadily improving its compliance with statutory governance standards. The fifth edition of the Excellence Enablers Survey (EES) on Corporate Governance in Nifty 100 companies shows on various parameters companies have steadily aligned with standards stipulated by the Companies Act and the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). Board sizes are one index. Given that listed companies need to have five mandatory committees — on remuneration, audit, human resources and so on — companies need to ensure that there are sufficient board members so that the same member does not serve on multiple committees. The EES study shows that the average board size has expanded — from 9.86 in FY21 to 10.52 in FY24 — and 61 per cent of the companies had between nine and 13 directors. Then again, according to Sebi regulations, non-executive directors (NEDs), including independent directors (IDs), should comprise 50 per cent of the board. Compliance here has improved significantly.

The survey showed 44 per cent of the Nifty 100 companies had between 50 and 74 per cent of NEDs, up from 35 per cent in FY21. For 55 per cent of the 44 per cent, NEDs accounted for 75 per cent or more of the board. As far as IDs are concerned, 96 per cent of the companies either met or exceeded statutory requirements that such directors comprise one-third of the board. No less encouraging is the fact that the Nifty 100 companies reported 200 women directors in FY24, up from 158 in FY23. Almost 74 per cent of them are IDs, meaning they are unlikely to be taken appointments of promoter families, which had been the popular practice earlier.

It is interesting, however, that while companies have complied with or exceeded statutory requirements, they appear to have fallen short on some best practices that are non-mandatory. For instance, just 61 per cent of the companies have separated the post of chairman and managing director as prescribed by the Uday Kotak Committee. In 2022, Sebi had made this requirement voluntary. On women directors, too, although almost all companies meet the minimum legal compliance, genuine gender diversity is still an elusive goal; women account for just 20 per cent of all board directors and 27 per cent of independent directors.

This trend suggests that for compliance to translate into a meaningful improvement in corporate governance, companies need to make the transition from conforming to the letter of the regulations to complying with the spirit as well. Key to this transition is enabling IDs to act with genuine freedom rather than function as ornaments and supporters of the management. This is a particular weakness in proprietary and family-managed companies with powerful promoters and founders. Boards comprising stalwarts from industry, banking, and academia have proved notably ineffective in preventing crises such as those in Satyam, IL&FS, ICICI Bank, Yes Bank, and Byju's, to name a few. Exercising this fiduciary duty is as much a responsibility of the director as the management. The fact that IDs also held functional committees underlines the reasons for not evading their responsibilities. As the study shows, sitting fees for directors are more than generous, which demands that IDs leverage the expertise for which they have been chosen and speak truth to power when necessary. India Inc can only be a net gainer from such managerial reform.

The Great Capitulation

With tech CEOs and other elites bowing to Mr Trump, the air is going out of the old liberal order



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

At a press conference at Mar-a-Lago on Monday, Donald Trump described recent visits from Tim Cook, chief executive officer of Apple, Sergey Brin, a co-founder of Google, and other tech barons. "In the first term everyone was fighting me," he said. "In this term, everyone wants to be my friend." For once, he wasn't exaggerating.

Since Mr Trump won re-election — this time with the popular vote — many of the most influential people in America seem to have lost any will to stand up to him as he goes about transforming America into the sort of authoritarian oligarchy he admires. Call it the Great Capitulation.

Following January 6, Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook co-founder, suspended Mr Trump's account. But last month at Mar-a-Lago, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, Mr Zuckerberg stood, hand on heart, as "the club played a rendition of the national anthem sung by imprisoned" January 6 defendants. (It's not clear if Mr Zuckerberg knew what he was listening to.) He's pledged a million-dollar donation to Mr Trump's inauguration, as did the OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Jeff Bezos's company Amazon, which will also stream the inauguration on its video platform.

After *Time* magazine declared Mr Trump "Person of the Year," the publication's owner, the Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, wrote on X, "This marks a time of great promise for our nation." The owner of *The Los Angeles Times*, the billionaire pharmaceutical and biomedical entrepreneur Patrick Soon-Shiong, killed an editorial criticising Mr Trump's cabinet picks and urging the Senate not to allow recess appointments.

Most shocking of all, last week ABC News, which

is owned by the Walt Disney Company, made the craven decision to settle a flimsy defamation case brought by Mr Trump.

As you may remember, a jury last year found Mr Trump civilly liable for sexually abusing the writer E. Jean Carroll. In a memorandum, the judge in the case explained that while a jury didn't find that Mr Trump had raped Ms Carroll, it was operating under New York criminal law, which defines rape solely as "vaginal penetration by a penis." It did find that he'd forcibly penetrated her with his fingers.

"The finding that Ms Carroll failed to prove that she was 'raped' within the meaning of the New York Penal Law does not mean that she failed to prove that Mr Trump 'raped' her as many people commonly understand the word 'rape,'" wrote the judge. "Indeed, as the evidence at trial recounted below makes clear, the jury found that Mr Trump in fact did exactly that."

The ABC News anchor George Stephanopoulos appeared to be using this broader definition when, in March, he said on-air that a jury had found Mr Trump "liable for rape." Mr Trump, who regularly threatens, and sometimes files, defamation cases against his perceived enemies in the press, sued. And though his case seemed absurdly weak, ABC News decided to settle in exchange for a \$15 million donation to Mr Trump's future presidential library or museum, \$1 million in legal fees and a public statement of regret from Mr Stephanopoulos and the network.

Displays of submission aren't limited to tech and media. Christopher Wray, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, agreed to step aside before



MICHELLE GOLDBERG

Moving beyond dependence

Over 50 per cent of municipal corporations generate less than half their revenue independently, while government transfers rose by over 20 per cent in 2022-23, according to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) recent report on municipal finances.

Decentralising local governance is crucial to empowering municipal bodies with greater administrative autonomy and financial independence. Strengthening municipal revenue streams is not merely a financial necessity but a fundamental requirement for effective urban governance. Municipalities can develop more responsive and sustainable urban management strategies by diversifying income sources and enhancing fiscal capabilities.

Effective municipal finance management involves a dual approach that necessitates financial transfers from higher levels of government and the proficient generation, use, and allocation of local revenue streams. In India, urban local bodies (ULBs) face significant challenges in achieving financial autonomy, primarily due to the limited devolution of authority and resources.

Financial transfers to municipal governments account for only 0.45 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP), a stark contrast to countries like Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Mexico, where the figures range from 1.6 per cent to 5.4 per cent. In European nations, such transfers can even reach 6 per cent to 10 per cent of GDP, exemplifying the critical role of robust inter-governmental fiscal transfers in supporting local governance. These international benchmarks highlight the pressing need to enhance financial transfers to Indian municipalities. Equally important is the ability of municipal bodies to generate their own revenue, an area where they lag significantly.

In this second aspect, municipal finance in India faces a triad of challenges, including low revenue collection, heavy reliance on transfers from the state and the Centre, and an increase in municipal borrowings. The 2024 RBI report titled "Own Sources of Revenue Generation in Municipal Corporations: Opportunities and Challenges" sheds light on these challenges.

Municipal corporations generated only 0.6 per cent of GDP in revenue, compared to 14.6 per cent by

state governments and 9.2 per cent by the central government. This has resulted in a heavy reliance on transfers, which increased by 24.9 per cent and 20.4 per cent from the Centre and state governments, respectively, in 2022-23. Municipal borrowings have surged by a staggering 363.06 per cent, rising from ₹2,886 crore in 2019-20 to ₹13,364 crore in 2023-24.

To meet the growing demand for high-quality public services in urban areas, the report recommends adopting geographic information system (GIS) mapping, a digital payment system, and improved property tax mechanisms that better reflect appreciating property valuations, as property tax remains the most significant source of tax revenue.

For improving non-tax revenue, which is all the more critical considering the restriction on earning tax revenue, the report cites the examples of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Tripura to make a case for introducing "user charges" for essential services such as water supply, sanitation, and waste management.

A recent study titled "Municipal Performance of Indian Cities: An Evaluation Based on LOF Data" highlights the pressing challenges faced by ULBs in India. Using data collected by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs through the Urban Outcome Framework on the AMPLI-FI platform, the study evaluates the performance of 134 municipalities.

It examines five critical verticals — governance, services, technology, planning, and finance — across 20 sectors and 100 indicators, offering a granular view of urban municipal performance.

The finance pillar, a cornerstone of this evaluation, provides particularly valuable insights. It assesses municipalities across four crucial areas: Revenue management, expenditure management, fiscal responsibility, and fiscal decentralisation. In the revenue management sector, approximately 50 per cent of municipalities generate less than 25 per cent of their total revenue independently, relying heavily on tax revenue.

Along with this, 22 municipalities derive 80 per cent of their total revenue from taxes alone. Perhaps most concerning is that nearly half the municipalities struggle to develop alternative financing sources,



CONURBATION

AMIT KAPOOR

the end of his 10-year term rather than make Mr Trump fire him. Several Democrats have signalled their willingness to work with Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, whose so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, seems poised to hack away at our already threadbare safety net.

In *The New Yorker*, Jonathan Blitzer wrote of the current administration's refusal, at least so far, to renew the humanitarian parole of immigrants from countries such as Venezuela and Haiti to possibly shield them from deportation under Mr Trump. "For a president who considers Mr Trump a fascist and has warned about the horrors of mass deportation, the atmosphere of Biden's White House has been remarkably safe. I spoke with as curiously sedate," Mr Blitzer wrote.

Different people have different reasons for falling in line. Some may simply lack the stomach for a fight or feel, not unreasonably, that it's futile. Our tech overlords, however liberal they once appeared, seem to welcome the new order. Many hated weakness, resented the demands of newly uppity employees and chafed at attempts by Joe Biden's administration to regulate crypto and artificial intelligence, two industries with the potential to cause deep and lasting social harm. There are CEOs who got where they are by riding the zeitgeist; they can pivot easily from mouthing platitudes about racial equity to slapping on a red MAGA hat.

Some Democrats appear to think that they might score DOGE in a productive direction and that, regardless, they'll get credit for bipartisanship. The electorate, after all, has rendered its verdict on #Resistance.

One of Kamala Harris's pollsters, *Politico* reported, recently warned the Democratic National Committee leadership against pearl-clutching over Mr Trump's transgressions, including the wildly unfit characters he's announced for his administration. The voters, she said, "don't care about who's putting in cabinet positions."

Collectively, all these elite decisions to bow to Mr Trump make it feel like the air is going out of the old liberal order. In its place will be something more ruthless and Nietzschean.

"The individual has the intrinsic moral right to live his life in a special and fulfilling way without subordinating to the universal collective," Marc Andreessen, the software engineer and venture capitalist at the forefront of Silicon Valley's rightward lurch, wrote on X last week. "Purveyors of abstract glib must not steal that from you." Even powerful people who didn't vote in favour of this harsh new world can find their consolations in it.

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Thinking small to make it big



BOOK REVIEW

AMMI PARAMESWARAN

In the award-winning TV series *Mad Men*, there is a scene in which the creative director of the ad agency Sterling Cooper, Don Draper, points to a page of *The New York Times*. The page contains a full-page ad for the car brand Volkswagen. "Guys, this is the future of advertising," Draper says. The ad to which he was referring had the pithy headline "Think Small." The car is shown in a tiny size in the corner of the ad. A large part of the ad is blank space. The ad contains a few lines of copy that explain the logic behind "Think Small". Advertising in the late 1950s and 1960s was full of big visuals and a lot of

copy. Car ads were packed with claims extolling their great looks, excellence, turbo-drive and so on. And then comes an ad for Volkswagen that doesn't shout, it whispers. Don Draper was impressed at the bold stance taken by the ad agency Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) and the client Volkswagen.

In fact, there are some funny stories about what a typical brand team could have done with that ad: Make the car as big as a ladder; add adjectives such as "smart," "efficient," "great looks" to the headline; add a woman and a man... and you have a run-of-the-mill ad.

Instead of falling for the established tropes, the agency decided to do something different. The Volkswagen ad and the other campaigns that DDB churned out during its glory days unleashed a new term in advertising: Subtle persuasion. To sell, you don't need to shout. Howard Gossage, a legendary copywriter, said, "Nobody reads. People read what interests them. Sometimes it is an ad." DDB's advertising brought the reader into the body copy by

its magical combination of art and copy. In fact, DDB was the first agency to make art directors and copywriters sit together and work together on campaigns.

What makes for persuasion? I remember discussing this with a creative director who was helping our agency improve its creative oomph. I remember him saying, "We should remove every extraneous element from the ad. Keep removing stuff until you hit a limit that you can't remove anymore. If the ad still works, go ahead. You don't have to stuff every ad with a great amount of copy and visuals."

I was reminded of the "Think Small" ad and the discussion with the creative director as I finished reading *Think Like The Minimalist: Master the Art and Science of Crafting Thought Provoking Design* by Chirag Gander and Sahil Vaidya. Both authors are Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay (IITB) graduates. They started dabbling in design as students and jumped into it full time after they graduated (they still wonder how they managed to

graduate). Their agency, The Minimalist, is ten years old and has an enviable roster of clients spanning the globe. They have helped numerous startup founders navigate the marketing-communication (mar-comm) ecosystem. At one time, it was the go-to agency for all the IITB startup founders.

Messrs Gander and Vaidya's philosophy is built on the Art of Minimalism. They want to help India become a pioneering powerhouse in the world of creativity, design and marketing. What was or is their secret sauce? They explain their formula in this handy little book. It is a simple four-step process. The first step is, no surprises here, The Brief. The brief has to be clear and said differently; the same brief can produce very different results. The second step is building a Mind Map. Here you start putting all kinds of words that come to

mind when you look at the brief and the issue at hand. You may want to go from first order association to second order and so forth. The third step is creating a visual representation of the mind map. Put down a visual for each of the words that occupied the mind map. Then comes the final fourth step. Applying the tools of minimalism. Examine the

similarities among the visuals. Look at the differences. The tools of minimalism are explained in 12 chapters with many vivid examples. Perception shift is simply a method of representation that creates multiple perceptions from the same object. Combining various elements, you can arrive at the Eureka moment. Another tool to look at the negative space. The object is the positive space; all around it is the negative space. Can something be done with the negative space? The famous "Think Small" ad used negative space to draw attention to the small car.

Can that space be used to hide or show something different? Then comes the technique of using typography; which typeface to use, what can be changed, what can be added/deleted. The next step is the use of humour, wordplay, double meanings, sarcasm, exaggeration, or pop culture references can all tickle the funny bone.

The book contains numerous practical exercises for the reader to apply minimalist thinking. For those who want to know whether these theories have any use in commercial organisations and brands, the last chapter contains several short case studies. I wish they had presented more of these to bring alive the application of their minimalist formula.

That said, I am happy the founders of a young ad-design agency have taken the time out to share their design and advertising principles in such a practical manner. I do hope this encourages other folks in the design and mar-comm space to share their stories.

The reviewer is also an IIT graduate, a 40+ year brand/ad veteran and author of 11 books on brands, consumers and advertising

Why the making of Constitution matters today



ZOYA HASAN
PROFESSOR EMERITA, CENTRE
FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, JNU

THE deliberations in the two-day debate on 75 years of the Constitution in Parliament saw the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) highlighting their own commitment to the constitutional vision, but equally keen on pointing to lapses committed by the rival side.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi singled out the Congress for a no-holds-barred attack. He blamed the Nehru-Gandhi family for the subversion of the Constitution. He cited, for example, the Congress party's hand in suppressing the constitutional rights through the imposition of the Emergency and the role of Jawaharlal Nehru in the first amendment to the Constitution.

Rahul Gandhi framed his intervention in terms of a conflict between the competing ideologies of civic nationalism and Hindutva, distinguishing the upholders of the Constitution from the supporters of *Manuvratni* — a text whose tenets challenge the basic premises of India's

foundational doctrine.

The BJP relentlessly criticised the Congress as the principal offender when it comes to transgressions of the Constitution. However, the BJP overlooked that in some instances, it has transgressed the Congress in these transgressions.

The debate was noteworthy in another respect, with doubts being raised about the Congress' preeminent role in Constitution-making.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, while initiating the debate in the Lok Sabha, said attempts had been made to project the Constitution as a contribution of a particular party in the last few years.

"Today, I want to make it clear that our Constitution is not the gift of a single party."

It might be interesting to ask why this unhistorical reconstruction is being made. It's certainly not the 'gift of one party'. But, having been largely absent from the freedom struggle and the Constituent Assembly, we can, perhaps, sympathise with the impulse of the BJP to downsize the Congress' role and insert its own ideas in the proceedings from which it was basically absent.

But this is not just about downplaying the Congress' role in drafting the Constitution. It demonstrates more stark attempts to further mainstream the BJP's discursive and political agenda of rewriting the national script to reinterpret events in



UNHISTORICAL: The BJP has sought to downplay the Congress' role in drafting the Constitution, Reuters

consonance with the needs of contemporary Hindu nationalist politics. The BJP is unmistakably leveraging its power at the Centre for a calculated reconstruction of modern history.

There is no shortage of historical analyses of the origins of the Constitution and, yet, repeated attempts are being made to misrepresent and misinterpret its history.

One has to see the Constitution as the product of a collective deliberation that stretched over three years — more than 7,500 amendments were tabled and 2,500 moved and a document of almost 400 articles emerged, one of the longest of its kind.

Its drafters were chosen by indirect elections. But it was Indians who drafted it. No colonial theory and practice

was involved in shaping the Constitution. Our own versions of democracy, secularism and federalism driven by principles of equality, justice and fraternity underlined it.

This vision of a new India of 'equal citizens' was articulated in the Karachi Congress Resolution of 1931. It went on to become the core of the Congress campaign in the 1937 elections and later, formed the core of the Constitution.

Contrary to the Defence Minister's claim that the Congress was not the only party which drafted the Constitution, the fact is that the vast majority of the Constituent Assembly's members were elected on a Congress ticket, leading to charges that the Assembly was entirely dominated by the Congress. Granville Austin, in his monu-

mental study of *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, notes that the "Constituent Assembly was a one-party body in an essentially one-party country..."

Thanks to Mahatma Gandhi, BR Ambedkar was appointed Chairman of the Drafting Committee and he, undoubtedly, played an important role in drafting the Constitution.

But the Drafting Committee was not entirely a free agency. The draft of the Constitution was discussed as per the views and recommendations of various subject committees and the draft itself was discussed, amended and, ultimately, adopted by the larger Constituent Assembly.

This is a critical aspect to bear in mind, especially as in many of the debates, Ambedkar was not expressing his own opinions but "lawyering" on behalf of the draft amendments discussed in the subject committees. This explains his remark that he was a 'hack', as noted by Anand Teltumbde in his recently published biography, *Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography Of Dr Bhabhaheb Ambedkar*.

Nehru played the most significant role in the deliberations of the Constitution. The process of constitution-making began with the Aims and Objectives resolution moved by Nehru on December 13, 1946, which became the Preamble. The landmark Objectives Resolution defined India

as an independent sovereign republic in which all power would be 'derived from the people', guaranteeing to 'all the people of India justice, social, economic and political; equality of status, of opportunity, and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public morality.'

The objectives enshrined in the Preamble contain the Basic Structure doctrine, which has given our wonderful Constitution a certain permanence and stability. This owes mostly to the vision articulated in the Constituent Assembly debates, but this was in no way inevitable or preordained. Constitutionalism based on adult franchise and fundamental rights marked a sharp break with history, faith and identity, signposting instead a strong linkage between the anti-colonial mass nationalism and the equal rights personified in the Constitution. The decisive factor was the sheer sweep of the anti-caste social reform and anti-colonial mass movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

India's adoption of a Constitution enshrining political equality of all citizens was a major human and political achievement of the modern world. It, however, can no longer be taken for granted in the circumstances today when politics has created the sense of majorities based on permanent ascriptive identities.

The BJP is unmistakably leveraging its power at the Centre for a calculated reconstruction of modern history.

Buddha Nullah a toxic story of industrialisation



SURESH KUMAR
EX-CHIEF PRINCIPAL
SECRETARY, PUNJAB

BUDDHA NULLAH, once a pristine tributary of the Sutlej river, has endured a slow and painful decline for over 50 years. Flowing through Ludhiana, Punjab's industrial heartland, it is now an infamous toxic drain. It carries untreated industrial waste, urban sewage and agricultural runoff. The drain symbolises the environmental costs of industrialisation and urban expansion, coupled with human negligence.

Yet, despite the grim reality, a glimmer of hope persists. Restoration efforts, though challenging, offer the promise of renewal and resilience, provided they are supported by bureaucratic efficiency, political will and community participation.

In its prime, Buddha Nullah was a lifeline for the region. Its clear waters nourished aquatic ecosystems, supported agriculture and contributed to the livelihoods of local farmers and businesses. However, it began declining as Ludhiana saw rapid industrialisation. Factories prolifer-

ated along the waterway, discharging untreated effluents. Domestic sewage, agricultural runoff and unchecked growth of dairies along its banks compounded the pollution. The effluents overwhelmed the nullah's natural ability to purify itself. Over time, it could no longer support the communities that once thrived along its banks.

Buddha Nullah's deterioration to a toxic drain has impacted the quality of life of the locals. Children contend with harmful fumes, exacerbated respiratory issues. Adults face chronic illnesses like skin diseases and gastrointestinal disorders directly linked to the polluted water.

Fishing communities have abandoned their trade as aquatic life has vanished. The toxic water has not only deprived these communities of their livelihoods but also poses a broader public health crisis.

Statistics paint a troubling picture. The health authorities have reported that respiratory diseases are 40 per cent more prevalent in areas near the nullah as compared to the unaffected regions. A 2022 study by Punjab Agricultural University revealed alarmingly high levels of heavy metals like lead and chromium in the water, far exceeding the safe limits. These pollutants have seeped into the groundwater, further compromising public health.

The polluted waters also contaminate the Sutlej river and Harike reservoir downstream.



CESSPOOL: Buddha Nullah's future lies in the hands of the govt, industries and local communities. NLU PHOTO

Being the vital source of water for both Punjab and Rajasthan, the issue has strained interstate water relations.

Efforts to restore the nullah have been sporadic and riddled with challenges. Early attempts in the 1980s focused on awareness and monitoring industrial waste, but they lacked enforcement mechanisms. In the 1990s, industries were mandated to install effluent treatment plants (ETPs), but compliance was inconsistent, with many ETPs remaining dysfunctional. Bioremediation was also attempted, but success remained elusive.

Recent initiatives, such as the Buddha Nullah Regeneration Project and installation of sewage treatment plants (STPs) during 2018-2022, have been undermined by funding delays, poor enforcement and resistance to the removal of encroachments. The lack of

For restoring Buddha Nullah, strict regulations to enforce industrial compliance with environmental standards, robust monitoring of industrial discharge and heavy penalties for non-compliance are crucial.

coordination between government bodies and civil society organisations has further hindered progress, leaving the pollution and its impacts largely uncontained.

The judicial interventions sought by environmentalists have been limited to ad hoc measures for a persistent problem. Deeper thought and innovative solutions for a durable impact are needed.

Achieving meaningful progress requires a combination of policy reforms, technological innovation and active community engagement. The following strategies can help improve the situation.

Stricter regulations are essential to enforce industrial compliance with environmental standards. Robust monitoring of industrial discharge and heavy penalties for non-compliance are crucial. A dedicated task force should oversee the

implementation of these regulations, holding the polluting industries accountable.

Relocating the most harmful industries to designated zones, supported by incentives, could mitigate environmental risks. Such incentives should be comparable with those offered to the new industries and those which move to safer places may also be allowed to make commercial capital out of their present premises.

Comprehensive policy reforms must prioritise the tributary's health with clear goals and timelines while ensuring that livelihoods are protected.

Expanding and updating treatment infrastructure is critical. Increasing the number of STPs and common effluent treatment plants (CETPs) will reduce the influx of untreated waste into the nullah. Real-time monitoring can ensure industrial effluents are treated before discharge. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping can identify pollution hotspots, allowing targeted interventions.

Community engagement is also vital for successful restoration efforts. Educating residents about waste segregation and proper disposal methods can reduce domestic garbage dumping in the nullah. Cleanliness campaigns involving local participation can remove pollutants and foster a collective sense of responsibility. Grassroots initiatives can transform public attitudes

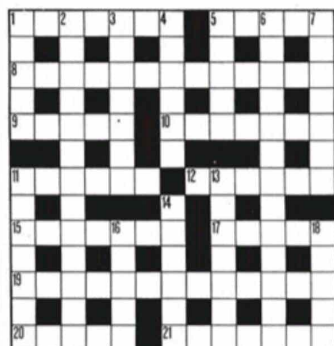
and promote environmentally responsible behaviour. It will be in the interest of the industry to actively associate itself in such endeavours. A clean environment in Ludhiana may attract more industrial consumers.

International examples offer valuable lessons. The Thames river in the UK, once known as 'The Great Stink', was revitalised through sustained political will, heavy investment and implementation of strict environmental laws. The Rhine in Europe underwent a transformation due to coordinated global efforts. Similarly, the Ganga Action Plan has demonstrated the effectiveness of community involvement and public-private partnership. These examples demonstrate that with a committed, multifaceted approach, Buddha Nullah can also be restored.

Restoring it is not merely an environmental endeavour; it is a chance to create a legacy of resilience and collective action. A revitalised tributary can once again sustain vibrant aquatic ecosystems and provide clean water for the local communities.

The future of Buddha Nullah, thus, lies in the hands of the government, industries and local communities. Together, they can restore it to its former glory. Even the most polluted waterways can be revived with determination and collaboration. Punjab and Punjabis can do it for sure.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Country of northwest Europe (5)
- Enduring (5)
- Accept without resistance (4,5,4)
- A healing ointment (5)
- Mad (7)
- Summary of information (6)
- Harrowing experience (6)
- Stare down (7)
- Student (5)
- Endure pain uncomplainingly (4,3,4,2)
- Presenting difficulties (5)
- What remains (7)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Scale, 8 Feel like, 9 Funny, 10 Run out on, 11 Chase, 12 Leg, 16 Cupola, 17 Arable, 18 Dip, 23 Delay, 24 All along, 25 Farce, 26 By rights, 27 Hefty.

Down: 2 Caught up, 3 Long shot, 4 Peruse, 5 Floor, 6 Mirth, 7 Means, 12 Lad, 13 Gap, 14 Take care, 15 Clear-cut, 19 Ignite, 20 Maybe, 21 Glory, 22 Bligh.

SU DO KU



HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 19, 2024, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Margashirsh Shaka 28
- Poosh Purnimite 5
- Hijri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 10.03 am
- Vadhrithi Yoga up to 6.34 pm
- Aashle Nakshatra up to 2.00 am
- Moon enters Leo sign 2.00 am

FORECAST

SUNBEL	THURSDAY	12:35 HRS
SUNBEL	FRIDAY	07:34 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	24	06
New Delhi	23	08
Amritsar	20	04
Bathinda	22	03
Jalandhar	20	03
Ludhiana	21	05
Bhawan	21	04
Hisar	21	02
Sirsa	21	04
Dharamsala	23	04
Manali	16	01
Shimla	18	05
Srinagar	09	-04
Jammu	22	06
Kargil	02	-12
Leh	04	-11
Dehradun	22	06
Mussoorie	18	07

SOURCE: IMD, NC



DECCAN HERALD
ESTABLISHED 1948

ONOE will disrupt democracy's free play

The introduction in parliament of two bills seeking to implement simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies shows the persistence of the government with the idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) which has been widely discussed in the country and invited strong opposition. The bills have been referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) which will deliberate on their provisions. The JPC is likely to return them to parliament with no substantial changes. Going by the voting position on the bills Tuesday, it is unlikely that they will have a passage in parliament as, being Constitutional amendments, they need a two-thirds majority. Even some members of the ruling side were absent in the House for voting on Tuesday.

The opposition to the idea of a single election has come not only from most of the Opposition parties but also from large sections of civil and political society. Opposition parties have dubbed it as violative of the basic structure of the Constitution and the bills as beyond the legislative competence of parliament. They have contended that the bills would take away the autonomy of state legislatures and make them subordinate to parliament. The simultaneous election plan would cover local self-government institutions too, as proposed by the government. Apart from issues relating to constitutionality, the proposal raises serious political issues. Voters have different considerations when they vote for different levels of government. But simultaneous elections give an advantage to the government at the national level and to national parties. The idea will seriously disadvantage regional parties which are a very important part of the country's political system and individuals who contest as independents in all elections. That will distort the free play of democratic forces. The Opposition has also objected to the additional powers given to the Election Commission of India (ECI).

The argument in favour of simultaneous elections is that they will save costs, improve the efficiency of the electoral process and increase voter participation. It is claimed that it will ensure policy stability to governance since the governments will have a fixed term. But these are insufficient rewards in view of the serious losses for citizens in terms of their democratic rights and the damage done to the party system which is integral to parliamentary democracy. Some of the claimed advantages may turn out to be unreal. Implementation of the proposal may also give rise to serious logistical and practical difficulties. The bills propose a straightjacketing of the electoral and democratic system, and further an authoritarian idea. Free play of democracy is a virtue, not a limitation, and democracy does not come cheap.

Delhi set for three-way contest

It has now been confirmed that the 2025 Assembly elections in Delhi will involve a triangular contest among the AAP, the BJP, and the Congress. AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal has ruled out an alliance with the Congress and other leaders of the party have confirmed the position. The party said it found no need to have an alliance this time as it had won all the past elections on its own. It has released its final list of candidates; both the BJP and the Congress have also started releasing their lists. The Congress' first list includes former MP Sandeep Dikshit who will take on Kejriwal in the New Delhi constituency. Senior AAP leader and former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia has shifted to a new constituency, inviting criticism for picking a safe fight. The line-up in all the constituencies will be clear soon.

The elections are expected to be held in February but the campaigning has already started. The AAP and the Congress, which had contested the general election as allies, have decided to part ways, possibly because the alliance did not help either party. The BJP won all the seven seats with about 55% vote share. Though the AAP and the Congress are L.N.D. LA bloc allies, the two parties have had more competition than cooperation. The AAP is not sure about benefiting from an alliance with a considerably weakened Congress which has not been able to help its allies with votes. The AAP is also likely to have felt that an association with the Congress may alienate some of its voters. The party has tried to appeal to the Hindu voters with its positions on some issues. It is the BJP that may gain if the AAP loses those votes. It appears that the AAP has banked on its governance record, the harassment of its leaders by central agencies, and the problems the government had with the Centre as strong campaign points. The party has also announced fresh sps, including schemes benefiting women. It has dropped about one-third of its sitting legislators and taken in defectors from the BJP and the Congress as candidates. These are compromises, and the AAP has always been practical on these matters in spite of its claim to following principled politics.

Both the BJP and the Congress would be hoping to take advantage of the anti-incumbency sentiment and the corruption charges that have dented AAP's credentials. The Congress would only be wanting to gain a presence where it does not exist, but the BJP has higher ambitions and will go all out to give the AAP a tough fight.

Incumbent AAP will take on an ambitious BJP and a Congress battling for pride

Are Indians at risk of unchecked data profiling?

An omission from the DPDP Act raises concerns on data misuse with far-reaching implications

RITVIJ RATH TIWARI

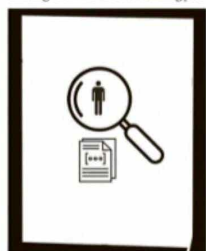
In *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Shoshana Zuboff warns of a world where data becomes the raw material for manipulation, turning individuals into predictable products of their digital selves. This reality is no longer confined to dystopian speculation; it has arrived, more recently highlighted by Clearview AI's controversial practices. In September this year, the US-based facial recognition company was fined \$30.5 million (\$33.7 million) by the Dutch Data Protection Authority (DPA). Clearview AI was penalised for creating an illegal database of billions of images scraped from the internet without consent, a clear violation of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. This enforcement action raises critical questions for India as it navigates its new data protection law, especially regarding the handling of personal data processed outside its borders.

The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act in India claims to have extraterritorial reach. Section 3(b) states that the law applies to the processing of digital personal data outside India if such processing is in connection with the offering of goods or services to individuals within the country. On paper, this ensures that foreign businesses targeting Indian citizens remain within the law's ambit. However, what stands out is the removal of a critical data profiling. Earlier drafts of the bill extended coverage to the profiling of Indian citizens regardless of whether goods or services were offered. The final version passed by Parliament has omitted this provision. Notably, the rules for the implementation of the Act are on the verge of being notified, which brings renewed urgency to address these omissions.

Profiling is the process of analysing personal data to predict behaviours, preferences, or interests. It is not just a privacy issue but an existential risk, as articulated in works like Nick Bostrom's *Superintelligence*. Data profiling, when done without adequate safeguards, can enable powerful actors to simulate and predict societal behaviours, paving the way for manipulation that transcends the economic sphere into political and ethical domains. Bostrom warns of the unforeseen consequences when technologies develop beyond regulatory and ethical oversight. In India's case, the omission of profiling allows foreign entities to

conduct data analysis for non-commercial purposes, free from Indian oversight, a loophole that could have significant anthropic implications. The question must be asked whether the act fails to foresee these risks and whether we are failing the reversal test. Would we accept such data vulnerabilities if they were being newly introduced rather than being unaddressed by omission?

Why does this matter? The company built its business by scraping public images from social media and other platforms to create a massive facial recognition database. Under GDPR, regulators had the power to step in, penalising Clearview AI for violating people's data privacy rights.



ple's data privacy rights. What makes the GDPR particularly significant is its extraterritorial reach. Any company processing the data of European citizens, no matter where it operates, must comply. Moreover, GDPR takes a firm stand against profiling, making it illegal without informed consent or a valid legal reason.

In contrast, India's DPDP Act, with its omission of profiling, would allow similar practices to go unchecked. If Clearview AI were to profile Indian citizens without offering any direct goods or services, it would technically escape Indian law's reach. This creates a dangerous scenario where foreign actors, whether non-profits, think tanks, or political agencies, can analyse Indian citizens' data to predict behaviours, influence opinions, or target individuals without any legal accountability. Such scenarios evoke concerns raised in the literature on whole brain emulation and the potential for data profiling, where data-fueled simulations are hypothesised to model behaviours in unprecedented ways, offering power without accountability.

Risks and regulation

The omission of profiling also reflects a gap in India's data protection regime. Its narrow focus on commercial activities, erroneously,

assumes that all non-commercial data processing is inherently benign. History has shown that data can be weaponised for misinformation campaigns, political manipulation, and surveillance. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in the United States and United Kingdom demonstrated the immense power of data profiling in influencing elections. In India, where data privacy awareness is still growing, such vulnerabilities are even more pronounced. Moreover, the omission raises questions about Parliament's intent. Was it a deliberate choice to appease certain stakeholders, or was it a legislative oversight? Earlier drafts of the bill clearly recognised the risks posed by profiling, so its absence cannot be ignored as a minor technical change. This shift leaves the door open for foreign entities to exploit Indian data without fear of legal repercussions, undermining the very purpose of a data protection regime.

If we consider data as a resource analogous to energy or labour, India's failure to regulate profiling mirrors broader ethical concerns raised in discussions on human enhancement and transhumanism, the unchecked application of tools without evaluating long-term societal consequences. The anthropic principle reminds us that our existence within a technological paradigm demands responsibility in addressing known risks. The omission is not neutral; it is an act that invites exploitation.

To address these shortcomings, India must look to global best practices. The European Union's GDPR and China's Personal Information Protection Law offer valuable lessons. Both frameworks regulate profiling explicitly, ensuring that individuals have control over how their data is used. India must reinforce provisions to regulate profiling, closing the loophole created by its omission. Additionally, the law's extraterritorial scope must be broadened to include all processing of Indian citizens' data, regardless of its purpose or commercial intent.

The Clearview AI case serves as a cautionary tale. It highlights the risks posed by unchecked data processing and the power of robust regulations in holding violators accountable. India cannot afford to be complacent in this digital age, where data transcends borders and becomes a tool for influence and manipulation. The DPDP Act, while a step forward, must be strengthened to address these emerging challenges. By reintroducing provisions on profiling and expanding its extraterritorial reach, India can create a comprehensive framework that truly protects its citizens' data.

He is a law student at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A friendship revisited

A chance encounter in school opened doors to new experiences and passions

M V SUNDARAMAN

I noticed him for the first time in the familiar corridors of high school. As a new boy, he seemed to be looking for something comforting to settle him in class. Curiosity, though, sparked at his eyes. Looking back, I'm thankful that destiny pushed me to reach out to him that day. I had found a friend who would introduce me—a naïve 12-year-old—a whole new universe of cinema, books, politics, thoughts, and ideas, and reaping the fruits of happy memories.

I soon discovered that he was a boy of extraordinary talent. His language abilities, his knack for trivia, his thoughts, and his insights were all far beyond my world. One Saturday when we got off school early, he had me over to his house. I vividly recall the awe I felt when I stepped into his vast collection

of books and LP records. Then, on, we spent countless weekends lost in those shelves, surrounded by books, music, and the warmth of his cool's piping hot also parathas and bhujias.

He also mentored me in the world of cinema. I had barely glimpsed before. Those were the days of VCRs and video cassettes, and our trips to the cassette library became a ritual. With a lively commentary on the movies on the shelves, he would carefully pick up Westerns, BBC comedies, and Hitchcock classics for us to watch.

His love for trivia was infectious, and it wasn't long before he led me into the thrilling world of quizzing, hopping from school to school and forming quiz teams. Together we studied, played, laughed, argued, and shared the joys of our shared childhood moments in hearty camaraderie. We walked away weekends and summers in the City Central Library and at Century Club's reading room when he would propound fantastic theories on the French Revolution, passionately argue that Amritha Bachchan was the world's greatest actor, and insist that

Wodehouse was overrated. We were inseparable, so much so that when the school decided that it must stage Shakespeare for the Annual Day, he nudged me playfully. "You be Othello, and I was, somewhat probably. Desdemona! But high school years quickly passed, and life drew us away in different directions. We tried to stay in touch—a quick hello here, a brief message there—until eventually, even those brief intimacies faded away.

Then, one day, decades later, I received an invitation to a book release event. The author's name on the card was unmistakable. I was overjoyed that my long-lost, dearest friend, now a British citizen, had written the authorised biography of a superstar Indian actor, and I was invited to the book launch. He had indeed arrived, pursuing a career that was most obviously destined for. Our reunion backstage that day with our families took us back to those cherished days in the school corridors and into Bengaluru's reading rooms and libraries, and it felt as if no time had passed at all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Broader discussions, debates needed for ONOE

The government has introduced the 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) bills in Parliament amid opposition protests, with several members and allies absent from the Lok Sabha. These bills include a provision for phased voting. In recent months, the Election Commission has held elections in phases, citing insufficient troops for simultaneous polling in some states. However, it's unclear whether this decision was driven by logistical constraints

or political motivations. The duration of these phased voting periods is also uncertain. If they span several weeks, the current system may be preferable. To address these concerns, the bills should be referred to a JPC headed by a non-ruling party member. Furthermore, broader discussions and debates should be held within states to gather their opinions, acknowledging India's federal structure.

Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

UCC good. But...

I refer to 'Govt will bring uniform civil code in every state' (Dec 18). The government's plan to implement UCC raises crucial questions about its impact on India's diverse social fabric. While unifying laws across states seems progressive, the approach must be inclusive, fair, and be sensitive to diverse cultural and religious identities. Historical accusations against the Congress

party cannot justify undermining democratic principles. The focus should be on fostering dialogue, consensus-building, and safeguarding minority rights. True progress lies in policies that unite, rather than polarise, and prioritise equality and justice for all citizens.

Srinidhi S Nair, Bengaluru

Sports is vital

I refer to 'Science meets sports' (Dec

17). Sports should be incorporated into school curricula considering its proven potential to improve learning outcomes. A balanced approach to education, focusing on both academic and physical well-being, is essential.

Harshitha G, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com in only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted. All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

Congress is trying to spread lies in the country. They have always disrespected Babasaheb Ambedkar. He was forced to resign as the law minister of India... Amit Shah has exposed the conspiracies they (Congress) carried out against Ambedkar... They are now misinterpreting Amit



Shah's statements.
Ravi Shankar Prasad, B.J.P. MP
(amid row over Amit Shah's remark on Ambedkar)

It is better to offer no excuse than a bad one.

George Washington

TO BE PRECISE

AMBEDKAR, AMBEDKAR, AMBEDKAR... WITHOUT AMBEDKAR, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN CRUSHED UNDER AND FOUND A PLACE IN HEAVEN!



IN PERSPECTIVE

Rural credit, the next frontier

With the right policy push, rural financial inclusion could drive the next wave of economic growth

DHAVAL MONANI AND SHARADBALA JOSHI

The urban housing shortfall in India has been well-researched, documented and debated. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), the largest social housing scheme in the world, has successfully delivered 8.5 million homes out of a sanctioned 11.8 million, according to the Press Information Bureau. The last decade has seen an ecosystem of financial services, risk assessment, and delivery mechanisms built around it. PMAY-Gramin (PMAY-G) is even more ambitious. The original target of 2.95 crore houses by 2023-24 was increased by another two crore in August 2024.

The expected impact cannot be overstated as the rural population currently stands at \$33 million and is growing. In spite of the 40,925 per capita GDP of Rs 40,925, a much smaller than for a Rs 5 lakh loan, the EMI in urban areas would be Rs 6,000 compared to Rs 13,246 in rural areas. For a demographic with a monthly GDP of Rs 4,000, finance gives a deeply ingrained, almost a distant dream.

The impact of PMAY-G is much diminished, a problem that the government recognises. The key factor here is the lack of financial data, and economic outcomes. Most lack basic sanitation and are vulnerable to calamities. This affects nearly two-thirds of the Indian population and explains the thrust given by the government to privatising PMAY-G. In spite of the need and will, a robust ecosystem for logistics, delivery and finance has failed to evolve.

The subsidy amount of Rs 120,000 in the plains, Rs 130,000 in hills plus Rs 17,000 for toilets is insufficient for a basic house of even 300 sq ft. The beneficiaries end up building one room at a time, many times substandard and disjointed. Delivery of the subsidy is also an issue and intermediation charges are often as high as 15% of the disbursed amount. This largely negates the aim of the programme. According to a recent study by Habitat For Humanity, rural and peri-urban India has an estimated 17 million unfinished homes that are not habitable.

The biggest catalyst for PMAY-Urban was the access to finance for beneficiaries in the informal sector. The Indian mortgage market over the past few years has demonstrated that the risk for mortgages in the informal sector were drastically mispriced. Indian lenders have been path-breaking in providing access to credit at reasonable rates for rural

tomers who, till then, were considered non-bankable. But this is largely confined to dense urban regions; access to credit is still challenging to borrowers in the country's peri-urban and rural areas.

Disparities in microfinance

Rural India has very low mortgage penetration and in spite of the government's path-breaking Jan Dhan Yojana, access to credit has remained abysmally low. Microfinance for 15 years has not been able to deliver a credit revolution. Housing microfinance, a fast-emerging sub-segment, fails to deliver as the short tenure and the high interest rates make it unviable for anything but some rudimentary home improvements. A typical rural housing microfinance loan would have a tenure of five years and an interest rate of 20% whereas in urban areas in the informal sector, the loan would have a tenure of 15 years at an interest rate of 12% or less. This means that for a Rs 5 lakh loan, the EMI in urban areas would be Rs 6,000 compared to Rs 13,246 in rural areas. For a demographic with a monthly GDP of Rs 4,000, finance gives a deeply ingrained, almost a distant dream.

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(Dhaval is an associate professor and Sharadbal is a senior researcher and visiting faculty at Anant National University)

The minorities in Bangladesh and our hypocrisy

AVIJIT PATHAK

When do we realise that the politics of communalism, or the mischievous act of dividing people on the basis of religious identities, thereby fostering a toxic environment filled with hatred and violence, goes against the noblest aspiration for a society that values empathy, the ability to live with cultural/religious pluralism, and the courage to nurture the ethos of democratic coexistence? Is the Indian subcontinent—tormented by the traumatic memory of Partition violence—incapable of learning this important lesson? Or are we, instead, destined to remain trapped in cycles of communal politics and religious bigotry?

Consider, for instance, what is happening in Bangladesh. Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government amid popular uprisings and massive student protests against her alleged autocratic rule, the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus faces mounting challenges. Fundamentalist Islamist forces, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, which Hasina had managed to subdue, are resurging. And subsequently, the politics of majoritarianism has begun to denigrate the minorities—Buddhists, Christians, and mainly Hindus. As reports indicate, there were attacks on temples and puja mandaps during the recent Durga Puja festival in Bangladesh. According to Manindra Kumar Nath—the acting general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Council—2,000 incidents of attacks, including murder, molestation, and kidnapping, were reported against minorities in Bangladesh in recent times. Furthermore, the arrest of the much-controversial religious leader Chinmay Krishna Das on sedition charges caused anxiety among the minorities—particularly, the followers of the Bangladesh Saranjan Jagaran Mancha.

The Indian government, as External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's statement suggests, took a 'serious note' of these incidents and shared its 'concerns' with the Government of Bangladesh. Furthermore, many Hindu organisations expressed their 'anxiety' over the state of Hindu minorities who constitute merely 8% of the 170 million Bangladesh population. In fact, this anguish manifested itself in yet another form of violence. A group of 'protesters' entered the consulate building of Bangladesh in Agartala and vandalised it. In West Bengal, the BJP leader Subhendu Adhikari—not particularly known for promoting the ethos of secularism—protested against the atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh with all sorts of aggressive gestures. And even some hospitals in West Bengal and Tripura chose to forget the medical ethics and decided not to treat patients from Bangladesh!

In fact, if you and I dare to be authentic and contemplative, it will not be difficult for us to realise that our response to the Bangladesh crisis is primarily hypocritical; it reveals our double standard, or our inability to look at our own engagement with the minorities in India. Can the ruling regime known for its Hindu supremacist thinking be bothered to look at its own record? From mob lynching to cow vigilantism to the normalisation of bulldozer justice to the triumphant agenda of 'discovering' the ruined temples beneath the series of mosques, from the horror of the 2002 riots in Gujarat to the organised effort to denigrate the Muslims as 'terrorists' or 'Babur ki aulad', or from the politics beneath the Citizen Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens to the fact that there is not even a single Muslim MP in the BJP—the harsh reality is that there is no reason to feel proud of the social/political dignity of the Muslim population in India. In fact, an ideology rooted in the discourses of Golwalkar, Savarkar, and Godse will denounce Nehru's secular humanism or Gandhi's engaged religiosity of love and compassion. Possibly, their 'concern' for the minorities in Bangladesh is merely a pretension; it is just a Machiavellian tool for stimulating the Hindu crowd in India to further demonise their 'Muslim enemies' and legitimise the ideology of hyper-masculine Hindu nationalism.

Is there any possibility of the subcontinent freeing itself from the vicious cycle of militant Hindutva vs Islamic fundamentalism? Of course, it is possible if we move towards a new politico-cultural awakening. It requires a clear understanding of the fact that the social psychology of religious fundamentalism is deeply related to the rise of right-wing nationalism and associated authoritarianism. In other words, if we wish to preserve a democratic, secular culture, it is important to fight the unholy alliance of populist/charismatic authoritarian leaders and religious fundamentalists. Likewise, it is important to realise that the politics of religious fundamentalism is inherently against the spirit of spiritual wonder or the religiosity of love and compassion.

Far from inspiring us to meditate on life and death, the finite and the infinite, or time and timelessness, and live every moment with mindfulness and gratitude, the anger implicit in the discourse of religious fundamentalism keeps constructing the 'enemies'—from the minorities to the immigrants. If spirituality is about love and oneness, religious fundamentalism is about division and hatred. And finally, it is important to create a new kind of politics that strives for an egalitarian and inclusive civic culture, resists all sorts of mental and physical ghettoisation, and prioritises truly important issues like social and economic justice for all rather than whether one should visit Mecca or Ayodhya for 'salvation'. However, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the proponents and practitioners of this kind of political culture, the danger is that the subcontinent might witness more and more communal hatred, majoritarian aggression, militarism, and cultural decadence, and simultaneously the rise of neoliberal fascists.

(The writer taught at JNU for more than three decades)

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The company's new chip, Willow, has made a significant leap in solving complex equations, bringing the world closer to the holy grail of an error-free quantum computer

THOMAS BLACK

Alphabet Inc.'s Google has rekindled excitement over quantum computing with an announcement about its new chip, Willow, which is a classical computer to solve a mathematical equation much faster. More important, Google said it had crossed a crucial threshold on the way to an error-free quantum computer, the holy grail of the technology.

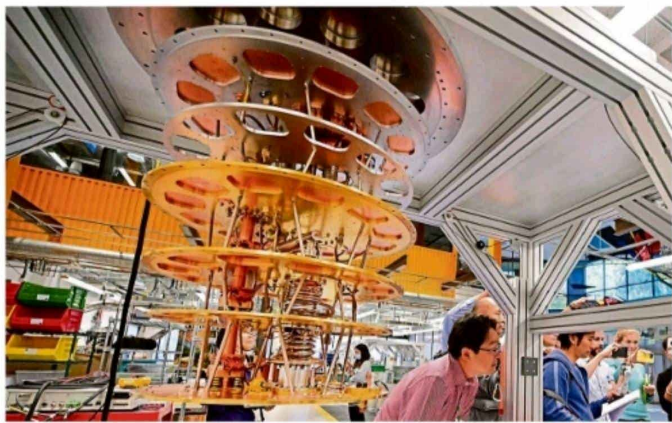
The tech world has been down this hype alley before. Google instigated that round with the 2019 introduction of its Sycamore processor, which also solved a mathematical equation that led the company to claim quantum supremacy over classical computers. New articles exhausted every angle in describing how these magical machines were going to impact each industry in the future. That enthusiasm fizzled out because while the machines were proven, they were not ready for widespread use. Besides, Nvidia Corp. keeps making super-chips that are pretty good at simulating quantum computing without the technical drawbacks.

This is where it is helpful to understand the difference between classical and quantum computing. Classical computers use digital bits that process information in 1s and 0s, made possible by electronic current that turns on or off tiny transistors. Quantum computing uses, well, quantum bits, or qubits, which are able to process data between 1 and 0 using natural or human-made particles. Using a paint analogy, the bits on a personal computer are the equivalent of black or white. Qubits, though, can come in all shades on the colour wheel. That potential array of values is what makes quantum computing so powerful and also underpins the reason the machines will be able to do much more complex calculations than their black-and-white classical cousins. The problem is that qubits are extremely delicate and can cause quantum computers to lose information, making them prone to error. Google's latest achievement is that it can correct errors at greater scale.

It's a good thing that Google's announcement has perked up ears again on quantum computing because the industry has been quietly making great strides toward creating machines that researchers from companies and government find valuable, and investors should exercise patience. Some computer makers, like Intel Corp., say their machines are already providing practical results. The startup, whose shares have jumped more than threefold this year, is planning to manufacture five quantum computers at its factory and just set one up in Switzerland.

Many models of these early, error-prone computers, including machines by IonQ and Rigetti Computing Inc. can be accessed both the open. Anytime you can access a quantum computer, you can use it. Google's Quantum Computing Lab, which is controlled by Honeywell International Inc. International Business Machines Corp. provides software tools and access to several of its models. Google's Quantum Computing Lab, which is controlled by Honeywell International Inc. International Business Machines Corp. provides software tools and access to several of its models. Google's Quantum Computing Lab, which is controlled by Honeywell International Inc. International Business Machines Corp. provides software tools and access to several of its models.

In other words, functioning quantum computers, albeit prone to error and limited, are available through cloud-based networks. Industry stalwarts, such as California Institute of Technology's John Preskill, are getting excited after years of repeating the same mantra that quantum computing was a decade away.



Google's Quantum Computing Lab. AFP

Google is pushing quantum computing closer to reality

"The quantum hardware has reached a stage now where it can advance science," Preskill said in a video accompanying the Willow announcement. "We can study very complex quantum systems in a regime that we've never had access to before."

The new machines are getting better and better. Preskill said. That's why Honeywell, which owns 54% of Quantinuum, should resist a push by investors to monetise its stake in the quantum computing startup. The industry is at the cusp of providing a useful tool to supercharge research across industries, and the value will only rise. That gets lost in the argument from investors to simplify Honeywell's conglomerate model.

Again, quantum computers still aren't ready for prime time because the machines are prone to error. But the race is entering the final stretch on who will build the first practical quantum computer. making this a great time to start paying attention for investing opportunities, not to mention the pure entertainment value. This is a real-life reality show that pits teams of scientists against one another to become the founders of a new era of computers. In the end, it may be hard to declare a winner because the gains are likely to be incrementally better until the impact on scientific research becomes apparent.

What makes this race so entertaining is that it pits two broad technological

pathways, or camps, against each other to reach the ultimate goal: a machine with enough error-corrected qubits to do advanced calculations. The divide between these camps will answer this critical question: Can humans fabricate an object that creates a quantum state that can be tweaked and tuned enough to match the natural quantum state provided by particles such as atoms or photons?

On the manufactured-qubit side are Google, IBM, Rigetti, IQM and other companies, which are building computers with superconducting qubits. In its Willow announcement, Google discussed its fabrication facility in Santa Barbara, California, that's built especially for making superconducting qubits and how it improved drastically the time its qubit remains in a quantum state.

On the other side, companies that create qubits from natural particles, such as atoms or photons, believe that the qubits manufactured on techniques based on semiconductor production advances will hit a wall in their ability to make exact qubits and connect them. This camp—which includes makers of trapped-ion computers such as IonQ and Quantinuum—instead capture, control and manipulate atoms or photons, believe that the qubits manufactured on techniques based on semiconductor production advances will hit a wall in their ability to make exact qubits and connect them. This camp—which includes makers of trapped-ion computers such as IonQ and Quantinuum—instead capture, control and manipulate atoms or photons, believe that the qubits manufactured on techniques based on semiconductor production advances will hit a wall in their ability to make exact qubits and connect them.

Qubits, though, aren't all created equal.

Remember, it's real particles versus human-made ones. Perhaps both pathways will have a place in the market. The industry standard will gravitate toward how many error-corrected, or logical, qubits a machine makes available to coders. In its Willow announcement, Google announced it had surpassed the "below threshold" at which it can add qubits and reduce errors. This is important because quantum computers need to add spare qubits to correct and maintain the logical, or error-corrected, qubits on which computations are made. Classical computers are also corrected for errors, but the fault rate from misfiring transistors is tiny to begin with.

The makers of computers based on atoms—Quantinuum, IonQ, Atom Computing and others—think they are ahead in the race because their qubits have lower error rates. Quantinuum and Microsoft Corp. published a paper in April that detailed how four logical qubits were created by using 30 physical qubits. Keep in mind that Google has said that even a computer with 100 error-corrected qubits would allow for calculations unmatched by classical computers.

The long race toward quantum computing is entering the backstretch, and the progress is accelerating. There will be business opportunities. IonQ's shares just hit an all-time high. Rigetti's shares have more than doubled just since Dec 6. Quantinuum will likely sell shares to the public in the near future. Google has announced its investment. Investors like those in Honeywell should realise that the payoff will be worth the wait.

Bloomberg Opinion

Making school excursions safe

MATHEW C NINAN

Excursions are among the most cherished memories of school life. In earlier times, excursions and picnics were an integral part of the academic calendar. Today, however, many schools avoid organising excursions for various reasons.

Last week, a tragic incident occurred on the Mureshwar coast, where four 15-year-old girls from a school in Kolar drowned in the rough sea. Following the incident, the school principal was suspended, and five guest teachers who accompanied the students were dismissed. As is customary, an inquiry has been ordered.

Such tragedies often lead to temporary public outcry and media coverage. However, they are quickly forgotten by the public, while the affected families and the school suffer long-lasting emotional and reputational damage.

Two years ago, a similar tragedy struck a school excursion group in Kerala, resulting in the death of five children and a teacher. While an inquiry and guidelines followed, their implementation and impact remain unclear.

Excursions, per se, are a valuable part of education and a wonderful source of knowledge, offering students experiential learning and exposure to the world beyond the classroom. However, when things go wrong, schools face severe repercussions, including legal battles and the burden of compensating families, often amounting to several lakhs of rupees. The trauma and ordeal last for several years.

Due to these risks, many schools avoid excursions altogether. Elite schools may organise foreign tours through private operators, catering primarily to affluent families. Middle-class parents who can afford it may take their children on trips independently. However, most teenagers prefer being with their friends, as school excursions provide a unique blend of fun, camaraderie, and learning under the guidance of experienced teachers and guides.

What about students from the privileged backgrounds? School excursions are often the only opportunity for children from such backgrounds to explore the world. Authorities should support such schools proactively with logistical and financial assistance to ensure safe and enriching trips.

The key question is: Can we make excursions safe? The answer lies in adhering to safety

guidelines issued by various departments and regulatory bodies.

- Schools must adopt strict protocols when organising an excursion to prevent mishaps.
- Buses and drivers must be certified fit by the regional transport officials before every excursion.
- Speed governors should be installed in the buses, and authorities must specify safe speed limits. The school authorities should comply with them.
- Buses should have bars across the windows to prevent students from sticking out their hands or heads.
- Emergency doors, GPS, CCTV, and fully equipped first-aid kits are essential.

Night travel by buses should be banned for excursion groups. It is often done to save expense, but they make two mistakes: They deny sightseeing to children and expose them to the risk of serious accidents. More such accidents are reported at night and in the small hours of the day.

There should be experienced teachers accompanying the students in a 1:10 ratio. The total number in a group should not be more than the seating capacity of the bus. Students should be divided into batches of 10 under a teacher during the entire trip. Female teachers with sufficient experience should be included, based on the number of girls in the group.

Drowning incidents alarmingly common. Many students, inexperienced in swimming, venture into dangerous waters, risking their lives. In the recent Mureshwar tragedy, the students reportedly ignored lifeguards' warnings. Coastal Karnataka witnesses frequent drowning incidents, highlighting the need for stricter preventive measures.

Mobile phones are yet another cause of many mishaps. Cliffs and precipices are favourite vantage points for selfies. But they are also beset with serious risks. Like water bodies, selfies at such locations should be a strict no during excursions.

Many such safeguards should be part of every excursion. Most importantly, the students and the teachers should undergo an orientation by an expert before they set out. The entire group must follow a leader who must be a capable teacher. Discipline and safety must be the watchword. Guided freedom makes for a safe and pleasant excursion.

(The writer is Director, Little Rock Group of Institutions, Udipi)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1974

Sharavathi probe welcomed

Bangalore, Dec. 18
Opposition Leader in the Karnataka Assembly H. D. Deve Gowda has, in a statement, welcomed the KPCC directive to the Government to institute a judicial enquiry into the "Sharavathi Karmakanda." He through Depts. Google pointed out that of the 32 allegations that had been made against S. Nijalingappa when he was Chief Minister by the then Opposition, only three related to Sharavathi. He has therefore urged PCC President K. H. Patil to ask the Government to hold an enquiry into all the 32 charges.

25 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1999

Chandrika survives assassination bid

Colombo, Dec. 18
Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga escaped an attempt on her life when two powerful bomb blasts rocked Colombo and its suburbs on Tuesday, leaving over 20 dead and about 150 injured. In the first blast, at the Town Hall in Colombo, the president escaped with shrapnel injuries. Her Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Pieris was among the injured. The blast, set off by a suspected LTTE suicide bomber, killed 15 people. The victims included the LTTE hit man.

OASIS | KANDASWAMY GNANAMURTHY

Striving for perfection

journey till then. Zero defects may be a lot more costly than, say, a little bit defective, and may not be worth the effort.

There is also another statistical side to the argument called the ninety-nine effect, meaning if 10% of the population that leads to the 90% of success stories. It is only ten people who contribute to the overall. Stretching a bit more, it is only a little of all the items you have that amounts to total value. Then why bother and sweat to perfect the overall? This applies across the universe, whether it be human efforts

or natural occurrences; most efforts are ineffective, however much you may aim at overall perfection, meaning while your goal can be perfection, the means are always wayward mostly.

So, when things are not entirely in your hand, you can't be going about working on perfection without incurring disproportionate costs, not to mention disappointments. The added misery is that we create disgruntled relatives, friends, colleagues, and employees and try to find fault with them for what they ought to have achieved but haven't in our superior

wisdom. We sit in judgement on others, which is universally forbidden. A great sports leader is known to get the best of his teammates, whatever they willingly give, and not demand what he thinks is perfect. Then what is striving for perfection?

Confined to yourself, not to perfecting the world or thereabouts. The pyramid of Maslow's talks about self-actualisation in your chosen pursuit. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Srinivasa Ramanujan, and Albert Einstein focused on their own goals of perfection instead of going about perfecting others. The journey is as glorious, enjoyable, and fulfilling as the goal.

Opinion

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2024

Acting with restraint

Overall, regulators have done a competent job, but they need to work on lack of transparency and overreach

CHIEF ECONOMIC ADVISER Anantha Nageswaran's appeal to the regulators to become more transparent about the rationale behind their decisions, and be mindful of the boundaries of their "untested power," is unexceptionable. While India's regulators have done a competent job, there is indeed a need to strike the right balance between their proximate and explicit objectives of systemic stability, viability and risk mitigation for the regulated entities/stakeholders, and the imperative of not standing in the way of innovation, enterprise and growth. They would do well to refrain from impulsive, unpredictable behaviour. As Nageswaran pointed out, "the regulators must explain why a particular regulation is being introduced, the information prompting it, the goals it seeks to achieve, and the criteria for withdrawing it." This is necessary not only because trust in regulatory decisions is built with such finer accountability, but because unlike the political executive, most regulators, except a few like the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, aren't directly accountable to people at large via Parliament.

It seems the CEA has some instances of regulatory overreach or excesses in mind which might have had the unintended consequence of impeding technological innovation and economic growth. For instance, he called for an assessment of socio-economic costs and benefits in areas like crypto/bitcoin, and online gaming, where regulatory oversight (by the Reserve Bank of India and the Goods and Services Tax Council respectively) looks tight. That said, regulators' alertness and their timely and adequate performance are as vital for stable progress of the Indian economy, as their increased accountability. However, not all Indian regulators have always acquitted themselves well in this respect, partly because they lacked the required functional autonomy in practical terms. Also, influential segments of business, including privileged public-sector units, have been interested in keeping some regulatory actions in check.

In many cases, the regulatory laws and rules are born weak and ambiguous, leaving room for the higher bureaucracy to interfere. Regulatory overlapping (or thin dividing lines) has also led to bickering, as between the regulators of drug pricing and quality, and lately, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India and the National Financial Reporting Authority. Another issue is the regulator itself being the dominant player in the relevant market, as has been the case of Power Grid Corporation until recently. The fact is along with the economy, the concepts of democracy, equity, and equal opportunity can exact a heavy price due to regulatory weakness, inaction, undue forbearance, or ineptitude. The appellate process, that leads up to the higher judiciary, is competent to set right any wrongs committed by the regulators, while systemic or policy problems can be addressed by Parliament in due course.

With these checks and balances, regulatory integrity needs to be ensured via a transparent, bipartisan process to select the top brass, and by equipping these bodies with adequate manpower and infrastructure, besides the legal teeth. Important regulators like the National Company Law Tribunal are still lacking requisite strength, causing, for example, insolvency resolution processes to prolong. The Competition Commission of India, the generic regulator of markets, has often been bereft of quorum. The CEA talked about how the interconnected nature of financial systems required vigilant oversight to protect economic stability. Also, the level of transparency expected of regulators has not been in their tackling of the charges, whether right or wrong, of stock market manipulations, and accounting malfeasance allegedly involving certain large, influential corporate groups.

Walmart has a tough battle ahead in India

E-COMMERCE IN INDIA is a political and regulatory minefield. US consumer giant Walmart Inc. — which has been waiting to launch the much-anticipated initial public offering of the online marketplace it acquired for \$1.6 billion six years ago — has had its patience tested. It's unlikely to get Flipkart out the door next year: A 2026 IPO may be a more reasonable expectation, with a little diplomatic help from the incoming government in Washington.

The business side of things is not the reason for the delay. Flipkart is the country's largest e-commerce player, ahead of Amazon.com Inc. The homegrown app looks the consumer-service finesse of its rival, but its sheer reach across a continent-sized geography gives it the heft that took the likes of Unilever P&G a century to build.

Flipkart is a stake Walmart has put down in a market where brick-and-mortar foreign retailers face stifling restrictions. That's not an immediate threat; it might take a decade before Indians have the purchasing power to sustain a franchise like Sam's Club, the Bentonville, Arkansas-based firm's members-only warehouse division that is defying China's consumption funk. The question is, will New Delhi be ready for Sam's Club in 10 years?

Walmart has already spent nearly two decades waiting for local regulations to become a little more welcoming of its investment dollars. The firm's partnership with Sunil Mittal, the Indian telecom czar who was going to prize open the market for the US retailer in 2007, ended six years later. Even Walmart's second shot — the Flipkart acquisition — has had to constantly tiptoe around regulations forbidding foreign-backed e-commerce firms from owning inventory.

On paper, that rule is all about safeguarding livelihoods of the corner kiranaa stores, tens of millions of tiny enterprises catering to 1.4 billion consumers. In reality, though, mom-and-pop shops are being shielded only from the Americans. The laws that target Walmart and Amazon are not about size or dominance, but the colour of money. This is laughable because even large Indian players like Mukesh Ambani, the country's richest tycoon who's also its biggest retailer, have tapped billions of dollars from global investors. It's all greenbacks, all the way.

Separately, India's Competition Commission has asked the US firms to share their financial statements so that it can determine how much to fine them after a four-year-old investigation. Flipkart can't possibly sell shares before it knows how much it has to pony up. The anti-monopoly watchdog could impose a charge of as much as 10% of the global turnover of Indian entities.

E-commerce is just about 5-6% of India's retail market, compared with more than 35% in China. The story in e-tailing is just the opposite. Thanks to the billions of dollars flowing into fuelling India's craze for quick commerce, consumers nowadays expect the T-shirts and light bulbs they order at 4 a.m. to arrive by 4:10 a.m. Investors may well figure out in a few years that the 10-minute gratification model of Indian startups is not really something that can be sustained outside of big cities. If anything, quick commerce might be a bigger headache for Ambani, whose retail empire has had a "forgettable year," according to the brokerage Jefferies, marked by store closures, weak revenue, and rising competition in a slowing economy.

But a delayed Flipkart IPO could just have been a lightning rod for the incoming Trump administration to negotiate hard for US firms' access to Indian retail. To avoid a trade war, New Delhi may have no option except to offer concessions and dial down its protectionist regulations. That's when Walmart's India acquisition, the biggest-ever deal in its history, would truly pay off.



ANDY MUKHERJEE
Bloomberg

● BLACK OR WHITE

AT PRESENT, RBI DOES NOT SEE ANY MIDDLE GROUND FOR NBFC INVESTORS ACTING AS OBSERVERS

Board observers in the spotlight

VIRAL MEHTA
KHYATI DALAL

The authors are with Nivithi Desai Associates



Two recent regulatory developments have brought the role of board observers into the spotlight. A few months back, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) amended the rules that exempted combinations from its notification requirement. Previously, to qualify for an exemption, acquirers could not acquire any special rights in the target entity—rights unavailable to ordinary shareholders. These special rights included the full range of contractual rights such as director and observer rights, as well as information and inspection rights. However, the one explicitly specified right in the old regulations was the right to appoint a director. The CCI's new exemption rules now explicitly include the right to appoint a board observer. This move clearly indicates that the CCI sees no differentiation between directors and board observers when it comes to the ability to exert "material influence" over the management and affairs of the target entity.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) seems to have gone a step further. A few days ago, it was reported that the central bank instructed various non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) to remove observers from their boards and instead consider appointing them as directors. The RBI's stand has caught investors, who currently have appointed board observers in NBFCs, by surprise. Considering these developments, it is crucial to assess the role that board observers play within a company.

Board observers are generally appointed by investors to exercise oversight over their portfolio companies. An observer right is a contractual one that companies grant to investors so that they can monitor their investment. Observers perform similar functions to directors, such as attending board meetings and participating in board discussions. They are also entitled to receive information that is sent to directors prior to a board meeting. The key difference between them is that, unlike directors, observers do not have any voting rights. Since they cannot vote on board matters, they hold no responsibility for the board's decisions. Hence, no liability can be attached to them when these decisions go wrong. It is this aspect that seems to have irked the RBI. The central bank views their position as being akin to that of directors, but because they are not subject to the duties imposed on directors, they can avoid liability when things go wrong.

A measured approach by the RBI may be favourable, such as prescribing notification requirements for appointing board observers

most investors nowadays require their portfolio companies to maintain a robust directors and officers insurance policy. Consequently, they don't view director liability as a substantial risk that would lead them to forgo board participation rights entirely. There are other reasons that sometimes prompt them to choose observers over directors. Take, for example, an NBFC that already has multiple existing investors and desires to raise further capital from a new investor. The new investor wants the right to appoint a director, but the NBFC is unwilling to grant it either because its investment is relatively small, or the board is too large to accommodate another member. In this situation, while the new investor favours obtaining a board seat, it is the NBFC that is opposed to this arrangement. As a

result, the NBFC needs to carry out a balancing act. Negotiations can get tricky and go either way depending on the bargaining power of the parties. If neither party is willing to budge, an observer right can be a useful tool to break the impasse and achieve an acceptable outcome for both parties. Therefore, rather than adopting an all-or-nothing approach, the RBI could consider permitting cases in which there may be a legitimate need to grant observer rights to get the deal over the line.

The other concern with the RBI's stand is that it may require NBFCs to renegotiate closed deals. NBFCs may have to reopen negotiations and convince their existing investors to forgo their observer rights. They may even need to react to their board's composition if the investors insist on a directorship in exchange for relinquishing their observer rights. Hence, to avoid upsetting settled transactions, it may be prudent for the RBI to clarify that its stand is prospective in nature and will not impact past transactions.

NBFCs have to tackle the perennial issue of raising capital at frequent intervals to grow. Imposing such restrictions could complicate their efforts to attract investors willing to provide essential funding for growth. Therefore, a more measured approach by the RBI might be favourable for both investors and NBFCs, such as prescribing notification or approval requirements for appointing board observers or placing a limit on the number of board observers an NBFC is allowed to have. However, at present, the RBI's message to investors of NBFCs seems to be clear: either take a board seat or have no board presence at all. It does not see any middle ground between these two extremes.

Views are personal

Placing Indian agriculture on the global map



ARPITA MUKHERJEE
KETAKI GAIKWAD

Respectively professor and research assistant, ICRIER

THE ESTABLISHMENT of farmer producer organisations (FPOs) was a great initiative started by the government of India in the early 2000s to help small and marginal farmers achieve economies of scale, increase their bargaining power by negotiating collectively, double their income, and reach the global markets. FPO is not a unique concept—similar models have been adopted in other countries like Mexico, Thailand, and China. It has helped their small farmers to enter the export market. In India, small and marginal farmers represent 86% of farmers, and they lack access to essential inputs, credit, modern technology, infrastructure, and are unable to connect to global sourcing firms/buyers.

To resolve such issues, the Indian government, in 2021, launched a new central sector scheme, Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Produce Organisations, with an allocation of ₹68,650 crore to form and promote 10,000 new FPOs nationwide. However, an ongoing survey by ICRIER, covering 43 FPOs and over 200 member farmers in spices (particularly turmeric) across six states, found that FPOs continue to face similar challenges in scaling up and accessing global markets, like the small and marginal farmers.

Assessing critical gaps in market linkages

Around 80% FPOs said that they are unable to identify and reach buyers, manufacturers, processors, and exporters, which are vital for their sus-

tainability. On the other hand, companies and foreign sourcing agents complained that they do not know which FPO is in the spices segment, so they continue to source from traders and traditional channels like mandis. Although over 8,000 FPOs are registered on the website of the ministry of agriculture and farmers welfare, there is no information on which products they cater to. Hence, the manufacturers, sourcing agents, and global buyers do not know who to go to for their requirements.

While many standards are in India, laid down by different agencies like Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), Export Inspection Council (EIC), and Spices Board to name a few, FPOs are often confused about what standard to follow and which one will help them to reach international markets. Globally, each country has the right to have their own standards, and very few have mutual recognition agreements for standards with India. Thus, while our standards may be good, they are hardly accepted by the importing countries. Therefore, 72% of the FPOs felt that the domestic standard setting process is too complex and that they lack information on the standards and requirements of the export markets,

Knowledge transfer on global compliance standards can be supported through multi-stakeholders' partnership models. There is a need for product-specific training and guidelines

leading to product rejections by the global clients, even if some of them are able to access global buyers through B2B events and net browsing. Global buyers want product traceability, and many FPOs do not know how to implement it.

When asked about the use of e-commerce platforms to reach the domestic and global markets, while the government has several initiatives like the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) and electronic trading platforms like eNAM; many FPOs and their members have limited knowledge about how to leverage such platforms effectively.

For example, as of November 11, there are no turmeric FPOs listed on the ONDC platform.

The survey found that while there are success stories of multi-stakeholder partnerships between state governments, multinational bodies, companies, and FPOs and they have helped the latter scale up and reach global markets, there is limited learning from such best practices and/or success stories. One such example is that of the Kandhamal Apex Spices Association for Marketing (KASAM) in Odisha for promoting Kandhamal turmeric. KASAM was formed as a collaboration of 61 Spice Development Societies under the government of Odisha. It signed a memorandum of understanding with Kisan Saathi, under which the former has been working with two KASAM FPOs—Gumpadar FPC Ltd.

and Sastris FPC Ltd.—to help them to reach global markets. Gumpadar FPC Ltd. is exporting Kandhamal turmeric to Ned-Spice Group from Netherlands. This demonstrates that with strategic partnerships and coordinated efforts, FPOs can overcome market barriers and go global.

How can our FPOs go global?

Scaling up and addressing the knowledge gap is crucial for the turmeric FPOs to go global. The database of FPOs should be comprehensive, providing detailed and product-specific information. This will enable global companies to locate and engage with relevant FPOs, fostering partnerships that could eventually lead to higher price realisation and better market access for farmers.

There is a need for increased support to onboard the FPOs on e-commerce platforms, along with educating farmers on using government platforms like the eNAM to help them expand market reach.

Knowledge transfer on global compliance standards like sanitary and phytosanitary measures, maximum residue levels, and technical barriers to trade is crucial, and can be supported through multi-stakeholders' partnership models. There is a need for product-specific training and guidelines related to compliance standards and regulations for key markets. Successful examples and best practices should be scaled up through knowledge sharing.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Improving access to healthcare

Apropos of "Transforming rural health systems" (FE, December 18), indeed, the rural-urban divide is the key reason for the rural population in not getting health care facilities. Doctors' reluctance to serve in the rural areas based on economic factors, paucity of medical infrastructures, among other aspects impair the rural population from accessing commensurate and

updated medical services. Developing a inclusive rural health policy focused on bringing private participation into the rural health net with digitised records is the need of the hour. Rural areas must be given adequate transport facilities to reach urban hospitals, especially the government hospitals with involved medical services. To bridge the rural-urban divide, collaboration must be fostered among different sectors to address the social determinants of

health in rural areas. Forming medical clusters in villages with community participation could address rural health grievances.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

A relevant debate

The history of monetary control would show that governments do not tax the rich just because inequality is high. It is forced to ponder the same when people increasingly believe that such taxes

are some compensation, which is rightfully their due, in lieu of the state unfairly favouring the wealthy. Given that social safety net for the lesser privileged is inadequate, taxing the rich could be a transient need of the times and Thomas Piketty's argument adds grit to the ongoing debate. The singular pursuit of wealth has led to the sequestration for a few.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Write to us at: letters@expressindia.com

Not again!

Delhi air quality once again plummets to unbreathable 'severe' category despite GRAP IV

You may not be a smoker but you are still smoking 10 cigarettes a day if you happen to be in Delhi. This is what the doctors have to say about Delhi pollution. The capital witnessed a sharp decline in air quality on Wednesday, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) crossing the 400 mark and entering the 'severe' category once again. This alarming situation unfolded despite the implementation of Stage 4 of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), which entails stringent anti-pollution measures. Monitoring Stations Report Severe-Plus AQI Out of the 37 monitoring stations listed on the Sameer app. These figures highlight the widespread and acute nature of air pollution across the city. GRAP, a tiered system of air quality management, categorises air quality into four stages based on AQI levels: Stage I (Poor, AQI 201-300) Stage II (Very Poor, AQI 301-400) Stage III (Severe, AQI 401-450) Stage IV (Severe Plus, AQI above 450) Under Stage IV, measures such as a complete ban on construction and demolition activities, including

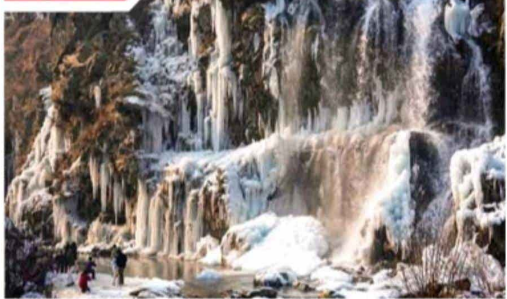


public infrastructure projects and the prohibition of diesel trucks carrying non-essential items entering Delhi are enforced. Offices—public, municipal and private—are advised to reduce staff attendance to 50 per cent, with the rest working from home. Additional measures like the closure of colleges, non-essential businesses and odd-even vehicular restrictions are considered during such extreme conditions. Despite these restrictions, Delhi's air quality has continued to deteriorate, raising questions about the efficacy and enforcement of these measures.

However, experts feel that it is more due to metrological conditions and not a failure of GRAP. They attribute

the sudden spike in pollution levels to unfavourable meteorological conditions, particularly a significant drop in wind speeds. The stagnation allows local pollutants to accumulate, exacerbating the already critical air quality. During winters, Delhi's air pollution crisis is compounded by a combination of factors. Vehicle emissions is a primary contributor to the city's air pollution. Besides vehicular pollution, paddy straw burning adds to the pollution burden. Factories emit significant quantities of pollutants. But right now it is the dip in temperatures. During winters heavy air traps pollutants near the ground, creating a thick layer of smog. The hazardous air quality in Delhi poses severe health risks to its residents. Prolonged exposure can lead to respiratory ailments, cardiovascular issues and other chronic conditions. Vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions, are at the highest risk. This is not the first time Delhi's air quality has entered the severe-plus category this season. In November, similar conditions led to the imposition of GRAP Stage IV. The recurrence of severe pollution highlights the cyclical nature of Delhi's air quality crisis, driven by a mix of local and regional factors. Unfortunately, authorities lack a comprehensive plan to address the issue, relying instead on knee-jerk reactions and ineffective quick fixes.

PICTALK



Visitors click photographs of the frozen Drung waterfall, in Baramulla

Year 2025: Prophecies, politics and progress

From hosting grand spiritual and political events to navigating economic growth and political turbulence, 2025 is poised to be a year of transformation and change



KALYANI SHANKAR

What does the crystal ball reveal about the upcoming year 2025? The predictions are a mixed bag. Nostradamus, the famous French astrologer and seer, has made significant predictions regarding global affairs and India's future for 2025. The 16th-century seer has predicted significant events that have shaped our world, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the moon landing, lending credibility and a sense of awe to his predictions. People today are trying to interpret the 16th-century seer's prophecy, impressed by his historical accuracy. Nostradamus has predicted that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war may end in 2025.

He warned that both nations could face climate change and floods. According to the New York Post, Turkey and France could significantly facilitate the peace process between Ukraine and Russia. Nostradamus also foretold an 'ancient plague' in England in 2025, indicating a resurgence of a historical disease and the resolution of Brazil's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and various natural disasters. Additionally, Nostradamus has predicted that the earth may be hit by an asteroid. He said 'From the cosmos, a fireball will rise, a harbinger of fate,' could engage us in potential future events with profound and concerning implications.

As for India's future, the year begins with the 2025 Republic Day parade. The theme is 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas'. It is yet to be finalised who will be the chief guest. On the religious side, the next Maha Kumbh Mela will be held in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, from January 13, 2025, to February 26, 2025. The Mela is a grand and holy spiritual gathering every 12 years at a rotating location. Millions of pilgrims rush to the venue to take the holy bath. In 2025, India will likely see fast economic growth, social challenges and new technology. The government is making sig-



IN 2025, INDIA WILL LIKELY SEE FAST ECONOMIC GROWTH, SOCIAL CHALLENGES, AND NEW TECHNOLOGY. THE GOVERNMENT IS MAKING SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

nificant improvements in technology education and renewable energy. These efforts and chances for economic development give a positive outlook for India's future prosperity. India is becoming more critical globally by working closely with other major economies in trade, defence, and climate efforts. This shows India's growing political power. At the domestic level, a critical issue facing the Opposition coalition, INDIA, is its cohesion. Already, some tensions have emerged. The Trinamool Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have distanced themselves from the alliance. The AAP plans to contest the Delhi Assembly elections independently.

The cracks within were visible in the latest Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand Assembly polls. While the Congress has done poorly in Haryana and Maharashtra, it is in coalition in Jharkhand with the JMM. The partners in the coalition are unhappy about the Congress's dismal performance. They are watching how Congress performs in the upcoming Delhi and Bihar polls scheduled for 2025.

The upcoming Assembly polls will indicate the future

of political realignment. Delhi will hold Assembly elections in February, with the BJP looking to unseat Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal. The AAP has faced many challenges, including corruption allegations against several leaders in the recent past. As a tactic, the AAP has appointed Athishi as a temporary chief minister for the polls. The AAP and Congress were partners in the Lok Sabha elections. While AAP performed reasonably well, the Congress got no seats. Bihar will also have elections this year. It is politically a critical state. The ruling NDA, led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, may face intense competition from the Mahagathabandhan, headed by Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav. The BJP and the JD(U) are working to retain the state.

Two political organisations—the Rashtriya Swamiv Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the CPI—will celebrate their birth centenary. The RSS will complete 100 years in September, while the CPI will begin its centenary celebrations in December this year. With its ups and downs, the RSS has strongly influenced Indian

politics and society now making it hard for future governments to weaken their power. At the same time, communist parties have less impact now, as right-wing parties are becoming more popular. On international affairs, India will hold the Quad Summit, originally scheduled to be held in New Delhi this September, which was relocated to New York due to a scheduling conflict among the attending leaders. Now, India will host the Quad summit in 2025. The US President Trump will likely visit New Delhi for the summit, further revealing India's position in international affairs. Another important visit is that of Russian President Putin, in the first half of next year. The Kremlin has said it will set a date early next year. It will be Putin's first visit since the Ukraine conflict began. Overall 2025 will be a mixed year for India. The economy is progressing well, and foreign relations are stable, but the political situation remains unclear. By next year, Congress could recover, or the BJP and the regional satraps would have a further hold on the electorate. (The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DISTRACTING FORM ISSUES

Madam —The introduction of 'One Nation One election' bill is a conscious attempt to waste the precious time of the parliament, and it is definitely timed to divert the attention of all from crucial issues like Manipur, serious allegations over Adani Group's misdoings, inflation, declining growth rates, the stunningly widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the fast deteriorating relationship with many countries. The ruling dispensation, in spite of being aware of a lack of enough strength to get this amendment bill through, tabling it in the parliament displays the intention behind its introduction. Moreover, the reasons counted upon to place this bill do not sound either logical or rational.

Losing majority support and deciding to refer the bill to the Joint Parliament Committee is a preplanned act deliberately meant to divert the course. It has already been explained by many quarters that the very idea of this proposal runs against democratic norms, as the demands of the people vary from a state and central government and are altogether different from local bodies. The narratives of national parties are sure to sway over the elections of state assemblies and the local bodies. The claims about expenditure do not deserve to be considered. Claims of hurdles to development programmes are not correct, as the restrictions are only for the launching of new projects during the notified period. Above all, the inability of the Election Commission to hold such a huge project is visible from the time schedule it keeps up to hold elections. Therefore it is not good to waste huge resources and take away the time of parliament sessions.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINIANS

Madam —Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi carrying a bag to Parliament that has 'Palestine' emblazoned on it proves that she is most concerned about the war, where the innocent people in Palestine are dying because of the deadly war. She has right-

Goa Liberation Day



Goa's Liberation Day is celebrated on December 19 and has its importance in the history of Goa. This is the day when Goa got her freedom from the dominant rule of the Portuguese with the help of the Indian armed forces and the navy. The Liberation of Goa was rather a historic event. The fight for Goa's freedom was dual—inside Goa and outside Goa—which was performed by the Indian government.

Towards the end of 1961, after various unsuccessful talks, the Indian government deployed armed forces.

On December 17, 1961, more than 30,000 Indian ground troops with the help of the Indian Air Force and the army conquered the 3,000-member ill-prepared Portuguese navy. There were a few more armed acts following that. The rest of the Portuguese colonies of Daman and Diu were also overpowered. The complete build-up of the Portuguese colonies shaped the Union Territory of Goa, Daman and Diu. The total army operation 'Operation Vijay' was performed almost without any violence. Finally, the Portuguese Governor General Vassalão da Silva fled Goa on December 19. After three days of operations, on December 19, 1961, Goa, at last, became a part of India. The day is observed with a lot of celebrations in Goa.

Jubel D'Cruz | Mumbai

deserve more leaders like Priyanka Gandhi.

Zakir Hussain | Kasipet

DILJIT WANTS BETTER CONCERT INFRA

Madam —Punjab superstar Diljit Dosanjh recently announced during his performance in Chandigarh that he would not hold any concerts in India until the government improves the country's concert infrastructure. India boasts a large number of talented singers who represent the nation globally and deliver phenomenal performances in international concerts. However, within their own country, they face inadequate concert infrastructure and a lack of basic facilities. This is concerning, as well-organised concerts could serve as a significant source of revenue and provide livelihoods to thousands. It is high time that the government recognises the potential of the music industry and invests in developing world-class infrastructure to support artists and their audiences.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Preparations underway in Prayagraj for Mahakumbh 2025

Prime Minister Modi visits the Triveni Sangam, offers prayers and reviews the arrangements for the world's largest spiritual gathering

Year 2025 is going to witness the largest religious gathering of humanity at Prayagraj — Mahakumbh. The preparations are already in full swing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached the holy city of Prayagraj, the land of pilgrimage, to oversee preparations for the grand Mahakumbh. This becomes even more significant at the confluence of three holy rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati. At this Triveni Sangam, the auspicious gathering of saints and sages during Mahakumbh elevates it into a grand event. The significance of Mahakumbh lies in its occurrence every 12 years, an event described in depth in our religious texts and Puranas. According to the estimates of government of Uttar Pradesh, over 45 crore people will attend the Mahakumbh Mela 2025. This makes it the world's largest religious gathering. Though everybody would like to take a dip at Sangam, but there are other centre of attractions too. Among the ancient temples of Prayagraj, the Nag Vasuki Temple holds a special place.



Worship of serpents or Nagas has been integral to Sanatan Dharma since ancient times. Among these, Vasuki, considered the king of serpents, is an essential figure. Vasuki Nag is also depicted as Lord Shiva's neck.

According to the legend of Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), Nag Vasuki was used as the rope during the churning of the ocean by gods and demons, with Mount Mandarachal serving as the churning rod. Vasuki Nag's body was injured during this process, and on Lord Vishnu's advice, he rested at Prayagraj and bathed at the Triveni Sangam to heal.

It is believed that a visit to the Nag Vasuki Temple after a holy dip at Sangam completes the spiritual journey. This temple, located in the Daraganj area of Prayagraj

along the Ganga River, has its roots in ancient mythology. A story mentions that King Divodas of Kashi performed penance to bring Lord Shiva to Varanasi, and Vasuki Nag was requested to stay in Prayagraj by the deities. Vasuki Nag agreed, stipulating that devotees must visit him after bathing at Sangam and worship him on Nag Panchami. The temple was subsequently established under divine guidance.

Preparations for Mahakumbh 2025: The grand Mahakumbh, to be held from January 13 (Pushya Purnima) to February 26 (Maha Shivratri) next year, is being meticulously planned. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated projects worth Rs 5,500 crores aimed at improving pilgrim amenities and strengthening the

city's infrastructure.

Key projects include:

1. Doubling and electrification of the Varanasi-Madhusingh-Prayagraj rail section, including a new rail bridge over the Ganga.
2. Construction of underpasses and overpasses to ease traffic.
3. Development of nine new ghats, 3,000 additional trains, 300 parks, and the planting of 300,000 trees over 4,000 hectares.

While in Prayagraj PM Modi not only saw the preparation first hand but also performed rituals at the Sangam, prayed at the Akshay Vat tree, visited the reclining Hanuman Temple, and offered prayers at the Saraswati Koop. He also toured the Mahakumbh exhibition site. The Mahakumbh is expected to draw millions of pilgrims to the Sangam, where it is believed that a dip in the holy waters cleanses one of sins and leads to spiritual liberation (moksha). Apart from bathing rituals, devotees participate in prayers, discourses by saints, and spiritual enlightenment sessions. (The writer is a freelance journalist; views are personal)



BINOD TAKIAWALA



However good a Constitution may be, if those who are implementing it are not good, it will prove to be bad

BR
Armedkar

newindianexpress.com

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

— Ramnath Goenka

DEFAMATION CASES WILL CLOG COURTS TILL CLARITY IS PROVIDED

THE Karnataka High Court recently junked a defamation case against public works development minister Satish Jarkiholi, who had been accused of defaming Hindus. The court also quashed criminal proceedings against BJP MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatal for uttering remarks unpalatable to the state Congress unit. The cases are the latest in a slew of defamation suits being filed across the country, most often by politicians or their supporters against patriots' sideswipes. Another case recently landed in the Supreme Court when AAP leader Satyendar Jain, who spent 18 months in jail before getting bail in a money laundering case, took umbrage at BJP MP Bansuri Swarna's allegation that he had amassed disproportionate wealth and was a fraud.

The trend of filing defamation cases citing 'hurt sentiments' and 'personal anguish' is dragging political slugs into the legal arena. It's left to courts to constantly redraw the fine line between the freedom of speech and the grey zone of defamation, where the hurt sentiments or reputations of a person or a community can be validated. In Jarkiholi's case, the judge ruled that "a definite class of people" was not defamed and so it did not fall under Section 499 (defamation) of the Penal Code. Cognisance was taken of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's remarks on the Modi surname—which led to his conviction, sentencing and subsequent disqualification as a member of parliament until the Supreme Court stayed his conviction.

Defamation cases are being increasingly used as a tool to intimidate political rivals and curb criticism. This raises questions on the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression in the political field. The conviction rate in defamation cases is low—only one in seven accused had been found guilty by the higher judiciary in 2018, the latest year for which such a number is available. Courts are regularly quashing defamation and seditious suits, warning that entertaining them would be an abuse of the process of law. Until there is more clarity on what exactly constitutes defamation, such suits will only waste the judiciary's precious time. It can be said that some such comments are best ignored. But Indian politicians are not known for their sense of humour, and now, for their sense of tolerance too.

FIX GLITCHES, INSTIL SAFE ROAD CULTURE EARLY

ROAD accidents in Kerala are continuing to claim lives at an alarming rate. Around 70 percent of road accident victims in the state are said to be of the prime working age of 18 to 55. But accidents do not discriminate. Among those who perished in a series of shocking accidents in December alone were six medical and four school students. At the same time, the state has the highest share of the elderly falling victim to road accidents in the country. On highway accidents, it's second after Tamil Nadu. In all, road accidents killed over 4,000 people in Kerala every year.

Driver-related issues account for most of the 2,34,466 accidents recorded over the past six years. That a third of accident victims are pedestrians also underlines drivers' recklessness, especially those steering private buses. To put the onus of responsible driving on bus owners, the motor vehicles department has come up with measures that include suspending for six months the permits of carriers that have caused fatal accidents. It has also been decided to cancel drivers' licences for reckless driving and make police clearance mandatory for bus crews. The police have proposed to the state government to install smart cameras linked to detection technologies along all state highways as well as minor roads. Police vehicles will be deployed on highways at regular intervals through the night.

While these measures are a good beginning, the government must also rectify engineering glitches that have resulted in poor road surfaces, badly-lit roads and flawed designs, which too play a major role in accidents. The government must ensure that roads are audited at regular intervals and deficiencies, especially on highways, are swiftly addressed. Once this is done, effective monitoring and enforcement of laws can address the issue more effectively. It is important to continuously monitor young, newly-licensed drivers for a specific period as many accidents are caused by fresh licensees. Experts insist it is important to inculcate a 'road culture' from a very young age—ideally initiated at school. All these measures—better roads, properly trained drivers, stricter enforcement of laws and broader awareness—will save many lives in one of the most dangerous states for those on the road.

QUICK TAKE

MOONSHOT IN MOTION

It looks like a dark metal egg propped up in a rocky desert. Habitat-1, a pod to simulate space-like conditions, has been set up for Isro in Ladakh by architect Aastha Kacha-Jha. The tests done at Habitat-1 are expected to help the Gaganyaan mission that is planned to take off next year and the space station planned by 2035. Meanwhile, the government informed the Lok Sabha on Wednesday that IN-SPACE, the agency promoting private participation in the space sector, has called companies to come forward for a public-private deal to set up an Earth observation system. The time for Indian companies to look up and dream beyond is now.

THE recent controversial hate speech by Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court deserves to be deprecated in the strongest terms. He made open and disparaging comments against minorities. He mistook constitutional democracy for conventional democracy and spoke as if communal majoritarianism is synonymous to democracy. The oath under the third schedule of the Constitution obliges him to uphold the integrity of India and perform his duties "without fear or favour, affection or ill-will" and also "uphold the Constitution and laws".

The text of his speech clearly negates the solemn affirmation in the oath he has taken. Thus, the nation was confronted with a scenario where a judge of a constitutional court discarded the values of the fundamental law in public. That the Chief Justice Sanjeev Khanna acted in time and called for a report on the incident is a matter of solace. Justice Yadav has also been summoned to appear before the collegium of judges at the Supreme Court.

More than an aberration by an individual judge, the incident reflects an unhealthy trend among some judges to lean towards political power centres. For these persons, legal precedents over their assigned constitutional role. The Congress era also showed a series of such shameful abandonment of judicial constituencies in search of political or other positions. Contemporary India, too, has her bad apples.

The quality of independence of the judiciary has a close linkage with the quality of democracy. The present day's deterioration of democracies across the world is often facilitated by courts as well, as David Landau and Rosalind Dixon demonstrated in their paper 'Abusive Judicial Review: Courts Against Democracy' (2020). In *Anatomy of the State*, even the right-wing liberal thinker Murray Rothbard endorsed the view of professor Charles Black who believed judicial review often supplies "ideological legitimacy" to executive actions. In his controversial work *The Politics of the Judiciary* (1977), A.G. Griffith opined that "[judicial] impartiality is a sham" and tried to expose the myth of the court being totally independent.

Thus, doctrinally, independence of the judiciary is a contested concept. It requires a great element of effort and the highest level of integrity on the robed class to dissociate from the possible mischiefs of the political executive of the day. The judiciary, being "the least

dangerous branch" as Alexander Hamilton put it, should be vigilant enough to uphold its identity.

This line of thinking led to the consolidation of certain notions about the way in which judges should conduct themselves. The Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct was an effort that got global recognition at a round table meeting at The Hague in 2002. It enlisted judicial values like independence, impartiality, integrity, equality, competence and diligence to be upheld by individual judges in their personal and professional life. "The behaviour of the judge is the bastion for people to reap the fruits of democracy, liberty and justice," said the Supreme Court in the *Ravichandran Iyer* case (1995).

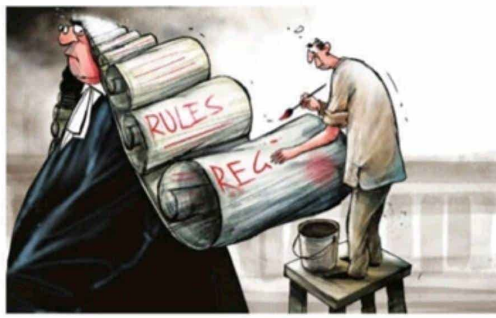
The latest case of a judge crossing lines of propriety is part of an alarming trend. With its 1997 code on judicial values breached, the Supreme Court needs to frame new rules

THE NEED FOR A JUDICIAL CODE OF CONDUCT

KALEESWARAM RAJ



Lawyer, Supreme Court of India



SCURRY BOY

In 1997, the Supreme Court formulated a code on 'restatement of judicial values' that, among other things, said judges should avoid actions that erode public confidence in the impartiality of the judiciary. It called for an enlightened detachment consistent with the dignity of the judicial office. It also asked judges to keep away from public debates and interdicted them from expressing political views. The code warned that judges are under public scrutiny and they should not behave in a manner unbecoming of their position.

Justice Yadav's speech breached the code in letter and spirit. A move for his impeachment, in all probability, would fail for want of numbers. It is impossible to imagine lawmakers in India rising above party lines to uphold the

THE PETROV DILEMMA & AI

IN 1983, the Soviet Union's Oko early-warning system issued a critical alert, signalling an imminent nuclear strike from the US. The system, based on satellite data and artificial analysis, had malfunctioned, misinterpreting sunlight reflections on high-altitude clouds as missile launches. The officer on duty, Stanislav Petrov, faced a critical dilemma: to trust the seemingly precise output or rely on human intuition shaped by broader context and uncertainty. He chose the latter, averting a nuclear catastrophe.

This moment serves as a haunting precursor to the challenges we now face with AI. It highlights the philosophical question of epistemic reliability: How do we ensure that machine-generated knowledge aligns with truth in high-stakes scenarios?

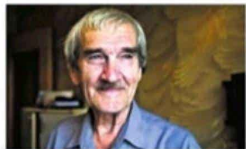
The electronics and IT ministry recently organised a consultation to establish the India AI Safety Institute, reflecting global efforts to address the multifaceted challenges posed by advanced AI technologies. The US, UK, European Union, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Canada, France, Kenya and Australia have already established institutes to evaluate AI systems, conduct adversarial testing, and develop methodologies for mitigating risks such as bias, manipulation and unintended behaviour. However, they should also look at the ethical questions.

An AI safety institute should look at epistemological and ethical dimensions of decision-making. What does it mean for an AI system to "understand" a risk? How can it differentiate between a signal and noise in contexts it has not been explicitly trained for? And how do we embed systems with the humility to defer when certainty is an illusion? These questions lie at the intersection of philosophy, ethics and systems design, defining the very essence of safe AI.

AI systems are built on probabilistic models, programmed to infer conclusions from data patterns. However, their epistemic framework is inherently narrow, confined to parameters of their training and the assumptions embedded by their designers. In contrast, human judgement often draws on tacit knowledge, an intuitive synthesis of experience, context and uncertainty. This highlights the philosophical distinction between computing and knowing.

For an AI safety institute, this raises a crucial question: can machines ever possess an epistemic framework broad enough to account for unquantifiable uncertainties? If not, how do we design systems that recognise the limits of their knowledge, akin to Petrov's decision to distrust the system when faced with conflicting signals?

The Oko incident also highlights the ethical question of deference. Machines act on the basis of pre-determined thresholds for action set by programmers, but lack the moral capacity to evaluate the stakes of their decisions in human terms. This leads to a broader question: should AI systems always defer to humans in decision scenarios, or should they act autonomously when speed is of essence? This is also a concern with lethal autonomous weapon systems.



Russian officer Stanislav Petrov averted a nuclear catastrophe in 1983 by ignoring the Soviet early warning system mistakenly warning of a US missile strike. As India sets up an AI Safety Institute, questions arise on granting machine-mediated knowledge primacy in high-stakes scenarios

The philosophical tradition of virtue ethics offers one way to think about this. Aristotle argued virtuous action depends on phronesis—practical wisdom rooted in moral character. An AI, no matter how advanced, cannot possess this, raising the risk of decisions devoid of ethical nuance. An AI safety institute must therefore grapple with the design of systems that can incorporate ethical constraints while remaining operationally effective. Can machines be designed to "know" when to stop, seek human input, or even refuse to act?

The Petrov dilemma also invites us to question the ontology of agency in machines. Do we treat AI systems as independent agents capable of making decisions, or merely as extensions of human intent? The former implies a need to grant them some level of moral accountability, while the latter suggests humans must always bear ulti-

mate responsibility for their actions. Yet, as AI systems grow more complex, the boundaries blur. The safety institute must tackle these ambiguities, developing frameworks that address the paradox of accountability.

At a deeper level, the 1983 incident underscores the tension between certainty and uncertainty in decision-making systems. Modern AI systems are designed to operate in environments of calculable risk, but struggle in situations of radical uncertainty where unknowns cannot be parameterised. The philosopher John Rawls introduced the concept of the "veil of ignorance" to address fairness in human decision-making. A similar principle could be applied to AI safety: how do we design systems that make decisions as if they are unaware of their own biases and limitations, ensuring a level of 'humility' in their outputs?

A critical dimension is the challenge of value pluralism, which arises from the incommensurability of human values embedded in decision-making contexts. Unlike humans, whose judgements are shaped by competing priorities such as equity, efficiency, and cultural norms, AI systems operate on predefined optimisation criteria that may fall in scenarios requiring moral trade-offs. For instance, a self-driving car confronted with an unavoidable accident must "decide" between minimising overall casualties and prioritising its passengers.

Drawing on Isaiah Berlin's concept of value pluralism, it is clear that no universal framework, whether utilitarianism, deontology or situational ethics, can resolve all such conflicts. This necessitates the development of adaptive systems capable of integrating multiple value paradigms while recognising context-specific nuances. Moreover, encoding such values into AI systems requires participatory governance mechanisms to prevent the privileging of dominant or exclusionary perspectives.

By engaging policymakers, ethicists, technologists and civil society, AI safety institutes must establish deliberative frameworks to ensure inclusive and operationally feasible ethical alignment. AI risks perpetuating systemic biases or making ethically indefensible decisions in high-stakes environments without these safeguards.

(Views are personal)
(On X @adityasinha00)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

More reforms

Ref: One election can be first of many reforms (Dec 18). The one election idea seems to focus on just one leader, PM Narendra Modi. The BJP is desperate to spread their wings at any cost. But there are several other elections reforms that are more important.
N Nagarajan, Secunderabad

Curbing populism

The one election bill introduced in the parliament seems to be a good move at the right time. It is imperative that the opposition parties should not oppose it just for the sake of it. It is high time intellectuals in all major parties sit together and discuss the merits and demerits of the proposed legislation. If the law can reduce populism in politics, it would greatly improve the lives of our citizens.
Jalakashan K, Kengeri

Weigh consequences

The one election bill introduced in parliament is disadvantaged by the fact that polls conducted simultaneously to elect representatives to parliament, state assemblies and local bodies will be fought on entirely different issues, which lack uniformity. However, considerable money will be saved. Both these factors must be discussed at length before coming to a conclusion.
George Jacob, Kochi

Gold glut

Ref: Insatiable gold demand poses tricky question for rupee (Dec 18). India's soaring gold imports, driven by cultural demand and rising prices, are exacerbating trade deficit and inflation. Despite efforts to curb smuggling, the country's appetite for gold remains a challenge.
Rejish Dugar, Bengaluru

New-gen women

Ref: Bigger WPL next step for women's cricket (Dec 18). Indeed, it is time to expand the WPL with more teams. Expanding women's cricket will give them an opportunity to learn and gain experience. Promoting women's cricket in India is essential for achieving gender equality and creating a new generation of role models.
Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Smaller enterprises

Ref: Growing enterprises in a time-tested Indian way (Dec 18). The idea of fostering businesses through traditional Indian approaches examines the harmony between age-old practices and modern business tactics. It accentuates the crucial role of micro-enterprises in the Indian economy, demonstrating how their advancement can drive broader development.
NR Jagannath, Bengaluru

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Terror alert in Punjab

Police force can't afford to let its guard down

TERROR groups working in tandem with gangsters, mostly based abroad, are keeping Punjab Police personnel on their toes. These are dangerous portents for a state that remained in the throes of militancy for a decade and is yet to fully recover from that prolonged nightmare. The targeting of police stations or posts in Majha, which is vulnerable to cross-border smuggling of guns, explosives and drugs, is a brazen attempt to dent the morale of law enforcement agencies and fuel tensions in the state. According to the police top brass, this is the handwork of pro-Khalistan groups backed by the usual suspect — Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. Handlers based in Germany and other Western countries are also in the thick of things, going by the recent arrest of three members of the Khalistan Zindabad Force terror module and the busting of an inter-state gun racket.

Two decades after rooting out militancy from the state, the Punjab Police had been jolted out of complacency in July 2015 when terrorists from Pakistan stormed Dinanagar police station in Gurdaspur district. Barely five months later, the Pathankot airbase was attacked. The two incidents taught the police a harsh lesson — there is no room for luxury when anti-India elements are hell-bent on creating trouble. The latest surge in terror activities is another wake-up call — it should spur the state's cops to be more vigilant and work in closer coordination with Central organisations such as the Border Security Force and the National Investigation Agency.

The recent attempt on the life of former Deputy CM Sukhbir Singh Badal outside the Golden Temple is a stark reminder that violent extremism is not yet dead and buried in Punjab. The embers of radicalism are still glowing, with efforts afoot to resurrect the bogie of Khalistan. The onus is on the police to enforce the rule of law and reassure the people about their safety and security.

The bag lady

Priyanka's totes speak louder than words

WHO needs long speeches when a bag can say it all? Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's recent appearances in Parliament with her tote bags have turned serious issues into serious fashion statements. One day it was 'Palestine' written across her handbag; the next, 'Stand with Bangladeshi Hindus and Christians'. Forget fiery debates — this Winter Session will be remembered for the accessories. But Priyanka isn't alone in this trend of 'message dressing'. US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 'Tax the Rich' dress at the Met Gala in 2021 was the talk of social media. It turned an elite event into a debate on wealth inequality. Back in India, Opposition MPs have mastered the art of wearable protests. From jackets screaming 'Modi-Adani Ek Hai' that they donned earlier this month to all-black outfits worn last year for solidarity with Manipur violence victims, their wardrobe seems to have become an extension of the manifesto.

Of course, such moves invite criticism. The BJP was quick to label Priyanka's bags as 'appeasement politics', accusing her of prioritising foreign issues over domestic ones. But Priyanka brushed it off, calling the backlash 'typical patriarchy'. Her defiant 'who's going to decide what I wear?' response proved she's carrying more than just a bag — she's carrying a message.

Symbolism in politics is a double-edged sword. While it captures attention, it risks being dismissed as superficial. Priyanka's gesture, however, transcends mere theatrics by invoking India's historical ethos of supporting oppressed communities, whether during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War or in advocating for Palestine's statehood. At the end of the day, whether it is dubbed as fashion activism or clever posturing, one thing is clear: Priyanka's tote bags aren't just an accessory but statements invoking India's moral responsibility in global humanitarian crises.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1924

Colonel Wedgwood's advice

COLONEL Wedgwood is so sincere a friend of India that any advice coming from him is bound to receive earnest attention at the hands of all patriotic Indians. The special article contributed by him to *The Hindu*, a telegraphic summary of which appeared in these columns yesterday, is a proof of at once the sincerity of his love of India and of that refreshing frankness which we have learnt to associate with his public utterances. The very opening words of the telegraphic summary are eminently characteristic of the man. "If Labour has done nothing for India during the past year," he writes, "neither had India helped her own case. We are no nearer Home Rule than we were a year ago and there are five years of Conservative rule ahead. During these five years, anything may happen except the next forward step hoped for by all who love India and freedom." Subject to one reservation, to which we shall refer, no words could have more admirably summed up the position. It is no small thing for one who was himself a member of the Labour Government to frankly admit that it did nothing for India during its term of office, and in spite of that term, India is no nearer Home Rule, to which Labour stands pledged, than she was a year ago. The reservation is only as regards the statement that India has not helped her own case. In the main, even this statement is true. The failure and the eventual abandonment of the much-advertised non-cooperation programme, on which so many in India seemed to pin their faith more or less exclusively three years ago, cannot surely be counted as a gain, except by those who believed that that programme alone stood between India and Home Rule.

Look beyond simultaneous polls

A democracy needs much more than the efficient conduct of elections



ASHOK LAVASA
FORMER ELECTION COMMISSIONER

THE relationship between the electorate and the elected representatives is that of demand and supply. In a democracy, the latter work towards fulfilling the former's aspirations. The ruling party tries to keep its poll promises, sometimes working to fulfil its own vision of what it thinks is good for the people and the country.

One Nation, One Election (ONOE) may be a part of the BJP's election manifesto, but surely it wasn't demanded by any section of society, even though some people felt that India suffered from "too much democracy". That the ruling party was convinced about the merits of ONOE was evident from the repeated assertions of its leadership and the way in which the terms of the Ram Nath Kovind committee were drafted. Its recommendations were a foregone conclusion, but the speed with which the government acted on it has surprised many. Having been elected with a truncated mandate, few expected the NDA government to vigorously pursue this matter, especially since its implementation is far away.

The 'farsightedness' of the government in wanting to legislate on something to be implemented a decade from now is intriguing. Similar alacrity was exhibited in passing the Women's Reservation Bill (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, labelled "a post-dated cheque") before the 2024 General Election. The difference is complete unanimity in passing the women's Bill but a total divergence in opinion about the desirability of the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill that pertains to ONOE.

The government won't mind referring the Bill to a joint parlia-



FRANCHISE: The right to vote in favour or against a government is an essential ingredient of a democracy. *ANI*

mentary committee as this would satisfy the Opposition and reflect its own open-mindedness. The passage of the Bill in a hurry might not be the objective; bringing it on the table and opening up the possibility of a consensus would serve the purpose as everyone would feel they are deliberating a 'grand electoral reform'. But is it so?

Simultaneous polls were held for 15 years after 1961 without an express provision to this effect in the Constitution. The chain was broken due to the vicissitudes and dynamics of power politics. The right to vote in favour or against a government is an essential ingredient of a democracy. While the Bill doesn't take away the right of withdrawing support from a ruling party, it offers the voters the right to elect a government for a curtailed period in order to complete the "unexpired term" of the government that is voted out. Thus, an outgoing elected regime would pave the way for an incoming elected substitute for a limited period.

The voter will be electing the playing eleven once every five years to fulfil the fetish of simultaneous elections and elect 'extras' or a 'nightwatchman' to replace an injured main player (government). The current system applicable to electing members of Parliament or legislative assemblies in a by-election will now apply to the entire House in

Recent examples show that the ECI has opted to stagger elections that could have been easily combined.

the event of mid-term polls.

Parliamentarians may consider whether this twisting of the people's right would diminish the character of our democracy. What would be achieved by creating this duality? Is simultaneously such a sacred objective or a fundamental principle that issues affecting democratic choices should be thus subordinated to managerial efficiency? The stadium of the lawmakers is on trial. After all, the framers of the Constitution didn't provide for simultaneous elections and left it to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to deal within the constitutional framework to deal with the exigencies of any situation.

Nobody can dispute the benefits of a short, swift, single predictable exercise, especially when it involves a billion people. While holding elections is a routine democratic exercise, it is not

like the UPSC conducting civil services exams once a year as per a fixed schedule. Administrative efficiency is desirable and there are ways in which the conduct of elections could be less time-consuming and involving less manpower. The excessive dependence on paramilitary forces, cited as a bottleneck forcing the ECI to conduct prolonged multi-phased elections, is due to the volatile nature of our politics and the vitriolic campaigning. The extant laws do empower the ECI to hold elections six months prior to the expiry of the term of any House, giving it a certain flexibility in scheduling and bunching elections for efficient management. However, recent examples show that the ECI has opted to stagger elections that could have been easily combined. Clearly, expediency is more persuasive than the principle of simultaneity.

Whether this so-called reform passes muster in Parliament or not, it is time the government and political parties took up more substantive electoral reforms pertaining to the issues of cash, crime, caste, community, the integrity of the electoral process, disqualification of candidates and capping the poll expenditure that have been suggested by the ECI and are languishing for long. Simulta-

neous elections are intended to reduce government expenditure in conducting elections, but what about controlling the use of black money in polls, and finding transparent ways for political funding? The Bill doesn't target these through the so-called reforms.

Let it be known that the Model Code of Conduct prohibits only a certain category of public expenditure with a view to denying the ruling party an unfair advantage by spending public resources. One wonders why ruling parties should wait till before the elections for taking major policy decisions and dub them as "disruptors of governance".

Further, elections in any state concern the voters and political leaders of that state, neither affecting the voters of other states nor the Central Government unless the party leadership is obsessed with campaigning everywhere, not letting the local leadership manage state-level campaigns. Would simultaneous elections further diminish the focus on elected local bodies and turn them into non-descript representatives of their central leadership rather than effective representatives of local voters?

The efficient conduct of elections is definitely a source of satisfaction, but a democracy needs much more. As parliamentarians spend their precious time making the conduct of elections more efficient in the distant future, they would do well to devote time to the issues affecting the people here and now. The hazardous air quality in the Capital, especially outside Parliament, the depletion of groundwater, the pollution of our rivers, the pathetic conditions of our educational institutions and public health facilities, and the environmental degradation facing the country are more immediate and pressing issues of governance and deserve their attention as much as the matter of simultaneous polls.

The citizens of India may not be exhausted by exercising their voting right frequently, but they might be exhausted waiting for their aspirations of a decent living to be fulfilled.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Voting is the only way to ensure that your concerns matter. — Michelle Obama

Zakir saab epitomised grace, humility

RENU SUD SINHA

AS the world, and not just India, mourns the loss of tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, I am reminded of my first and only meeting with the iconic artist. In the early 1990s, as a college student, my 'patriotism' had made me passionate about Indian classical music rather than the more-in-fashion Western music, while my young heart would flutter at the sight of these virtuosos. Ustad Zakir Hussain topped the list, as his ringlets swirled with every beat of his tabla.

The percussion artist had come to Ludhiana to perform at an event. The local glitterati was in full attendance. Despite all my desperate efforts, I could not meet him backstage after the event. But what kind of a fan gives up easily? Well, I persisted and pestered a family friend, who was a senior journalist, to do something. Challenged about his professional *jugaad*, uncle was able to find out where the *ustad* was staying.

Next day, at 7 am sharp, we were at the guesthouse where Zakir saab was putting up. Uncle barged straight into the bedroom, where the *ustad* was sleeping, while I hovered hesitantly at the door. Uncle introduced himself to the person under the covers. A sleepy voice, courteous to a fault, not perturbed by this intrusion, asked us in a gentle tone, "Can you give me some time?"

The attendant showed us to the drawing room, serving us tea, which apparently the *ustad* had asked him to. Sometime later, dressed in purple silk kurta and lungi, the maestro emerged, water dripping from his curls. For a young fan, the moment and sight were beyond what she had hoped or wished for.

For the next 40 minutes or so, uncle spoke to Zakir saab for my interview for his paper, while I pretended to take notes, my eyes never leaving his face for a moment. Used to such adulation, the *ustad*, who had been voted the 'sexiest man' by the readers of *Gentlemen*, must have guessed my adoration. Later, when we were leaving, I extended my diary for an autograph. Smiling, he obliged and said, "Be good, don't be naughty," leaving my uncle giving me puzzling looks.

"Why did he say that?" he asked. I laughed sheepishly, giving some feeble excuse, keeping my 'motives' for the meeting secret. Whatever were my motives or motivation, I later wrote an article and sent it to a leading newspaper, not expecting much. Some weeks later, I saw a half-page spread bearing my first byline. That meeting, by hook or crook, had become the start of a professional journey.

Over the years, I have met and interviewed a number of celebrities, many not even near Zakir saab's stature, but almost no one has measured up to his humility or kindness, or his talent. I wonder, if by any means a fan or a scribe would now be able to barge into a celeb's room like this and if he/she could, will they be treated with the same courtesy and gentleness? His passing is truly the passing of an era of grace, of *adab*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Care and awareness needed

Refer to 'Addicts not demons'; the editorial has rightly observed that drug users should not be treated as demons; instead, they should be taken care of compassionately. Haryana's mass campaign against drugs is bearing fruit. These initiatives need to be considered by Punjab too for the betterment of its youth. The Punjab Government should also encourage youngsters to participate in sports activities. Panchayats should organise games in villages and honour the winners. The state government should also come down heavily on drug smugglers so that the menace can be dealt with effectively.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Check easy availability of drugs

Apropos of 'Addicts not demons'; drug use and addiction are stigmatised. Instead of understanding the causes behind addiction, the drug users are condemned and ostracised. The problem needs an effective solution. Sometimes, families are not able to give much time to their children. The fear of not fulfilling the expectations of parents and teachers drives some students towards drugs. Unemployment is another factor behind frustration and addiction among the educated. Everyone, including the family, school, society and the government, need to work together to bring the addicts back to the mainstream. A strict vigil should be kept on campuses of educational institutions. The authorities must check the easy availability of drugs and act against traffickers.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Emulate khap's move

Refer to 'Celebratory firing'; the Sarv Jatiya Khap Panchayat's decision to ban electrolyte firing is a welcome move. The ban has been imposed after the death of a 13-year-old girl in Charkhi Dadri. No useful purpose is served by this mad practice that claims the lives of innocent people. It has been rightly observed that while grassroots efforts are crucial, the responsibility also lies with the authorities. The Supreme Court has repeatedly advocated a ban on this practice.

SUBHASH CTANEJA, GURUGRAM

Teach skills to boost employability

Apropos of 'Why taxing super-rich is an out-moded plan'; India has a complex system in which taxpayers are heavily taxed. Suggestions to increase the tax burden on the super-rich may not yield much gains for the treasury because they are not many. Equality should be brought by imparting quality education and improving healthcare. The opaque system causes many to indulge in corruption, malpractices and fraud. As a result, economic benefits don't reach the deserving. Lakhs of vacancies exist in government departments and the private sector due to the unemployability of the youth. Skill training can make them contenders for coveted jobs.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Penalise tax evaders

Refer to 'Why taxing the super-rich is an out-moded plan'; the article highlights India's stark income inequality. French economist Thomas Piketty's suggestion of higher taxes on the ultra-wealthy is well-founded. The author's arguments — while taxes could spur capital flight, the lack of reforms in education and healthcare is due to mismanagement, not the lack of funds — are compelling. However, both stem from the government's chronic failure to address these concerns. The question is: if China can create greater equality by taxing its billionaires, why can't India? The government must implement stringent measures to curb capital outflows and penalise tax evaders to ensure that India's growth benefits the poor without stifling vital investment.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Ashwin should offer to coach

It's odd that R Ashwin announced his retirement midway through India's Test series against Australia. The timing has denied his reputation as one of the strongest pillars of the Indian cricket team. Being a senior member, he could have continued guiding his young teammates. His maturity and experience make him the perfect motivator for other players. However, now that he has taken this decision, one wishes him the best, with the hope that he will volunteer to be a bowling coach for budding cricketers in India.

SPS NARANG, GURUGRAM

The Statesman

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Reviving Momentum

India's economy stands at a critical juncture, shaped by evolving trends in consumer behaviour, investment patterns, and structural wage growth. Recent data underscores a complex mix of recovery and stagnation, pointing to significant headwinds that demand immediate attention. One of the most striking observations is the decline in the issuance of e-way bills, a reliable indicator of goods movement. The cool, particularly after the festive season, highlights a dropping in inventory replenishment and subdued trade activity. This trend mirrors broader concerns about consumption patterns, as rising inflation continues to erode purchasing power, leaving many households cautious about discretionary spending. The mutual fund industry also reflects these shifting dynamics. A slowdown in systematic investment plan (SIP) account additions and reduced new fund offerings suggest waning investor enthusiasm. While SIP inflows remain steady, overall equity fund inflows have seen a sharp decline, particularly in thematic and sectoral funds. This hesitation points to a growing preference for safe havens over high-risk investments amid economic uncertainty. The automobile sector offers another lens into the challenges facing India's economy. Record-high discounts on passenger vehicles signal a demand crunch, leaving dealers struggling to clear inventories. This is a significant departure from post-festive sales trends in previous years, where moderate discounts sufficed to sustain momentum. The steep discounts and impending price hikes raise questions about consumer confidence and long-term affordability. Stagnant wage growth across critical sectors is perhaps the most worrying trend. Despite corporate profits multiplying over recent years, wage growth has failed to keep pace, particularly in industries like engineering, manufacturing and FMCG. Real incomes have declined when adjusted for inflation, further exacerbating inequality. As a result, consumption - a cornerstone of India's economic growth - is at risk of further weakening. Moreover, the decline in consumer confidence underscores the need for stronger social safety nets. Policies that directly address income insecurity, such as targeted subsidies or expanded employment guarantees, can help stabilise household spending and revive demand in the short term. Rising credit card delinquencies add another layer of concern. As households grapple with stagnant wages and rising living costs, the strain on unsecured loans has become evident. Banks have tightened credit criteria to manage defaults, but this carries the risk of excluding potential borrowers, slowing economic activity further. The moderate GDP growth rate of 5.4 per cent reflects these combined pressures. While not alarming, it indicates a need for sustained reforms to reinvigorate the economy. Policymakers must prioritise structural changes to address wage stagnation, encourage investment, and bolster consumer confidence. A balanced recovery will require a concerted focus on both demand and supply side interventions. Addressing wage disparities, improving credit access, and fostering investment-friendly policies can lay the foundation for robust growth. At the same time, targeted measures to enhance consumption - such as inflation control and direct support for low-income households - are essential. India's economic challenges are formidable but not insurmountable. The country will need focused action in order to navigate these headwinds and return to a path of sustainable and inclusive growth.

Wake-up call

The global democratic landscape in 2024 reveals an unsettling yet fascinating trend. Across continents, voters have upended incumbents, embraced polarising ideologies, and gravitated toward both Right and Left-wing populism. This year has not only been a test of electoral resilience but also a stark reminder of the growing dissatisfaction with traditional political frameworks and leadership. One of the most striking observations has been the downfall of incumbents. Economic challenges have played a pivotal role in this upheaval, with citizens across nations expressing discontent over stagnating growth, inflation, and unemployment. Dissatisfaction with governance and democracy has compounded this frustration. In many countries, a growing sense that traditional political systems are unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people has pushed voters to explore alternative political voices, no matter how radical. The rise of Right-wing populism, particularly in Western democracies, underscores this discontent. In various elections, these parties have not only gained parliamentary ground but also reshaped public discourse. They have successfully channelled anxieties over national identity, immigration, and cultural shifts into electoral gains. This narrative has resonated with a significant segment of the electorate, who feel alienated by progressive policies and globalisation. However, it would be reductive to view populism as solely a Right-wing phenomenon. Left-wing populists have also tapped into public frustrations, albeit from a different angle. Campaigning against economic inequality and political elitism, these movements have captured the imagination of those disillusioned with market-driven policies and social inequities. Both spectrums of populism, in their own ways, highlight the inadequacies of mainstream political structures in addressing the evolving concerns of the electorate. Another key theme of 2024 has been the intensifying cultural polarisation. Debates over issues like immigration, LGBT/QIA+ rights, and national identity have deepened ideological divides, making consensus harder to achieve. This polarisation is not confined to domestic issues; international conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza crisis, have further fractured political alliances. Positions on these conflicts often mirror domestic ideological divides, underscoring how global events now shape and amplify local political dynamics. While this tumult suggests a crisis of democracy, it also presents an opportunity. Populism, despite its flaws, has forced a reckoning within established political institutions. It has highlighted the need for governance models that are more inclusive, adaptive, and attuned to the aspirations of citizens. Democracies must now grapple with the dual challenge of addressing immediate economic and social grievances while fostering long-term cohesion in increasingly diverse societies. The upheaval of 2024 should not be viewed merely as a destabilising force but as a wake-up call. If leaders can rise to the occasion, this turbulent year could serve as a turning point, ushering in reforms that strengthen democratic institutions and rebuild public trust. The future of democracy may well depend on it.

Renewal of democracy

Democracy is not a monument but an ongoing process requiring engagement, compromise, and resistance to authoritarian impulses. The challenges Snyder highlights - inequality, disinformation, and the concentration of power - are real and demand attention. However, framing of the 'struggle for freedom' should inspire hope rather than despair, encouraging Americans to see themselves as agents of democratic renewal rather than passive observers of decline. America is not declining



In his latest book *On Freedom*, Yale historian Timothy Snyder provocatively asserts that "some Americans want to be tyrants." The statement, while challenging, invites strict scrutiny regarding its implications for American society and its ongoing democratic challenge in the age of Donald Trump.

Snyder's work often draws on lessons from 20th-century authoritarian regimes, particularly Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The immediate backdrop of the book is Ukraine's heroic struggle against Russia's naked aggression. However, Snyder explores with engaging personal stories and encounters with diverse thinkers including students and prisoners, various facets of freedom especially focusing on American society.

He argues that the seeds of tyranny are not just external threats but also internal tendencies - elements of society or political leadership that exploit crises to erode freedoms. His assertion highlights a paradox: in a nation founded on liberty, some may actively or passively enable its dismantling.

Snyder's analysis is rooted in real examples of democratic backsliding worldwide and the fragility of democratic norms. On Tuesday, 3 December, for example, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, which was however withdrawn due to massive public protests and the National Assembly's unanimous vote against it. David French, a New York Times columnist, was quick to ask whether martial law could happen in America.

However, Snyder's argument, while poignant, can be critiqued for its broad strokes and occasional overgeneralization. His phrase "some Americans want to be tyrants" may

be true, but it is a sweeping indictment of political opponents rather than a nuanced diagnosis.

Who, precisely, are these "Americans"? Are they political elites, fringe extremists, or everyday citizens swayed by authoritarian rhetoric? The lack of specificity undermines the effectiveness of his warning. Moreover, Snyder's rhetoric, while evocative, occasionally veers into alarmism - for example, as he said before the election on X, "Unless Trump loses, America ends." As a historian, Snyder should acknowledge the complexity of democratic resilience. For instance, while anti-democratic tendencies exist, so too does a vibrant civic infrastructure working to counter them, from grassroots organizers to independent media to state sovereignty in the federal system.

Snyder's analysis can sometimes overlook these counterforces in favour of a more ominous and sensational narrative. Democracy is not a monument but an ongoing process requiring engagement, compromise, and resistance to authoritarian impulses. The challenges Snyder highlights - inequality, disinformation, and the concentration of power - are real and demand attention.

However, framing of the "struggle for freedom" should inspire hope rather than despair, encouraging Americans to see themselves as agents of democratic renewal rather than passive observers of decline. America is not declining. Snyder's criticism of au-

thoritarian tendencies in the United States, including his warnings about Americans who "want to be tyrants," has been significantly shaped by Donald Trump.

Trump's rhetoric, including his claims of a "stolen election" and calls to overturn democratic processes, fit into Snyder's framework of how would-be tyrants undermine democratic institutions. In Snyder's view, Trump's leadership style - marked by disdain for checks and balances, attacks on the press, and a willingness to exploit disinformation - mirrors historical precedents where democracies have given way to autocracy.

The January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol was particularly significant because it was a moment when the United States came perilously close to losing its democratic footing. The event was not merely an isolated act of mob violence but the culmination of years of authoritarian rhetoric, mistrust in democratic institutions, and deliberate manipulation of the public through conspiracy theories and propaganda.

Snyder, an expert on totalitarian regimes, tyranny and freedom, draws parallels between Trump's efforts to retain power and the strategies of past autocrats. He highlights tactics such as exploiting crises, like Hitler's use of the Reichstag Fire in 1933, and employing the "Big Lie" strategy, which undermines trust in democracy, as seen with leaders like Stalin and Mussolini.

Snyder stresses that the erosion of democracy is a systemic risk exacerbated by broader issues such as inequality, weak civic education, and the influence of money in politics. For Snyder, Trump represents a symptom rather than the sole cause of authoritarian drift in the U.S.

Snyder's concerns about the fragility of democratic institutions are now at the forefront. He has consistently warned that Trump's approach to governance could erode democratic norms and processes.

In light of Trump's victory, Snyder's emphasis on active citizenship and the importance of individual and collective action in preserving democratic values becomes even more critical.

Recently, an attorney friend, echoing Snyder's admonition, wrote to me, "We should brace for some hard times and be prepared to join with those who will resist unlawful power grabs and unconstitutional actions." America has a long history of grassroots activism and resistance. Most importantly, despite the U.S. Supremacy Clause that establishes federal law as the supreme law, states in the United States have tremendous powers, which they have used successfully in many cases, defying the federal government, for example, establishing sanctuary cities for undocumented immigrants and marijuana legalization, despite federal prohibition.

Why would independent-spirited Vermont (my home state) or New Hampshire, with the motto "Live Free or Die", for example, follow Trump's ultra vir or unconstitutional acts? Besides, the Establishment (the deep state) is not going away. Believe me, I replied to my attorney friend, it's an extraordinary time to live in the US because American democracy is in the process of self-renewal.

Yours, etc., Shovanlal Chakraborty, Kolkata, 17 December.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Cross-Strait blood ties cannot be denied

Blood is thicker than water. Except that which flows through the veins of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) secessionists on the island harbor by trying to de-sinicize the island, it will be almost impossible for them to dilute the blood ties between people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait as they hope.

It is true that there are differences between both sides in terms of political systems and other institutional operations. Yet what cannot and will never change is that both sides of the Strait belong to one country and Chinese people living on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are members of the same family, sharing ties of blood and a common destiny.

The recent nine-day visit by a delegation of mainland college students, including Olympic table tennis champion Ma Long and shooting champion Yang Qian, should have been a testament to the blood ties between both sides of the Strait.

The warm welcome they received from various sectors in Taiwan spoke volumes about how people in Taiwan cherish the cordial relations between both sides. Yet the DPP vampires have tried to drain the blood from these exchanges. Yet reaffirming that such

CHINA DAILY

blood ties will not be sucked dry. Ma Ying-jeou, former chairman of the Chinese Kuomintang party, will lead a group of Taiwan youth to the mainland provinces of Heliangjiang and Sichuan later this month to participate in a major ice-themed event and engage in other exchange activities.

This visit will be Ma's second trip to the mainland this year, following a tour starting from the end of March, during which he led a Taiwan youth delegation to Guangdong, Shanxi and Beijing.

The visit concluded with a meeting between Ma and Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee.

That the mainland continues to do whatever it can to support and promote cross-Strait youth exchanges points to the fact that the Chinese mainland has not given up its efforts to seek the peaceful reunification of the motherland.

Just as Ma Ying-jeou said, the more exchanges there are between young people across the Strait, the fewer misperceptions there will be and the less chance of conflict in the future.

The mainland does not exclude the option of taking back the island by force, as there are some secessionists on the island who seek "Taiwan independence" through collusion with external powers, but what the mainland has been doing to facilitate youth exchanges across the Strait is a bid to lay a solid foundation for the peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question.

It is to be hoped that what the mainland has been doing in response to the DPP's de-sinicization attempts pays dividends in the form of increased affinity and understanding between youth across the Strait. And this in turn promotes the peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Protection needed

SIR, It is distressing that over 2,500 women have been killed in India on charges of witchcraft since 2000, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. Over the past year, NGO Nirantar Trust, in collaboration with women's federations and other groups in Bihar, conducted a survey on witchcraft-related persecution in the state.

It found that the majority of the women surveyed - 121 out of 145 - who faced violence related to accusations of witchcraft were married and lived with their husbands and children in joint families.

This meant that 83 per cent of surveyed women who were married could not protect themselves from such violence.

The survey report, which was released in New Delhi on December 9, also said that a majority of the women (56 per cent) who faced such violence were holding some form of a leadership role.

Apart from the visible in-

crease in the income of women or their families and women assuming leadership roles, among the most significant factors driving accusations of witchcraft were deaths caused by poor health and malnutrition, such as deaths of individuals, children or livestock within the family or community.

Witch-hunting is both domestic and public violence. It can start at home, in the family or in the neighbourhood, and stem from domestic reasons or discord, but culminates in a public display of violence.

To tackle the problem it is necessary to hold accountable qahars or traditional healers, particularly at the panchayat level, since they were the first to confirm and further perpetuate witchcraft accusations.

The accountability and role of panchayats in cases of gender-based violence should be strictly determined.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 16 December.

WAH, USTAD!

SIR, With the passing away of the legendary percussionist, composer and occasional actor Zakir Hussain, for millions of his fans the sound of the tabla itself seems silent. Barely does it happen in musical history that an instrument becomes synonymous with a person. The world beckoned when a performance during his late teens with sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar in New York paved the way for an illustrious career.

In his six-decade long career, he not only put the tabla on the global stage and won over the West with his dexterous command over his chosen instrument, especially his trademark thais, but also jammed with the best global musicians. His father's advice 'always remain a student' ensured he was open to all kinds of musical influences, eager to learn and forever passionate about his muse. Classical music he may have felt had a niche audience but he took it to a pinnacle where even a layman was compelled to echo "Wah Ustad Wah."

"Without love, music and harmony we are nothing," he said during his Grammy acceptance speech and he brought all three in the lives of millions. Beyond genres, even gharanas, this purist was forever in pursuit of pure sound. If Ustad Zakir Hussain could not imagine his existence without the tabla, his mate and friend, music lovers too could not see the percussion instrument without the affable man appearing on their mindscape.

Yours, etc., Shovanlal Chakraborty, Kolkata, 17 December.

