



Frosty and bitter

Parliament needs to be more productive, not sidetracked by barbs

The first winter session of 18th Lok Sabha ended on December 20 as one of the least productive and most acrimonious in history. The conflict between the government and the Opposition degenerated into a scuffle on the penultimate day, followed by absurd allegations and police reports. The Opposition sent a notice for a motion of no confidence in Rajya Sabha Chairman and Vice-President of India Jagdeep Dhankhar, which was rejected by the Deputy Chairman. The acrimony peaked with the Opposition turning a reference by Home Minister Amit Shah to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar into a stick to beat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with. Mr. Shah's mis-spoken remarks were taken out of context by the Opposition which feels that it is par for the course. After all, the BJP had made ridiculous allegations about the Congress party's supposed link with anti-India forces abroad to stall Parliament proceedings for several days earlier. Productivity in the Rajya Sabha was 40%, as it met for 43 hours and 27 minutes of the schedule. The Lok Sabha functioned for 54.5% of its scheduled time. Both the Houses witnessed protests from the treasury and Opposition sides over issues such as the alleged interference of U.S. billionaire George Soros in Indian politics, and the U.S. government's actions against the Adani Group.

The session was scheduled to take up 16 Bills in the legislative business and the first batch of supplementary grants under the financial business. Of the 16 Bills, only one Bill, the Bharatiya Vayayan Vidheyak, 2024, significant for the civil aviation sector, was passed in both Houses. The Rajya Sabha passed the Boilers Bill and the Oil Fields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Bill, bringing major changes in the industrial laws governing large furnaces and boilers and the petroleum sector. Other than the Appropriation Bills as part of the supplementary demands for grants, the Lok Sabha discussed and passed the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, the Railways (Amendment) Bill and the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill. The debates saw Opposition members asking the government to protect the public sector banking system, ensure the safety of rail passengers and employees and bring in transparency in the allocation of funds to States hit by natural calamities. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, that aim to achieve simultaneous elections in the country, were introduced and referred to a Joint Committee of Parliament. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made statements in both Houses on India-China relations. The winter session demonstrated the need for an urgent restoration of parliamentary norms and basic decency in exchanges between political opponents.

Crime and shame

The stigma and impunity attached to sexual assault must end

The horrors will never go away, and Gisèle Pelicot has got only a semblance of closure after a French court sentenced her former husband to 20 years in prison for committing and orchestrating mass rapes of her for almost a decade. The 72-year-old Dominique Pelicot admitted in court that he had drugged Ms. Pelicot, 72, for years, before raping her, and recruiting strangers online to violate her as she was deeply asleep. In all, 51 people, aged between the late 20s and 70s, assaulted her as she lay in a drug-induced stupor, and have got away with punishment ranging from three to 15 years, less than the terms sought by prosecutors. The evidence, photographs and films, was stored in Dominique Pelicot's computer and shown in court to shocking disbelief; the crime itself unravelled in 2020 after he was being probed for another misdemeanour, filming women inappropriately. But in all this, Ms. Pelicot's brave stand – to waive anonymity and requesting a public trial – and boldly stating that “it is not us who should feel shame, but them”, struck a chord. People all across France, and the world, have followed the over three-month trial, marched on the streets and held demonstrations to seek changes in law for sexual crimes against women, and also the overturning of societal perceptions and toxic patriarchal behaviour.

Ms. Pelicot said she had led the fight for her daughters and grandchildren and also “unrecognised victims whose stories often remain in the shadows”. She hoped that by opening the doors of the trial, and despite her ordeal, “society could take hold of the debates that took place there”. Her case has sparked fierce debates on abuse and the aftermath. Under French law, the maximum penalty for rape is 20 years, and rights activists have pointed out that the punishment is simply not enough for ruining a life. In a majority of cases, complaints of sexual abuse and rapes are not reported and prosecuted. France is not the only violator. The United Nations says violence against women remains one of the most prevalent human rights violations, and that globally, an estimated 736 million women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. Gisèle Pelicot held out hope and confidence that society will “collectively seize a future in which each woman and man can live in harmony with respect and mutual understanding”. But first, her words should be heeded, and rape charges must never be trivialised. She has helped break the silence and the shame around rape; the onus is on society and law-makers to shatter the stigma and impunity attached to sexual abuse.

It is for historians to dig for tell-tale remains, not bigots

Normally, digging at historic sites is done by an archaeologist and historians in search of a lost civilisation or an ancient city or some signs of mythological events. But nowhere in the world, in the modern age, is an excavation done underneath a place of worship of one religion to find the remains of a place of worship of another religion. While digging in search of historical facts is a secular act, and is done using internationally recognised scientific methods, digging to establish the presence of a place of worship of one religion in a place of worship of another religion is, clearly, a non-secular act. Therefore, it is absolutely puzzling why the former Chief Justice of India (CJI), D.Y. Chandrachud found nothing objectionable or illegal in a survey in a place of worship of a particular religion by another religious group. In his oral observation, the former CJI, said, in 2022 (he was the CJI then), “a survey may not necessarily fall foul of the Places of Worship Act”. He made this tricky observation in the Gyanvapi mosque case.

Clarity in the Act, yet challenged

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act was enacted by Parliament in 1991 in the background of a strident movement by Ram Jannabhooni supporters which heightened communal tensions in Ayodhya and many other parts of north India. The government of the day apprehended the imminent outbreak of violence in different parts of the country due to the raising of claims over the places of worship of a particular minority community. This Act bars the conversion of places of worship of any religious community into a place of worship of a different religious community. It declares that the religious character of a place of worship existing on the 15th day of August 1947, shall continue to be the same as it existed on that day.

The Act further provides that any suit and appeal seeking to convert the religious character of a place of worship existing on 15th August, 1947 pending before any court or tribunal shall abate on the commencement of the Act. It also states that no suit or appeal relating to this matter shall lie in any court after the commencement of the Act, and any suit alleging that the religious character of a place of worship has been converted after 15th August 1947 will be determined in terms of this Act.

But the constitutionality of this Act is under challenge in the Supreme Court of India. A petition was filed in 2020 challenging the constitutional validity of the Act on the grounds



P.D.T. Achary

a former Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha

It is unfortunate that judicial misdirection is stirring up the retaliatory instincts of people fed on the falsehoods of manufactured history

that the date of August 15, 1947 was fixed arbitrarily and that this Act takes away judicial review.

The contention that the date of August 15, 1947 was arbitrarily fixed in the Act to prevent the conversion of a place of worship is a specious one. This is the day when the transfer of power from the British government to the Indian government took place. Naturally, this was the earliest date the government could think of for the purpose of this Act. In any case, the Government of India could not have chosen April 21, 1526 when Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodhi in the battle of Panipat and captured Delhi and Agra and laid the foundation of the Mughal empire. Nor could it have chosen, arbitrarily, a later date and kept the field open for a set of religious fanatics to make reckless claims on the places of worship of another religion. Therefore, by all accounts, the date chosen by Parliament in this enactment was the most reasonable one.

The second ground cited in the petition is that the Act takes away judicial review which is a part of the basic structure of the Constitution of India and any enactment which alters it is unconstitutional. This contention, needless to say, is without any merit. The Act declares that from the commencement of the Act, all pending suits, appeal or proceedings seeking to convert a place of worship of one religion existing as on August 15, 1947 into that of another religion or altering the religious character of a place of worship shall abate. It is the legislative policy of the government to declare through a law that certain types of suits shall abate under certain circumstances. It is not the same as stating that “no court shall have any jurisdiction in respect of any suit arising from the place of worship of any religion”. The latter legislative assertion can be interpreted as an exclusion of judicial review which would, no doubt, be unconstitutional. But that is not the case here.

On the lower courts

Subsequent to the above quoted observation of the former CJI, lower courts in the State of Uttar Pradesh are ordering surveys in mosques to determine their religious character with great alacrity. It has led to violence in Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh in which some lives were lost. The lower courts do not seem to have bothered to check whether it was an order of the Supreme Court or a mere observation of the CJI during the hearing. The fact is that such observations from the Bench have no significance as those are not a part of any judgment of the Court.

Besides, it is a matter of common logic that when the law has barred any kind of conversion of the religious character of a place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947, then what is the relevance of ordering or carrying out a survey to determine its character? Legally, its character is what existed on the date as above. So, where is the need for a fresh survey?

A close reading of the provisions of the Act would reveal that what has been prohibited is not merely the act of conversion but also fresh surveys to establish the religious character of a place of worship. As that stands settled, any attempt to resurrect the dispute and get an order from the court would be clearly in violation of the Act.

The Places of Worship Act 1991 has been hailed as a law which protects secularism in the Ayodhya judgment of the Supreme Court. Wisely, the Court has now put a blanket ban on all litigations relating to the places of worship till it finally determines the issue of the constitutionality of the Act.

Protection of a fundamental right

Quite apart from the issue of constitutionality or otherwise of the Places of Worship Act, a religious denomination has the fundamental right, under Article 26, to manage its own affairs in matters of religion. Worshipping in a mosque or a church is a matter of religion and any kind of interference by any outsider in that place of worship can be treated as a violation of the fundamental right of that religious denomination. The court, while ordering a survey of such a place of worship, is in fact committing a violation of Article 26 of the Constitution. The object of this Article is to protect the right conferred on a religious denomination. So, even if the Act was not in existence, a survey or excavation in a place of worship being used by a religious denomination for the purpose of finding out the religious character of that place would be a violation of Article 26.

It is possible that beneath some mosques lie remains of temples. And beneath the remains of temples there may be the remains of Buddha or Jain viharas. History has sequestered in the womb of earth these tell-tale remains for an archaeologist and a historian to chronicle the history of this nation, and not for bigots to kindle revanchism and poison the minds of generations of unwary people. It is a great pity that judicial misdirection is referring the retaliatory instincts of people fed on the falsehoods of manufactured history.

A chance to strike gold during the Kuwait visit

The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is set to visit Kuwait on December 21-22. The visit will be the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 43 years, the last being the visit by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1981. Mr. Modi was scheduled to visit Kuwait in January 2022, but the visit was postponed due to concerns about COVID-19.

The visit holds great significance not only for the bilateral ties but also the region, which is going through a very difficult phase of conflict and transition. Mr. Modi has visited all the other countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) over the past 10 years, some more than once, and not having visited Kuwait was seen as a gap in India's West Asia engagement. This visit aims to not only plug this gap but also give a boost to the rather stagnant ties between the two countries which, otherwise, have much potential for a strong engagement.

A country with strategic significance

Why is Kuwait important? Despite being one of the smallest countries in the region, it holds significant strategic importance. Located at the north-east end of the Persian Gulf, it shares borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia and hosts important American military bases. It is the only monarchy in the region which has experimented successfully with democracy. On regional issues, it has generally maintained a neutral stance and has often been the interlocutor in resolving disputes.

Its wealth is owed primarily to its vast oil reserves, which are sixth-largest globally. It is also one of the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

It also has one of the largest basket sovereign wealth funds. These funds, managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), have grown to an impressive rate and are currently estimated to



Rajeev Agarwal

a retired colonel, is a former Director in the Ministry of External Affairs, a former Director in Military Intelligence (International Relations) and a former Research Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi (IDSA), New Delhi

The Indian Prime Minister's visit, long overdue, has many opportunities to develop an important bilateral relationship

be \$924 billion (in March 2024), the fourth largest in the world after Norway, China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Untapped potential, existing links

India and Kuwait have always enjoyed friendly ties, built on a strong foundation of history and cultural bonds. India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Kuwait following its independence from the British Protectorate in 1961. In fact, the Indian rupee was a legal tender in Kuwait till 1961.

Trade and people-to-people ties have traditionally been the main anchors of the bilateral ties. India has consistently been among the top trading partners of Kuwait, with the total bilateral trade with Kuwait during FY 2023-24 being \$10.47 billion. During FY2023-24, Kuwait was the sixth largest crude supplier catering to about 3.0% of India's total energy needs. The KIA has invested indirectly in India with estimated investments of more than US\$10 billion.

During the COVID-19 pandemic too, India and Kuwait demonstrated a strong sense of brotherhood. India provided two lakh vaccine doses. During the second wave of COVID-19 in May 2021, Kuwait provided 282 oxygen cylinders, 60 oxygen concentrators, ventilators and many other medical supplies to India.

People-to-people ties form the other firm anchor. Out of a population of almost 4.9 million, around 1 million Indians not only form the largest expatriate group in Kuwait but are also among the most trusted. As a special gesture, a ‘Festival of India’ was organised in Kuwait in March 2023. A weekly Hindi radio programme, ‘Namaste Kuwait’ has been started by Kuwait National Radio since April 2024. And, 26 schools in Kuwait with over 60,000 students, follow the Central Board of Secondary Education curriculum of India.

When tragedy struck on June 12, in the form of

a fire in a residential building in Kuwait killing over 40 Indians, Kuwait rendered help and repatriated their mortal remains quickly.

Areas to elevate ties

Despite enjoying mutual trust and goodwill, India's ties with Kuwait – like with many others in the Gulf region – have not been able to transcend to the next level. Mr. Modi's visit, therefore, offers the perfect opportunity to set things moving. The signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Kuwait could be the ideal start. An agreement on defence cooperation could be signed too. India has invited Kuwait to join the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, which Kuwait is likely to accept. An agreement between KIA and the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) in India could be mutually beneficial and give impetus to growth in India. Like the UAE, Kuwait could become an important partner for storing strategic oil reserves in India.

From India, helping Kuwait in building its infrastructure under Kuwait's ‘Vision 2035’ could be a good initiative. Setting up institutions of higher education, such as the Indian Institute of Technology and the Indian Institute of Management, and modern hospitals in Kuwait could boost people-to-people ties. Kuwait's request for additional seats for its airlines from India (in addition to 12,000 seats per week allotted), could be considered as a special exemption, despite Kuwait not fulfilling the required quota. Cooperation in space programmes including launching satellites for Kuwait would make good headlines too.

The scope for Kuwait-India ties is huge and the wish list endless. Hopefully, this visit will provide the perfect platform to kick-start a golden era in this very important bilateral relationship.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In and outside the House

The ‘scuffle’ between Members of Parliament across the aisle over the Home Minister's remarks on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is distressing. Parliament, meant for constructive debate, is increasingly becoming a battleground for hostility. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy is becoming a tool for partisan conflicts. Such behaviour not only undermines the dignity of our institutions but also sets a bad example for citizens. Our representatives must remember that their duty is to uphold democracy

through dialogue, not through physical altercations.
Pavithra M.
Tiruch, Tamil Nadu

There have been allegations of gross misbehaviour, the use of physical force and endangering the life of some MPs. The happenings in Parliament are a shade worse than the ruckus in the Kerala Assembly, in 2015, destroying property worth lakhs of rupees. Such incidents highlight the need for a law for the ‘recall of elected representatives’.
P.R.V. Raja,
Pondicherry, Kerala

One election, advantages

Those who oppose the proposal of ‘one nation one election’ do not seem to realise the advantage of having simultaneous elections. Apart from money being wasted and administrative lapses in conducting such multiple elections, no one is talking about the troubles voters face queuing up before booths. In the earlier years, when simultaneous elections went smoothly, the voter turnout was close to 90%. Many voters have moved away from their permanent address and may not be

able to return to vote. A simultaneous election could ensure a larger number of voters returning home to exercise their rightful duty.
V.P. Dharmarajan,
Chennai

Shift EVM focus to ECI

The problem is not with the Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) but with the integrity and fairness in conducting elections by the present Election Commission of India (ECI). There appears to be a partisan slant in its actions before, during and after the elections. There is also a refusal to give valid reasons for the

discrepancies in the votes polled and recorded. The Opposition should give up complaining about the functioning of the EVMs and instead concentrate on bringing to light the alleged unethical practices of the ECI in conducting elections.
Tharicus S. Fernando,
Chennai

Re-examination woes

The protest by Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) civil service aspirants for a re-examination has continued for three days. It highlights student frustration with the commission's autocratic

attitude. There is to be a re-examination at the Babu Sabha Ghar, where 12,000 students appeared for their examination, but not in other centres. With 3.2 lakh candidates appearing for the examination, conducting a fair re-examination is feasible. The BPSC must shed its rigid stance, engage with students, and ensure justice by ensuring a transparent and equal opportunity for all aspirants.
Ghufan Mustafa,
Pune, Bihar

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



A Jatra performance at Ralab village in Ganjam, Odisha. BISWARANJAN ROUT

Shock and awe in the world of Jatra

In Odisha's Ganjam district, villagers compete for prestige by staging epic Ramayana performances. To sustain the interest of the audience, they have begun resorting to extreme measures, such as playing with cobras on stage, smashing coconuts on their heads, or even killing pigs and chickens. **Satyasundar Barik** reports on the radical transformation of Jatra, a traditional form of folk theatre

In the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Prince Rama of Ayodhya, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana meet Viradha, a ferocious *rakshasa* (demon), in the dense forests of Dandakaranya. Viradha not only clashes with the brothers but also abducts Sita. This act foreshadows the final few events of the epic. In theatrical adaptations of the *Ramayana*, Viradha is often portrayed as pure evil.

On the chilly evening of November 26, in the remote village of Ralaba in Ganjam district, Odisha, a farmer, Bimbabhar Gouda, played Viradha at a Jatra, a form of folk theatre that is popular across Odisha and West Bengal. Instead of bringing a prop to 'devour', Gouda had brought a live pig. "When he ripped the pig apart, there was a stunned silence in the audience," recalled Sadashiba Jena, a villager who watched the play that day.

When footage of the incident, seen by a few as an "immersive performance", surfaced on social media and TV news channels, drama enthusiasts and animal rights activists were enraged. "Using any live animal or bird in a cultural performance including cinema and drama is illegal without the permission of the Animal Welfare Board of India. There are clear guidelines which prohibit animal cruelty during stage performances. In Ganjam, the theatre groups are probably not aware of the guidelines," said Biswajit Mohanty, a wildlife expert and secretary, Wildlife Society of Orissa.

In the Odisha Assembly, ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lawmakers Babu Singh and Sanatan Bijuli demanded that those responsible for the act be held accountable. The actor and the procurer of the pig now face multiple cases under sections pertaining to animal cruelty under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. The case has shone a spotlight on the changing character of Jatra.

Where there are no limits

Jatra is usually performed on an open-air stage with the audience, both men and women, seated on all sides. It dates back to the rise of Vaishnavism and the Bhakti movement during the 16th century. Back then, devotional songs and dances that were sung and performed by followers of the Bhakti movement, and plays on mythology, captivated people. Over time, social issues became central to Jatra. While Jatra includes plays, music, and dance, today, stunts have taken over, in an

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SASHIDHAR PATRA
Jatra enthusiast

attempt to make them more "modern" and "commercial", said various artists and villagers.

On December 12, past midnight in Manchewar, a village on the outskirts of the State capital Bhubaneswar, a young man lay on stage on a bed of shattered glass under the glare of multi-coloured lights. A large rock was placed on his chest. Suddenly, another actor began hammering the boulder. Despite the sharp glass shards that could have caused serious cuts and wounds, the man who was lying down remained stoic and unscathed. The audience, seated in a sprawling makeshift enclosure, watched in awe.

As the act unfolded, two young women, standing atop massive truck tyres lifted by a group of performers, waved the national flag. The audience rose to their feet. While the actors were to perform a play with social themes, acrobatics and stunts dominated the night and kept everyone spellbound.

"Stunts and 'item numbers' have grown in Jatra because the audience wants it. We have no choice but to match the expectations of people," said Jagannath Bhol, a choreographer of the Rangamati theatre group, based in Bhubaneswar.

In both Ralaba and Manchewar, the troupes use shock and awe as methods to reinvent themselves and remain relevant. This often happens at the expense of traditional storytelling forms.

"Over the last two decades, TV and films have transformed the entertainment landscape. Today, people can enjoy movies, shows, or dance

performances in their living rooms at their convenience. In contrast, Jatra demands an audience that is willing to stay engaged throughout the night," said Sashidhar Patra, who has been a Jatra hopper for 40 years. "The youth, even in rural areas, is increasingly absorbed in [Instagram] Reels. So, Jatra has no option but to reinvent itself to sustain the audience's interest."

While Ralaba, a village of 1,400 families of mostly farmers and migrant labourers, is not economically affluent, it is culturally rich. Ralaba takes pride in its theatre group, Rama Bhakta Maruti, which boasts 70-80 active members at any given time. Since 1992, the group has been performing the *Ramayana* in Ralaba and neighbouring villages. Not just Ralaba; hundreds of villages across Ganjam have theatre groups that are dedicated to performing the *Ramayana*. Year after year, the residents of these villages watch the annual play with undiminished enthusiasm.

Politics, however, has divided these villages into two factions. In the past, theatre groups aligned with the Congress and the Janata Dal. Over time, loyalties shifted, and the groups stand mostly divided between the Biju Janata Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party. This rivalry often transforms the traditional *Ramayana* play into a competitive spectacle known as *Badi Ramayana*, with each faction striving to draw larger crowds to assert their dominance. *Badi Ramayana* is staged with the rule that in passion and battle, limits don't exist, especially in Ganjam district.

"In other parts of the world, a *Ramayana* play typically concludes within five to six hours. However, in our region, the play goes on for 13 to 14 hours," says Nila Bhaula, a resident of Ralaba. "When troupes are drawn into competing in the *Badi Ramayana*, the epic is enacted for days. The actors and the audience remain immersed in the performance and often don't even take a break."

In one of the plays, the actor playing Vali, the king of Kishkinda in the *Ramayana*, lifted bullock cart wheels and cracked a tender coconut on his head. While the audience sat glued to the stage, a rival troupe performed similar stunts nearby. Immediately, the attention of the audience shifted.

"The two plays went on for 40 hours, with neither the actors nor the audience showing any signs of tiredness," said Bhaula.

To transform or not to transform

The traditional staging of the *Ramayana* in Ganjam villages has undergone an incredible transformation in the last 15 years. Mythological storytelling has taken a back seat and there is an increased emphasis on sensual dances, acrobatics, gymnastics, and comedy.

It is not just that characters, especially demons and monkeys, often perform dramatic stunts, such as playing with cobras, lifting goats on stage, and killing chickens; the plays also give modern twists to iconic moments in the epic. Jatra performers said Sita sometimes makes her entrance in the bucket of an earthmover or Ravana's kidnapping of Sita occasionally involves bullets fired in the air instead of a chariot. Across India, Sita is generally portrayed as the 'ideal' wife and a soft-spoken woman, but in Ganjam, she sometimes breaks into a frenzied freestyle dance, challenging the Sita on another stage to match her moves, much to the delight of the audience.

Santosh Khuntia, 50, who has played the role



A few greedy individuals are giving us a bad name. Every art form must evolve to remain relevant, but not at the expense of its core values

RABI PANDA
Leader of the Jatra Artists Association

of Kaikeyi in Ralaba for over three decades, reflected on the evolution of the epic. "I have seen how the *Ramayana* has changed on stage. Purists might disapprove, but these reinventions are necessary to keep the people engaged," he said.

Subrat Kumar Mishra, the manager of Rangamahala, a professional Jatra troupe based in Bhubaneswar, travels across districts with what he calls his "mini-world". The troupe requires five trucks and two buses to transport equipment, including lights and sound systems, and a diverse team of artists from one location to another.

Seated on a cot behind the Jatra pandal in Manchewar, Mishra discussed the stiff competition his troupe faces in generating revenue and sustaining the interest of the audience. The performance is meticulously structured to appeal to a wide range of viewers, he said. "The first two hours are dedicated to devotional songs, followed by an episode on Hanuman. Then we play Odia and Hindi film music. Men perform stunts and women wear short costumes and dance. All this caters to people of all age groups," he said.

But not everyone supports these changes. Basant Dalai, a 60-year-old resident of Ralaba, said, "I don't subscribe to today's *Ramayana*. I stopped watching these shows long ago."

Similarly, in Bikrampur village of Ganjam, Sakaleswar Roul, popularly known as the "*Ramayana* director", has remained steadfast in his traditional approach to staging the epic. "Over the past 40 years, I have directed 27 theatre groups. I have never felt the need to use such distasteful measures to maintain interest," he said.

Even though *Ramayana* performances are staged over several days, the community's enthusiasm has never waned, added Roul. "People take turns staying near the stage, and at no point does the audience count drop to below 250, even between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. By morning, the crowd quickly returns," he said.

Though actors move around villages for seven months a year for rehearsals and performances, they don't receive any remuneration. Most of them are farmers or daily wage earners who enjoy Jatra and perform to uphold the pride of the village. The income generated from *Ramayana* performances is given to the village fund and is used to support various cultural activities. "For us, this is a passion, not a profession," Roul said.

From the sidelines to centre stage

While female dance troupes are roped in to perform as actors change clothes during a performance, women in villages don't have any roles in the *Ramayana* plays. But this is not the case in Bhubaneswar. Rangamahala boasts a significant number of female artists and dancers who perform in front of large crowds. They are under-terred even when they hear lewd remarks.

"As women, we have to maintain our composure. Jatra audiences, who are predominantly from rural backgrounds, often attend performances in groups and don't shy away from making vulgar remarks. While it is hurtful, we choose to take it in our stride," said Sampurna Swain, who has been acting in Jatra for 20 years.

In Bhubaneswar, Jatra groups and artists are professionals and get remuneration. Jyotiskha Malla, 19, who was preparing to take the stage with her dance routine, said, "With my father working as a bus conductor, it is tough for my family to manage. I have two sisters and a brother to look after. I had to start earning early, and joining a Jatra troupe was the perfect opportunity."

In the past, women who did Jatra performances were often looked down upon. But times have changed, they said. Anjana Nayak, 45, ran away from home when she was in Class 10. Since then, she has spent 30 years carving out a career in Jatra. She started with just a few hundred rupees a month. Now she earns up to ₹50,000 a month. "I am at the peak of my career," she said, smiling.

A thriving industry

Jatra is no longer a simple gathering of artists who entertain rural audiences; it has evolved into a thriving industry. People who wish to establish a professional Jatra group need ₹8 to ₹10 crore. "There are about 45 major Jatra troupes travelling across Odisha for performances," said Braja Behari Nayak, a 60-year-old character artist. "Some star performers command annual packages of up to ₹45 lakh, while a celebrated couple is said to be paid ₹60 lakh per year."

The competition intensifies when multiple troupes perform in Bhubaneswar, elevating the quality of the acts and driving ticket prices as high as ₹1,000 per show. Securing a ticket to watch a Jatra show is a matter of luck. Bollywood celebrities such as Ameesha Patel, Rakhi Sawant, and Shakti Kapoor have also made brief appearances at these shows, boosting the industry.

"Jatra has been nothing short of a cultural revolution in Odisha," said Naba Kishore Mania, a Jatra critic. "Some proprietors continuously innovate to keep their troupes afloat, and the earnings of certain Jatra stars rival those of top Odia film actors. It is not uncommon for Odia movie stars to step onto the Jatra stage, both to refine their acting skill and earn a lucrative paycheck."

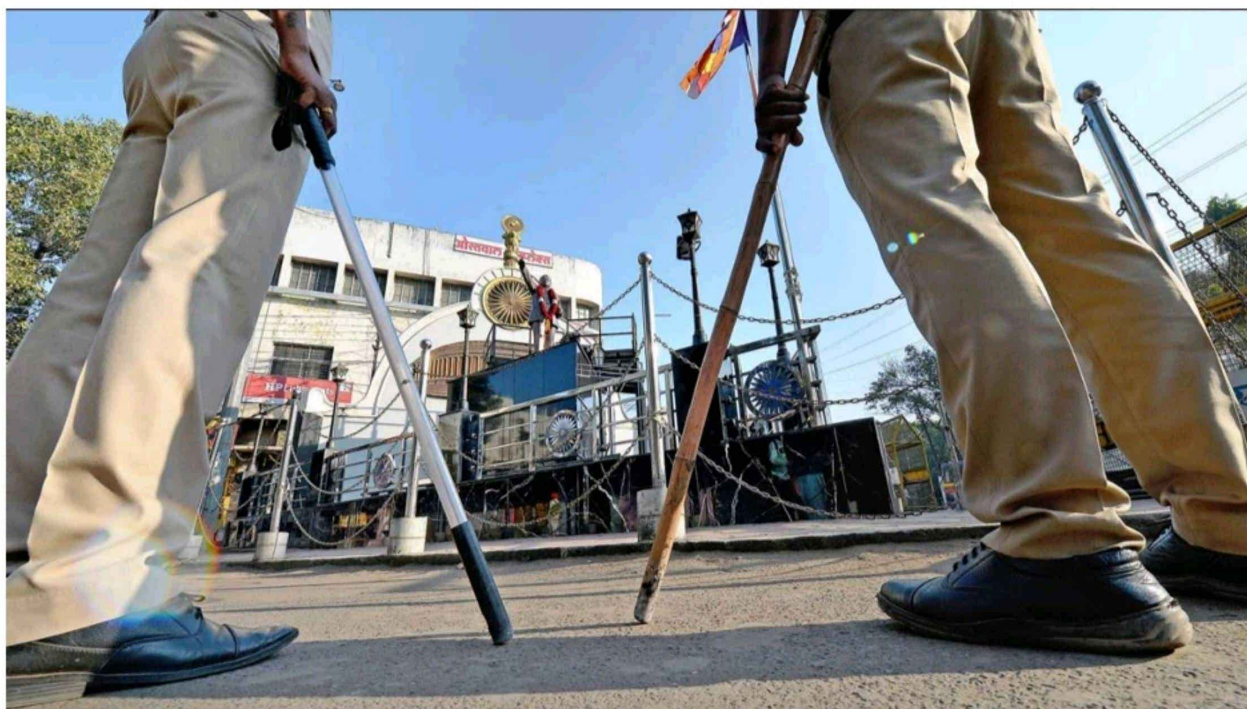
However, some of these radical transformations of the folk art are tarnishing Jatra's reputation and alienating loyal Jatra enthusiasts. Unlike earlier times, some families now hesitate to attend Jatra shows together. Rabi Panda, a leader of the Jatra Artists Association, said, "A few greedy individuals are giving us a bad name. Every art form must evolve to remain relevant, but not at the expense of its core values."

satyasundar.b@thehindu.co.in



Earlier, women who did Jatra performances were often looked down upon, but times have changed. A performance at Ralab village. BISWARANJAN ROUT

MAHARASHTRA



Maharashtra police personnel keep vigil near the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at Station Road in Parbhani after violence broke out in the area when a replica of the Constitution was damaged. VIJAY SONI/E

A statue and the peace – broken

On December 11, violence broke out in Maharashtra's Parbhani city after a man damaged a replica of the Constitution, a part of the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. With tension still in the air, the incident has triggered fear among Dalits, following the death of a member of the community in judicial custody, which it claims was due to 'police brutality', reports **Snehal Mutha**

Just outside the two-platform Parbhani railway station in Maharashtra's Marathwada region flutters the Indian national flag mounted on a pole. Beyond the tea shops selling *misal pav* and hotels catering to travellers, in front of an Art Deco building, is a statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who headed the drafting committee of the Constitution of India. Behind the statue are more symbols of the Indian republic: a replica of the Ashoka Chakra that forms the central symbol of the national flag, and the Ashoka Pillar, the original erected in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, where Buddha gave his first sermon. In front is the Constitution, now covered in a blue cloth, the colour of Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation of India flag. From the statue, the Doctor Line market begins, extending about 3 km up to Gandhi Park.

Dilip Ragade, 55, who runs a newspaper stand next to the statue, recalls a scuffle between a man and an autorickshaw driver between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. on December 10. "At first, I thought he had pulled something out of the autorickshaw and thrown it on the road. Later, I realised that it was the replica of the Constitution. The autorickshaw driver had confronted the man," he says. Soon, a crowd of about 200 people gathered and the man was thrashed, say witnesses. People ran towards the market spreading the word, and shops began to shut.

The police, the District Collector, and Ambedkarite leaders showed up and took the badly injured man to hospital, says Ragade. The man was arrested and the police told people that he was mentally ill and had not done the damage on purpose. Ambedkarites, however, were not convinced. They blocked the Nandigram Express for at least 30 minutes. Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Yashwant Kale says the train left Parbhani station only after the Government Railway Police dispersed the crowd.

The next day, following protests by Ambedkarites, there was stone pelting and arson, followed by a crackdown by the Parbhani police. Somnath Suryavanshi, 35, who had come from Pune for his law entrance examination, was allegedly picked up from where he was staying. He died in judicial custody a few days later.

Ambedkarites claim people not from their community joined the protests so the blame for the violence would fall on them. They say the "police brutality" was a reflection of how Dalits are treated in society.

Protests of different kinds

Earlier in the day on December 10, Hindu Sakal Samaj, a right-wing outfit, had taken out a *marcha* (march) condemning the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh, which has a prominent border with India. It took place a few metres from the Ambedkar statue where the statue of 17th-century Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji, a symbol of Maratha pride, is located. There was not much movement in the city during the *marcha*, say the residents of Parbhani. Ambedkarites claim several people delivered provocative speeches. This right-wing event combined with the desecration of the Constitution's replica angered Dalits, many of whom are Ambedkar's followers. Around 8 p.m. that night, the administration organised a *shanti samiti baithak* (peaceful meeting). Here, Ambedkarite leaders said they would carry out a protest at five locations in Parbhani the next day. They would also submit a letter to the Collector putting forth their demands, which included charging the man and his 'accomplices' under the stringent Unlawful Activ-

THE CROWD
The crowd was massive; they could have burnt anything that came in its way. The anger was visible, and the police were hiding

KAPIL CHONDE
Trader,
Parbhani market

ities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and making him undergo a polygraph test to find out the 'mastermind' behind the act of vandalism. That night, the city went to sleep peacefully.

The following day, Ambedkarite organisations called for a bandh. These included the Republican Sena led by a grandson of Ambedkar; the Republican Party of India (A) led by Union Minister Ramdas Athawale; and the Buddhist Society of India, founded by Ambedkar himself, who had converted to Buddhism.

Ambedkarite groups began protests across the city around 8 a.m. People gathered in groups ranging from 200 to 1,000. Seven groups peacefully submitted the charter of demands to the Collector. The police say the eighth group got disruptive, forcing its way into the Collector's office. Soon, they say, violence erupted in the market, about 600 metres from the office. There was stone pelting and arson, followed by the firing of tear gas shells, say witnesses.

A city unsettled

Ambedkarites say the police reacted violently. A 32-year-old demonstrator says, "The police first stopped us from reaching out to the Collector. That is why we agitated and some of us got on top of the police van to raise slogans. Now, they are looking for me everywhere." She has been in hiding after a video featuring her protesting went viral. Infuriated, she says, "We agitated for something that has given us a dignified life." She says a few men wearing masks and holding lathis had joined the protesters. "The people of Ambedkar Basti did not have these when they left."

Eight FIRs were registered, over 200 people booked, and 50 arrested, including minor girls from Dalit bastis (neighbourhoods) in Parbhani such as Gautam Nagar, Priyadarshini Nagar, Rahul Nagar, and Bhim Nagar. The police booked people on charges of rioting, assault on public servants, promoting enmity, and damaging public property. "Two police vans, two four-wheelers, 18 two-wheelers, and hundreds of shops were damaged. Nine police personnel were injured. Five women were released a day after detention," says the ASP. "So far, 27 people have been arrested," he says.

On December 11, orders were issued under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, preventing the assembly of five or more people. Social activists and locals have criticised the administration for taking a whole day to do this. "The State Reserve Police Force (SRPF) unit was stationed a few kilometres from here in Hingoli, yet the police did not act," says a 49-year-old retailer in the area. The SRPF was deployed the next day after 2 p.m.

Vijay Wakode, an Ambedkarite leader, who

died of a heart attack while protesting against the death of Somnath, had said the protest was peaceful until 1 p.m. "Then things went haywire and we cancelled the rally scheduled to be held after the protest," he had said, adding that people not part of the Ambedkar movement got mixed in the crowd, making Ambedkarite organisations the scapegoat "to malign us".

During the Maharashtra Assembly's winter session in Nagpur, the Opposition slammed the Mahayuti government over "poor law and order" in the State. In response, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis said, "The government will never do anything against the Constitution and the insult of it will not be tolerated."

Meanwhile, newly appointed Minister and MLA from Jintur in Parbhani Meghna Bordikar told mediapersons that "Suryavanshi's death was due to a heart attack". She also defended the police, saying, "They arrested the accused immediately."

A market on edge

One of the shops that was damaged belonged to Kapil Chonde, 25. As news of the violence spread, he quickly bundled up sweaters, caps, and dark glasses that lay on his makeshift platform under a tarpaulin tied between an electric pole and bamboo struts. On seeing the mob rush in his direction, he sought safety in a *pucca* shop, but a lot of his goods were burnt. "The crowd was massive; they could have burnt anything that came in its way. The anger was visible and the police were hiding," Chonde says, two days after the incident, distraught. He estimates his loss at ₹40,000. He has taken a loan of ₹60,000 and wonders how he will pay it back.

Several traders are grappling with the task of assessing the extent of damage. Boards were damaged, doors bashed in, pushcarts broken, and bits thrown into the gutter. The Parbhani police estimate that property worth at least ₹30 lakh was damaged. Doctor Line has shops owned by a variety of trading communities from different ethnicities and religions. However, Kashinath Shinde, 45, one of the owners, says, "Most shops are of the Maratha community. The violence was targeted at them as the perpetrator is a Maratha."

The area around the Ambedkar statue has been cordoned off with barricades. Riot Control Police vans are stationed at the opposite end of the road. At least 10 police personnel are deployed every 300 metres, and police vans stationed at every kilometre, with patrolling every half an hour. The government also suspended Internet services for two days.

Rumours abound in the city. One talks about the arrest of a 10-year-old girl, another the custodial death of a woman. The moment a rumour is spread, the shutters of shops go down. This happens a couple of times. The police announce on loudspeakers that these claims are untrue.

Dalits traumatised

In Dalit settlements, people are gripped with fear of getting picked up by the police. Kalawanti Dabade, 50, a daily wage earner, says, "The police are searching every house and taking our children." A demonstrator from Bhim Nagar says, "We started pelting stones when the police resorted to lathi charge and opened tear gas. We missed our exams because they are looking for us and many of us are in hiding." His body is covered with black and green scars that he says are a result of the lathi charge. "The government hospital refused to take me in, saying I was a rioter." Vachala Manavte, 53, was hospitalised after

she was released from jail on December 12. She works at a nearby hospital and was allegedly thrashed for recording a video of the police while they were detaining youth in Priyadarshini Nagar. "After dragging me there, they threw me in the lock-up and slapped and kicked me. They were trying to retrieve my mobile phone's password to delete the video," she says.

Rutuja, 20, and Pooja, 27, along with two minor sisters, aged 14 and 12, from Bhim Nagar were taken into custody. "They treated us like animals and humiliated us for being Dalit. I could actually relate to *Jai Bhim* [a Tamil movie on a tribal woman fighting for justice]. They asked us to kneel and not look up," says Rutuja, adding that the police also took her hall ticket for her first-year BA exams. Pooja tells a similar story. The minor girls' mother has sent them to Nanded to avoid harassment by the police.

Politicians have been visiting the area following the violence. Athawale visited the Ambedkar statue, garlanded it, met officials in-charge of the administration, and residents of Bhim Nagar. Sujat Ambedkar, the great-grandson of Ambedkar, also garlanded the statue and visited Bhim Nagar.

On December 17, Prakash Ambedkar, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi chief and Sujat's father, posted a video on X and wrote: "A mother of a newborn was brutally assaulted by the police in her house. She had locked herself in the bathroom to save herself from the violence, but the police broke the door down and brutally beat her up."

Conspiracy theories

The man who desecrated the Constitution is from Mirzapur village in Parbhani district and worked at grocery shops in Parbhani. His father-in-law, who asked not to be named, says his younger son was the first to receive a call from the police informing them about the incident. He adds that he will accept what the law decides. "For the last two months, he had been hospitalised in Akola [about 200 km from Parbhani] and arrived in the city on the day of the incident," he says. "For the past 16 years, he has been under treatment for mental health issues." A doctor confirms this.

Ambedkarite organisations believe the man was used. "This could be a conspiracy to create a rift between Marathas and Dalits. The police must probe this under the Supreme Court's observation," Bhimrao Hattimbare, an Ambedkarite leader from Parbhani, says.

However, District Collector Raghunath Gawade calls this a "mere coincidence" and dismisses such a possibility. "Prima facie there is no correlation between the two incidents. We are investigating this angle. This was a huge but unintentional mistake."

Somnath's brother Premnath Suryavanshi is now fighting for justice. His lawyer, Pawan Jondhale, says Somnath had no role in the events of December 11 and was picked up with other men from Shankar Nagar, where a number of Dalits live. "He came to Parbhani from Pune to fulfil his dream of becoming a lawyer," he says. "He did odd jobs, from driving to labour work, and supported his family."

Vilas Kale, who calls himself a Parbhanikar, sits outside a restaurant whose board was damaged in the violence. In February, during the Urs (death anniversary of a Muslim holy man) of Hazrat Sayyed Shah Turabul Haq Baba, which saw the participation of both Hindus and Muslims, tensions over the molestation of a woman resulted in stone pelting. "The Urs was cut short by four days citing law and order issues," he says. "Parbhani has always been sensitive."



A victim of the violence offers prayers in front of statuetttes of Buddha and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at her home in Parbhani, Maharashtra. VIJAY SONI/E

India's Foreign Trade: Mind The Gap

Why are India's exports sluggish?

- Geopolitical challenges
- Sluggish global economic growth and demands
- Contraction in petroleum export due to decline in prices
- Low demands for gems and jewellery
- Inability to tap key emerging markets

Silver Linings

- Core exports (excluding petroleum and gems & jewellery) faring well
- Sharp jump in smartphone exports
- Good performance of pharmaceuticals, textiles, and engineering exports

NOT-SO-GOOD GOODS EXPORTS

November 2024 Foreign Trade Records

Imports: \$69.95 billion
Merchandise trade deficit: \$37.84 billion
Gold imports: \$14.86 billion
Value of services exports (\$35.67 billion) overtakes goods exports (\$32.11 billion)

Top Five Services Exports



Destination-wise Exports

India's export growth in USD value terms, Apr-Sep 2024 (% y-o-y)

Region	Growth (%)
North America	6.4
European Union	6.8
West Asia - GCC	8.7
Latin America	1.5
Developing Europe	0.4
Rest of Asia (-)	6.7
Africa (-)	11.5
Others	6.6

*Exports to Asia, and Africa falter

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF COMMERCE, ECONOMIC SURVEY, INDIA RATINGS, CRISIL

GVANENDRA KESHRI
DH NRES SERVICE

The foreign trade data for November 2024, released by the Ministry of Commerce recently, shows multiple records. For the first time services exports overtook goods exports, indicating a major shift in the country's external trade dynamics. India's monthly import bill soared to nearly \$70 billion for the first time, and the merchandise trade deficit, the difference between the country's goods imports and exports, hit a record high of \$37.84 billion. Another record was related to the shipment of gold. The value of gold imports jumped to a record high of \$14.86 billion in November, which is over three times compared to \$3.4 billion recorded in the same month last year. Doubts are being raised over the gold import figures though. News agency Bloomberg reported that there might be accumulation errors. However, no official clarification has been issued so far.

These records do not bode well for the Indian economy. The country imported

goods worth \$69.95 billion while the value of exports stood at just \$32.11 billion during November. This surge in the trade gap will widen the country's current account deficit. According to ICRA, India's current account deficit is likely to increase to 2.8% of GDP in the quarter ending December, the highest in two years. It will put further pressure on the Indian currency, which has weakened by around 2% this year.

The rupee recently slipped below 85 against the US dollar. At the end of 2023, the rupee had closed at 83.35 against the greenback. The weakening of the rupee will make imports more expensive and lead to uptick in imported inflation. Gold, oils and fats, and chemical products are the major contributors to imported inflation.

In the first eight months of the current financial year, the value of merchandise exports stood at \$284.31 billion, which is just 2.17% higher when compared with the corresponding period of the last year. The outbound shipment during November was 4.8% lower, year-on-year. The two most disappointing sectors are petroleum and gems and jewellery. In the first half of the current fiscal, earnings from petroleum

exports dropped by 10.2% and gems and jewellery by 10.9% when compared with the same period last year. While the poor numbers in the petroleum sector are due to lower prices in international markets, there was a sharp decline in gems and jewellery exports in volume terms. This is worrisome given the labour-intensive nature of the gems and jewellery industry.

The US President-elect Donald Trump's plan to impose high tariffs may significantly impact India's foreign trade. Trump has threatened to impose high tariff on imports to the US. While China is in focus, Trump has also threatened to impose reciprocal tariffs on imports from India, alleging that New Delhi imposes high taxes on American products.

Devendra Kumar Pant, Chief Economist at India Ratings and Research, said that the imposition of high tariffs by the US would impact Indian exports and hit the economy, especially the manufacturing sector. Manufacturing output growth slipped to 2.2% in the July-September quarter dragging the overall economic growth to a seven-quarter low of 5.4%.

"With prospective US tariff hikes against

China, India's imports from China could rise as Beijing tries to push away its deflationary pressures by exporting cheap goods to other economies. This is something India, along with other Asian nations, is already facing in many goods categories. Hence, India's goods trade deficit will need to be monitored over the next few months and will require deft policy responses from the authorities," rating agency CRISIL, said in a note.

Mithleshwar Thakur, secretary general of the Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEP), said several policy actions are needed to improve the competitiveness of Indian exports.

"PLI (production linked incentive) scheme should be expanded to more and more key sectors to attract investments and build production and export capabilities of those sectors. That will help Indian industry achieve economies of scale and thereby cost competitiveness," Thakur said.

He also suggested the implementation of speedy reforms in customs to promote faster and automated clearance and the development of industrial clusters to minimise fixed costs and promote ease of doing business for the industry.

'Exporters need a predictable business environment'

The Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) acts as an interface between exporters and government agencies in India. In an interview with *DH's* Gyanendra Keshri, the president of the apex body of the country's trade promotion organisations, Ashwani Kumar, highlights the need for financial support and a predictable business environment for exporters to narrow the widening trade deficit.

Exporters:

What needs to be done to improve the competitiveness of Indian exports?

The urgent and immediate steps that need to be taken on the liquidity front are deeper interest subvention support, an extension of the interest equalisation scheme for at least five years, and creating a predictable business environment for the exporters. Interest subvention and equalisation schemes help in reducing the cost of borrowings for exporters. The interest equalisation scheme, which was started in April 2015, is set to end this month. Besides, the government has put a cap of Rs 50 lakh. The imposition of this cap has hit many MSMEs, and they are unable to decide on orders due to the non-availability of further subvention. We demand the restoration of the interest equalisation scheme with a cap of Rs 10 crore for all MSMEs and 410 tariff lines for five years. Besides, the government should extend the RoDTEP (Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products) benefits to all sectors of exports. We have also been urging for the early conclusion of the ongoing FTA negotiations with the UK, Peru, Oman, and the European Union.

What are your projections for India's exports and imports this fiscal and for 2025-26?

The overall goods and services exports are expected to be in the range of \$810-\$820 billion for this fiscal, while overall imports are expected to be in the range of \$950-\$960 bil-

lion. In 2025-26, the overall export is likely to cross \$850 billion, while imports may remain in the same range as in the current fiscal. A lot will depend on the global economic scenario.

India's imports have increased to record highs in recent months while exports remain sluggish. Why?

Imports are rising as India's demand for goods has gone up, much more than the global average, and the country's economy is growing faster than the other global economies. Though the demand for Indian products has also increased, global

economic uncertainties coupled with logistical challenges due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the crisis in the Red Sea due to conflict in the Gulf region have impacted India's shipments, especially to Europe, Africa, CIS, and the Gulf region. Volatility in crude and metal prices has also played a key role in the declining value of India's exports to some extent.

US President-elect Donald Trump has plans to impose high tariffs on imports from several countries, including India. Will it put further pressure on exports from India?

The US remains India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$120 billion in FY24. Unlike China, India enjoys a favourable trade relationship with the US. The imposition of high tariffs on Chinese goods would benefit India. This we can say from the experience of Trump's first term. The US-China tariff wars during Trump's first term created new export opportunities for several countries. Mexico was the biggest beneficiary. India has also gained substantially. India's exports to the US during that period had increased by \$36.8 billion driven by electronics, pharmaceuticals, and engineering goods. However, high tariffs on US imports from India may impact our slowing exports. It is too early to predict though.



COMPILLED BY
GVANENDRA KESHRI

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

When a study warrants a ban

Biologists warned against a research on so-called mirror cells, which defy fundamental properties of living organisms, writes **Carl Zimmer**

On Thursday, 38 prominent biologists issued a dire warning: Within a few decades, scientists will be able to create a microbe that could cause an unstoppable pandemic, devastating crop losses or the collapse of entire ecosystems. The scientists called for a ban on research that could lead to the synthesis of such an organism.

"The consequences could be globally disastrous," said Jack W. Szostak, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist at the University of Chicago who helped write a 259-page technical report on the risks of the research.

In an accompanying commentary in *Science*, Szostak and his colleagues warned that an organism created with the new technology could cause "extraordinarily damaging consequences for the environment, agriculture, and human well-being." To make such a microbe, scientists would have to build a cell that defied one of the fundamental properties of life on Earth. The molecules that serve as the building blocks of DNA and proteins typically exist in one of two mirror-image forms. But living cells rely on just one form.

Our DNA, for example, has a backbone made partly of sugar. While sugar molecules can exist in left- and right-handed forms, DNA only uses the right-handed molecules.

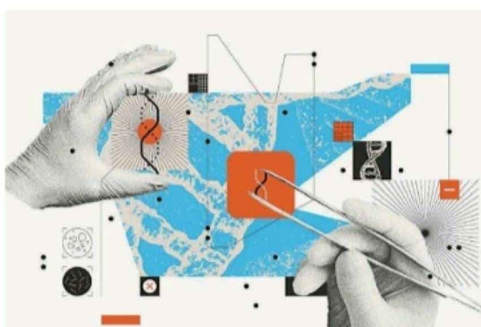
That's the reason DNA's double helix has a right-handed twist. Our proteins, by contrast, are made of left-handed amino acids. This combination is found in humans and every species on Earth.

Scientists are still debating how evolution landed on this arrangement. Theoretically, a mirror cell — with left-handed DNA and right-handed proteins — could carry out all the biochemical reactions required to stay alive.

But as far as biologists can tell, mirror cells do not exist. At least not yet.

In recent decades, scientists have discovered how to make mirror proteins. Researchers have welded together right-handed amino acids to create mirror versions of natural proteins made by our bodies.

Chemists are now trying to exploit mirror proteins, hoping they can be used to create long-acting drugs for diseases ranging from HIV to Alzheimer's.



Scientists have taken even bigger strides forward in mirror biology in recent years. Ordinary cells make proteins by reading a gene, copying the gene's sequence in an RNA molecule, and shipping that RNA to a protein-making factory.

In 2022, Yuan Xu and Ting Zhu, two researchers at Westlake University in China, created mirror enzymes that can produce mirror RNA molecules by reading mirror genes. Similar advances have raised the prospect that scientists could eventually make all the parts required to build a mirror cell, perhaps in 10 to 30 years.

"The creation of mirror-image life is one of the ultimate applications of synthetic mirror-image proteins," Richard Payne, a chemist at the University of Sydney in Australia, and his colleagues wrote last year.

Several teams of scientists started taking further steps toward mirror cells. Kate Adamala, a synthetic biologist at the University of Minnesota, said: "If we made a mirror cell, we would have made a second tree of life."

A mirror cell might also be medically valuable. Scientists could program it to make bigger, more powerful mirror proteins.

Potential for a planetwide catastrophe

Kevin Esvelt, a biologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who studies the risks of biotechnology, had vaguely wondered in the past if mirror cells might pose a risk. As its synthesis became possible, he began to take that risk seriously.

He raised his concerns with biosecurity experts at Open Philanthropy, which funds research on potential threats to humanity, such as pandemics and artificial intelligence. They brought together Adamala and other researchers working on mirror cells, along with immunologists, plant biologists and evolutionary biologists, to discuss possible risks.

The discussion felt like science fiction. Jonathan Jones, a plant biologist at the Sainsbury Laboratory in Norwich, England, "It took me a while to take it seriously," he said.

But he eventually recognised the potential for a planetwide catastrophe if a mirror cell escaped containment — either accidentally released from a lab or set free as a biological weapon.

The researchers then spent weeks researching the scientific literature to see if they could falsify their hypothesis, but they failed.

The trouble with mirror cells is that they could probably evade most of the barriers that keep ordinary organisms in check. To fight off pathogens, for example, our bodies must first detect them with molecular sensors.

Those sensors can only latch on to left-handed proteins or right-handed DNA and RNA. A mirror cell that infected lab workers might spread through their bodies without triggering any resistance from their immune systems.

A victim of mirror cells would harbour a vast supply of the microbes, which could spread to other people and start a pandemic. And it would be one that medicine would be unlikely to stop.

An antibiotic typically works against ordinary microbes by locking on to their proteins or DNA. Such a drug would probably be useless against a mirror cell because the drug could not get a proper grip on an essential molecule.

All animals rely on similar pathogen sensors to switch on their immune systems, and they would all likely fail to recognize mirror cells.

Plants have their own pathogen detectors, which would also fail. Even if a mirror cell only escaped into a river or the soil, it could wreak ecological havoc. Viruses would be unable to infect it. Amoebae and other predators would find it indigestible.

Unchecked, mirror cells could come to dominate entire ecosystems. "The impact on the food chain would be devastating," said Deepa Agashe, an evolutionary biologist at the National Center for Biological Sciences in Bengaluru.

A mirror cell is even more dangerous because it will mutate as it replicates, allowing it to evolve into an even greater threat that is impossible to predict.

As a result of these conversations, Adamala and her colleagues decided to abandon their work on mirror cells. "We're saying, 'We're not going to do it,'" she said. How to prevent others from doing it is an open question that scientists plan to address at larger meetings in 2025.

The New York Times

DID YOU KNOW?

Footprints show co-existence of different humans

A million and a half years ago, amid giant storks and the ancestors of antelopes, two extinct relatives of humans walked along the same muddy lakeshore in what is today northern Kenya, new research suggests.

An excavation team uncovered four sets of footprints preserved in the mud at the Turkana Basin, a site that has led to important breakthroughs in understanding human evolution. The discovery, announced in a paper in the journal *Science*, is direct evidence that different kinds of human relatives, with distinct anatomies and gaits, inhabited the same place simultaneously, the paper's authors say.

It also raises questions about the extent of the species' interactions with each other. "They might have walked by one another," said Kevin Hatala, an evolutionary anthropologist at Chatham University in Pittsburgh who led the study.

Based on skeletal remains found in the region, Hatala's team attributed the footprints to *Paranthropus boisei* and *Homo erectus*, two types of hominins, the group consisting of our human lineage and closely related species. *Paranthropus boisei* had smaller brains along with wide, flat faces and massive teeth and chewing muscles. *Homo erectus*, by contrast, more closely resembled modern human proportions and are thought to be our direct ancestors.

Scientists have long known that different types of hominins co-existed on Earth. *Homo sapiens*, who emerged only about 300,000 years ago, shared the planet with Neanderthals and Denisovans for thousands of years. Traces of their DNA are still present in us today.

However, evidence of species overlap and how behaviour differed from one species to another is mostly inferred from bones. Such fossils are often preserved irregularly or found in sediments that accumulate over millennia. This can lead to a large margin of error in dating.

Footprints, on the other hand, fossilize much more straightforwardly, often within hours or days of their creation. They provide a clear snapshot of a moment in time and a locomotion pattern.

In 2021, Hatala was part of a team that reported footprints found in Tanzania were made by two distinct hominin species 3.6 million years ago. Now, he has found a similar occurrence in Kenya.

— KATRINA MILLER, The New York Times

TELANGANA



The craze for film stars touches the sky at Hyderabad's Sandhya 70 MM theatre, where a tragic stampede occurred on December 4, resulting in the death of a 35-year-old woman. The victim's eight-year-old son continues to battle for his life at a private hospital. SERISH NANISETTI

The hidden toll of cinematic fandom

As Indian movie-makers pump in more money to mount their fantasies on screen, the stakes at the turnstile are higher than ever. The actor is a brand; the movie is a collective experience. Fans are not watching a film, they are participating in it. A death inside a cinema hall is a statistical blip, write **Serish Nanisetti & Lavpreet Kaur**

Inside a packed cinema hall, three teenage girls perched on the edge of their seats giggle as Allu Arjun and Rashmika Mandanna share a romantic moment in the kitchen. A little later, the screen erupts into an athletic dance sequence in *Pushpa-2*. What feels more like a PT drill than choreography sends the audience of 100-plus into a frenzy — cheers, whistles, and catcalls filling the air.

It was amid the communal euphoria such as this inside a darkened hall of Sandhya 70 MM theatre in Hyderabad that a tragedy unfolded on December 4 — a 35-year-old woman died, and her eight-year-old son continues to battle for life at a private hospital.

Every Friday, the cinema comes alive with a pulsating crowd of film enthusiasts armed with crackers, drums, tinsels, tambourines, oversized speakers, flower garlands, and packets of milk. As part of the ritual, dozens of milk packets are emptied over a towering 70-foot poster. "We spend the money from our own pockets for this. I love Allu Arjun," says Manoj Reddy, but clams up when the conversation turns to the tragic events of December 4.

Now 28, Reddy mans the souvenir and ice-cream counter at the AAA (Allu Arjun Army) cinema hall in Ameerpet. A fan of the actor since *Parugu* (2008) and *Race Gurram* (2014), he admits he hasn't yet seen *Pushpa-2*, as he is observing *Ayyappa deeksha*, a 41-day period of abstinence and penitence dedicated to Swamy Ayyappa.

A love beyond the screen
The cinema hall, partially owned by Allu Arjun, features an *Icon Star Lounge* adorned with posters from his films and a section dedicated to family photographs. Inside, red low-settees are scattered across the spacious hall, where visitors, men and women alike, wander in, settle down, pose for photos, or snap selfies. Many mimic the iconic gesture and dialogue from *Pushpa-1*, sliding the back of their hands under their chin in a signature move. Here, moviegoers don't just watch the legend; they become part of it.

"The actors are no longer just selling movies; they are selling experiences that can't be replicated on OTT," says Uma Bhargubanda, an associate professor at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, who has researched Indian cinema and cultural history.

"After the COVID pandemic, big-star films were bringing people back to theatres. *Pathaan* and *Janam* did it in the north. Big-budget films don't rake in money unless they get a wide release, so they began positioning the theatre experience as part of the appeal to draw people in," she explains.

Pushpa-2 released in 12,000 screens worldwide, including at theatres in RTC Crossroad, Hyderabad. The Sandhya 70mm, a legendary ci-



Big-budget films don't rake in money unless they get a wide release, so they began positioning the theatre experience as part of the appeal to draw people in.

UMA BHARGUBANDA, Associate professor at EFLL, Hyderabad

nema in the area, seats over 1,300 cinegoers. It is where some of the most extravagant celebrations of a new release plays out in the Telugu states, causing traffic gridlocks and creating an electric atmosphere. Fans travel from different districts within Telangana and even neighbouring Andhra Pradesh for a first-hand experience of the hype.

It was this experience that an eight-year-old boy longed for, driven by his deep admiration for Allu Arjun, and his parents were equally excited by the idea.

The family, residents of Dilsukhnagar in Hyderabad, purchased tickets for the benefit show to be screened the night before the official release. They paid ₹800 per ticket, unaware that this decision would soon upend their lives.

The plan was for Revathi, 35, and her two children to reach the theatre first, while the father, Mogudampalli Bhaskar, would have joined them directly from work. "My son wanted to watch the movie. I took him to Sandhya theatre upon his insistence. Allu Arjun coming there isn't his fault. If anything, I am ready to withdraw the complaint," says Bhaskar.

After finishing work, he rushed to the cinema hall, intending to join his wife, son and daughter to watch the movie together. But that wasn't to be. Late that evening, he learned of his wife's death in the stampede while he struggled to get his seriously injured son admitted to a private hospital.

On December 13, when police detained Allu Arjun, Bhaskar publicly stated that he wanted to withdraw the complaint that had led to the arrest. The actor was released after his family enlisted high-profile lawyers.

Director Ram Gopal Varma took to social media platform 'X' to share his thoughts, linking the



arrest to the stakes involved in the movie's success: "Chief Minister of Telangana @revanthanumala did this to @alluarjun, I think it is because he wanted to give a big publicity boost to Telangana state's favourite son for a huge rise in #Pushpa2's week-2 collections. This explains why the state did such a deliberately weak prosecution so that he could be bailed out in a few hours and become even more mega popular to rule the box office for a long long time."

On December 17, Hyderabad Commissioner of Police C.V. Anand issued a show-cause notice to the theatre management, questioning why cinematography licence issued to it should not be cancelled for the lapses leading to the death of the woman in the stampede.

In the two-page notice dated December 12, the official pointed out several lapses, including absence of women security, lack of frisking booths for women, lack of systems to check tickets leading to unauthorised entry and overcrowding, display of large flics outside the theatre without permission, and improper security arrangements by the management, among others. The management has been asked to respond to the notice within 10 days.

High-stakes game

"There's a lot of publicity behind big-budget films, which whips up a kind of mass hysteria. People are looking for a sense of community. Sometimes the star provides that, for young boys or young men. There is something to it, akin to religious processions, political rallies, or even cricket matches — there's a collective energy that binds it all together," says Bhargubanda, explaining the fan phenomenon.

Fan following is both a legacy and an identity in the Telugu film industry. In 1984, Chiranjeevi made his mark with the blockbuster *Challe*, following his hit *Khalidi* (1983), loosely based on Sylvester Stallone's 1982 action thriller *First Blood*. The iconic 56-foot-high poster of *Challe* became a landmark at Shanti cinema in Narayanguda, Hyderabad. Since then, generations of fans have been devoted to Chiranjeevi, who later forayed into politics but eventually stepped back. Today, much of that fan loyalty has shifted to Allu Arjun.

RTC Crossroad is a paradise not just for movie buffs but also for actors and filmmakers, where the fate of a film can be sensed even before the first show ends. It has been a tradition for lead actors to arrive and watch the movie alongside their fans. Not too long ago, the area was home to over 10 theatres. While many have now given way to malls and other commercial buildings, Sandhya Sudarshan and Devi Theatres have remained key landmarks.

The scale of the economic stakes is evident from the fact that between 2022 and 2024, five movies have breached the ₹1,000-crore mark in collections. *Pushpa-2* ranks as the third biggest grosser, following *Dangal* (2016) and *Baahubali-2* (2017). Of the top five all-time big grossers in India, only one is a Hindi movie; the rest are in Telugu and Kannada. This success has been driven

by political decisions allowing filmmakers to raise ticket prices and screen more than four shows per day in cinemas.

Social media has further amplified the message, attracting an ever-growing audience eager to experience it.

Going national and international

Telugu and Tamil movies have mastered the art of subliminal messaging, seamlessly weaving it into their narratives. In *Pushpa-2*, for instance, the smuggler is asked how he plans to amass the resources needed to unseat a Chief Minister and plant a new one. "Cross the border. Become national... become international," he says. It's no coincidence that the film opens with the protagonist clashing with criminals in Japan.

The scale of *Pushpa-2*'s ambition was evident at its trailer launch in Patna's sprawling Gandhi Maidan on November 17. Chaos erupted as fans clambered up the scaffolding, huddled up the lights and speakers, desperate to glimpse the actors and hear them talk.

The police resorted to a cane-charge to control the crowd spilling onto the streets, narrowly avoiding a stampede.

"Even political rallies don't attract so many people. All these people had gathered and turned up on their own — that's the level of craze," says Ram Kulesh Thakur, an English teacher from Muzaffarpur, Bihar. "Regional boundaries have faded. There's no longer a distinction between Telugu or Malayalam heroes, as more Indians move across states for work or business. Dubbed South Indian movies have become a nationwide sensation."

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the number of cinema halls across the country, with many being converted into malls or shopping complexes. It also reshaped the movie-watching experience for audiences.

Meanwhile, OTT platforms cracked open language barriers, transforming Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam films into a pan-India phenomena and catapulting stars like Ravi Teja, Upendra, and Allu Arjun to national fame. After all, what's not to love about a story where a character starts as a worker, struts with italicised swagger, breaks free from the shackles of poverty, and evolves into a suave metrosexual man of the world, sporting silk shirts, tailored trousers, and a penchant for chunky gold jewellery?

"The way I look at it, films like *RRR* and *Pushpa* seem to be following the Hollywood big-studio model, where nothing is standalone anymore," says Bhargubanda. "Because once so much is invested in publicising a film, it becomes a brand. That's why every big-budget movie now claims to be part of a 'universe'. If there's *KGf*, there has to be *KGf-2*. When *Kantara* became a hit, a sequel was inevitable. There's immense pressure on stars and filmmakers to capitalise on the success of such films, given the massive investments involved," she adds.

"Despite being aware of the actor's immense popularity, the management did not arrange separate entry and exit points for his team and failed to deploy adequate security to manage the crowd. Along with the actor, a large number of people from outside rushed into the lower balcony area. His personal security staff started pushing the crowd, which further aggravated the situation," explains Central Zone Deputy Commissioner of Police Akanksh Yadav, recounting how the tragedy unfolded.

While these films rake in big bucks by riding the crest of fandom, it's high time filmmakers allocate a portion of their earnings to ensure the safety of the very fans who live, breathe, and immerse themselves in the fantasy world they create.



DECCAN HERALD
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On Ambedkar, some politics of convenience

A row over remarks made about B R Ambedkar inside parliament has degenerated into a scuffle outside the House with schoolboy-level claims and accusations – of being pushed, shoved, and people getting too close for comfort. The chain of events started with Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks in the Rajya Sabha in which he sought to criticise the Congress for what he called false posturing about Ambedkar, and for failing to give the architect of the Constitution his due. But the way he phrased his criticism exposed him and his party to the charge of posturing and insincerity which he accused the Congress of. Shah's comment that the chanting of God's name would be better than chanting Ambedkar's name was an opportunity for the Opposition to accuse him of denigration of the icon. Shah claimed that his words were taken out of context, but words have their meanings and resonances, and in politics, they become weapons.

No party can accuse others of being false and pretentious about Ambedkar without inviting that criticism to itself. Even parties that have a predominantly Dalit following, such as the BSP, have been found wanting in their commitment to the cause that Ambedkar espoused. Ambedkar had differences with all shades of politics that existed in his time and even had debates with Gandhi. He had co-operation and differences with the Congress, and had differences with and strong opposition to Hindu conservatism. He was at odds with the Hindu orthodoxy on many issues such as the Hindu Code Bill which he pushed when he was in the Union cabinet. Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet, frustrated with the position of the Hindu conservatives on the Bill. He differed with the Hindu orthodoxy and leaders such as Savarkar on many other issues. Ambedkar was, essentially, a social reformer and his vision conflicted with politics in many respects. The nation should be grateful to him for his role in shaping a secular and egalitarian Constitution. It is only recently that the BJP accepted Ambedkar into its pantheon. For politics, he is more an electoral icon than anything else. His role as a social reformer and Constitution builder is praised, but the aim has always been the electoral returns that his name fetches.

In the fracas outside parliament, two BJP MPs claimed to have been injured and are in hospital. An FIR has been filed against the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi for allegedly pushing them. The Congress has accused BJP members of obstructing them and injuring senior leader Mallikarjun Kharge. The charges should be investigated, however childish or exaggerated they are, but without the vindictiveness that has marked politically loaded cases in recent times.

Parties of all shades have used him predominantly for electoral gains

PF through ATMs empowers members

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) proposal to enable withdrawal of funds through ATM cards will be widely welcomed by its members. The plan is to roll out the facility by the middle of next year. There is also a proposal to introduce a digital wallet where the claimed amount could be kept and withdrawn from. The withdrawal will be subject to certain limits. The EPFO is a major social security scheme and has about 30 crore accounts. Lakhs of members are being added every year. It commands a corpus of about Rs 30 lakh crore. Every week, lakhs of people interact with the organisation; among the most significant requirements are withdrawal of funds for housing, children's education, and weddings. The funds entrusted with the EPFO are the members' earnings and it is important for them to have easy access to these funds.

Withdrawals from the EPF fund have often involved a lot of hassles and delays. There have even been charges of corruption. Technology has made the procedures simpler. The EPFO has said that claim rejections have been reduced to 25% till November 2024 from 35% the year before. It has claimed improvement of performance in other aspects as well. EPFO 3.0, to be launched next year, is a technology version which will allow members to withdraw up to 50% of their total deposits from ATMs using cards. It is expected to provide the members more control over their savings and improve their long-term benefits. It also gives them the option of converting savings into a pension. The IT upgrade will link the EPFO's infrastructure with the banking system and facilitate automation, and quicker claim settlements. All members will be issued withdrawal cards. There is a view that PF money which forms the most significant saving fund for many should not be so easy to withdraw. But the idea behind the ATM card option is to ensure that the members have control over their finances.

It will take many months before the proposal becomes a reality. The labour ministry, the EPFO and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which is the banking regulator, have to work out the details of the plan and its implementation. The RBI has to approve the programme as well. Aspects such as the frequency and limit of withdrawals need to be decided. But once set in motion, the plan will give the EPFO's services a whole new dimension.

A proposed IT upgrade will also facilitate quicker claim settlements

The Constitution, beyond fundamental rights

There must be greater understanding among the people on the document which defines the country's governance structures and legislative federalism

NIKHIL ERUKINGAT

The debate in the winter session of the Parliament over the Constitution of India and ways to protect the sacred constitutional principles has garnered substantial public attention. All ends of the political spectrum have been fighting to be the custodian of the Constitution and its principles. Several members have also held up the Constitution while taking oaths. The use of the Constitution as a symbol of protest or demonstration is becoming increasingly prevalent over the last few years.

Most of the public deliberations and debates on the Constitution is centred around the idea of fundamental rights. However, the Constitution is much more than just fundamental rights. It is a document that also lays out structures and systems for governance of the country. It establishes the Supreme Court, how a Bill must be passed, when the President or judge of the Supreme Court or a High Court or the Vice President can be impeached. It demarcates the legislative competence of the Parliament and the State legislature to maintain legislative federalism. But it needs to be noted that the conversations on these provisions are mostly confined within the four walls of the courts.

For instance, protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act witnessed television news anchors, politicians and even citizens citing Article 14, i.e., the right to equality. However, the farmers' protest – even though it amassed substantial public engagement – did not witness any serious public interest on the constitutional competence of the Parliament (instead of the State legislatures) to enact the farm laws. Another classic example is of the Aadhaar Act. Most of the discussions around the Aadhaar issue among the public have centred on privacy and data protection, without a proportionate discussion on how the Parliament introduced the

Aadhaar Act as a money bill, allowing the government to practically bypass the Rajya Sabha.

How does the rest of the Constitution matter? These provisions of the Constitution on the procedures and the establishment of constitutional bodies are riddled with intricacies. The appointment of judges to the high courts or the Supreme Court is not a matter of mere formality. It is the provision that will determine the independence of the judiciary from the executive and the legislature. If the appointment is made completely at the discretion of the President and the Cabinet, the Supreme Court can be filled with the ruling party's sympathisers. And if it is left completely to the judiciary, nepotism

as to who appoints a judge matters as well, because the judges can widen or restrict fundamental rights on the basis of their interpretation.

GST Council and skewing fiscal federalism

Similarly, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council is established under Article 279A of the Constitution. The provision also mandates that every decision of the Council shall be taken by a majority of not less than three-fourth of weighted votes of the members. The Central government has a weightage of one-third and all the states together have a weightage of two-thirds of the total votes. In other words, even if all the states come together over an issue, they can only accumulate 2/3rd votes (66.66%), while they need 3/4th votes (75%) to pass a resolution.

No decision can be passed in the Council without the Centre being in the majority. This has a significant impact because now, the state governments (and consequently, the electorate of the state constituencies) no longer have an effective say over the decisions made by the GST Council, if these decisions are contrary to those of the Central government. This affects the fiscal federal structure of the country and more broadly, the democratic value of the state electorates' voice in the GST Council.

Even though this does not have a direct impact on the fundamental rights of individuals, it does have an impact on several issues that are linked to fundamental rights. For instance, a high GST on education, medical equipment, insurance, household products, or footwear will raise the cost of effective realisation of the right to education, health, and the adequate standard of living, among other fundamental rights.

Thus, a better understanding of how the Constitution entails much more than just fundamental rights and a public engagement with the procedural provisions in the Constitution are crucial. While fundamental rights are indispensable to the constitutional governance of the country, how the fundamental rights must be understood and what is their true scope can be influenced and re-shaped by the other parts of the Constitution.

(The writer is an assistant professor at the Alliance School of Law, Alliance University, Bengaluru)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The toddler effect

Spending time with little ones is a recipe for happiness

N DEVARAJAN

Spending time with toddlers is an exotic pleasure, especially for seniors like myself. I hope you'll agree that toddlers are ego-free, priority-free, and expectation-free. They crave immense love and are drawn to warmth. Anyone who exerts affection can easily win them over. Amplify their expectations, and they'll fall for you instantly. It's pure bliss!

Their bewitching smile is mesmerising. The more you behave childishly, the more attracted they become, believing you're part of their group. They shower you with inexplicable love in return. Their innocent smile, stuttering, and tumbling keep you in awe.

Imitating them, behaving exactly as they do, helps you connect with them. I have always craved for spending golden moments with children – be it the children of people who worked in our houses, neighbours, relatives, or parents.

During my sister's stay in Harihar three decades ago, I'd frequently visit her, not to see her family, but to play with her Marathi neighbour's younger daughter, Megha. She was so popular that instead of calling her "so and so's daughter," the entire colony referred to her father as "Megha's father."

This charming chatterbox was everyone's favourite. In the evenings, colony elders would join her at the park to play hide-and-seek or carry her on their backs, jumping in ecstasy.

For the past four or five years, my centre of attraction has been my nephew's four-year-old son, Arya. This English-smitten child has been attending kindergarten for just a couple of

months but shows remarkable fluency in English. His teacher often wonders if he's the student or the teacher!

When Arya's cousin Yuvika – same age as him – visits, the house turns into a warzone. Yuvika excitedly shares stories and her love for Mulgubal Dosa, while Arya scatters plastic toys and invites everyone to join him. To restore calm, my nephew often hands them each a mobile phone. We're amazed by the sudden calmness, as both of them get immersed in their favourite YouTube cartoons! The only time the house is peaceful is when both kids are away at school.

This little friend of mine – Anoop, the one-and-a-half-year-old son of our apartment's security guard. As soon as Anoop sees me, he calls out "Ah, Ah" and rides his toy cycle towards me. Unable to speak yet, he gestures for me to sit on the pillow seat. With his curly hair tied with a rubber band and a *kunkum* on his forehead, he resembles Lord Krishna.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shame in the temple of democracy

What's unfolding in the temple of democracy during this session should make us hang our heads in shame. Both the ruling party and opposition are waiting for the slightest opportunity to clash. The Home Minister's indiscreet remark about Ambedkar and the rejection of a no-confidence motion against the Rajya Sabha Chairman sparked high-decibel shouts, walkouts, and adjournments. Protests by the L.N.D.I.A bloc and coun-

ter-protests by the BJP led to an ugly fracas, resulting in complaints and counter-complaints, ultimately leading to the registration of a case of serious offence against Rahul Gandhi. It's unfortunate that lawmakers haven't learned to conduct themselves with dignity. These incidents have tarnished the image of institutions and leaders, leaving the public in disgust.

S V Venkatakrishnan, Bengaluru

New low

The news, 'Lawmakers hit a low over Ambedkar row', (Dec 20), makes for disturbing reading. Our politicians have sunk to an abysmal level, and such actions should be abhorred by all. Instead of engaging in meaningful discourse, our politicians are resorting to distraction. Some have even perfected this art, as evident from their 'holier-than-thou' attitude. As aptly quoted in your 'SPEAK OUT', 'Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.' Jose Abraham, Kottayam

Need for balance

The article 'Why India should find the golden mean' (Dec 20) serves as a vital reminder about the dangers of

extremes in governance. It highlights how policies based solely on appeasement or majoritarianism can lead to societal divisions, as seen in Syria and Pakistan. India's strengths lie in its diversity, and a balanced approach that promotes inclusion and rejects polarisation is essential for progress. The call for unity within diversity is timely and crucial for preserving democracy and harmony. Magdalene J. Bengaluru

Stricter laws needed

The growing issue of drug misuse in Karnataka requires a comprehensive approach, including better drug-testing facilities, stricter pharmacy regulations, and public awareness campaigns. Involving communities and healthcare pro-

fessionals in these efforts could help strengthen preventive measures. It's essential that we respond to this issue quickly and compassionately. Ragini H R, Bengaluru

Irreplaceable Ashwin

Regarding 'The learner who would be legend' (Dec 20), R Ashwin's genius stemmed from his commitment. His career was marked by constant self-doubt, which fuelled his innovation and mastery. His legacy will always be his ability to push boundaries and challenge conventions. Lalshram Atholi Channu, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

People from Purvanchal and Bihar are present all over India, and the upcoming elections are in UP and Bihar. The wave of development flowing in Delhi is spreading everywhere, and this fear is haunting them – that the public, recognising this wave of development, might make them lose all their strongholds.



Avadh Ojha, AAP leader (on BJP president JP Nadda's 'Rohingyas' remark in Rajya Sabha)

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

Mark Twain

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Conflicts in a time warp

Resurfacing of unresolved ethnic hostilities, as in Manipur, is not unfamiliar in the region

CHIRANJIB HALDAR

Jyoti Raditya Scindia, Union Minister for the Development of North Eastern Region, while replying to opposition barbs in Parliament, retorted – "Manipur is a situation which has been there for the last 25 to 40 years. So it's not something that has been created by the government", stamping the ongoing Manipur imbroglio as a legacy issue.

Many conflict analysts feel the hostilities in Manipur may terminate out of combat exhaustion on either side though the ethnic quagmire may remain frozen in a time warp. When interethnic conflicts end without a formal cessation of hostilities, they unfreeze intermittently and we have witnessed this untempered times in Northeast India. The Meitei and Kuki-Zo refugees may be dreadfully preoccupied as a future conflict trap with no palatable resolution. The confounding approach of the Centre and the BJP-led Manipur government treating water as mayhem continues unabated are pointers to this. The land of jewels is now more intersected by fissures and deeply fractured than before. With ethnic territories of the Meiteis and Kuki-Zos sharply marked by aspirations of identity layered by politics and an imposed violence, Manipur represents a cauldron state in India.

We have witnessed replayed scenarios. Homes are razed and burnt; people of all ethnicities are thrashed and marauded in a spiral of territoriality and revenge strikes. Weapons looted from state armories and police outposts by both rebels and radicals are now awash in the region. No one knows the sequence or who ignited the flame. All ethnic groups converge periodically on Imphal through firefights. Meiteis claim to have been ejected from several districts to take shelter in the Imphal Valley stronghold while Kuki-Zo cry hoarse about being forced to leave Imphal Valley and take shelter in their home districts.

Intermittent resurgence of unrest and ethnic tension, as in Manipur, has turned the region into an open mayhem zone. Conflicts hibernated to erupt later are not unfamiliar occurrences in the region where different ethnic identities have repeatedly been weaponised along colonial fault-lines to serve the interests of a power elite.

Tension is so overlapped that an upheaval in one nation's border state rings a distant bell in perimeters of unwary neighbours. Any

ethnic or political upheaval in Manipur invariably has a domino effect in Myanmar or Bangladesh. Kukis and several other tribes, aggressively dovetailed by British missionaries in colonial times, remain both Christian and Indian or Myanmarese. Naga tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur have kin across the border in Myanmar's Sagaing region. Most Kuki-Chin-Zo inhabitants with homelands in Manipur and Mizoram have brethren in Sagaing and Chin State in Myanmar. The corollary to this complex ethno-geography mixed with displacement politics is that upheavals in one region have an escape valve in another nation.

Border politics

Closer home, the BJP's offensive on minority persecution in Bangladesh has kept the political pot boiling in West Bengal's border districts. Incessant flux and mayhem in Manipur has the wherewithal to trigger a reaction in Mizoram which has strong indigenous and filial bonds with Manipur's Kuki-Chin-Zo groups.

Bangladesh and India both have been affected with a steady influx of Rohingya refugees as Myanmar's military junta started evicting them from Rakhine state. And with reports of Myanmar's junta having lost control of its border with Bangladesh to the Arakan Army (AA), another stream of Rohingya exodus may be expected into Myanmar's neighbours, read Bangladesh and India. Existing political instability in both Myanmar and Bangladesh has also made the borders more porous. Dhaka's tacit and overt support for Rohingya refugees has only facilitated the rise of militancy and radicalism in its resolve to repatriate them to Myanmar. This is also a case of a frozen conflict reigniting at intervals.

Besides ramping up army adjuncts and paramilitary companies, there has been no significant intervention by the ruling dispensation in Imphal. The vision of a brave new Manipur publicised during the 2022 state polls seems to have fizzled down. Intertwined border areas are often susceptible to geopolitical stress. The roots of these conflicts in the Northeast date back to colonial and post-colonial homelands of various ethnic groups were frowned upon by regimes. Thus the ethnographic mess in Manipur has an indirect bearing on Myanmar hinterlands which adds to the subsidence in the sub-region. Preserved conflicts are like trinkets of intensity. You have abounding maps, uncertain boundaries and belligerent posturing by various groups, all attributing to a region's restive borders. Everyone is crying wolf but all under plausible deniability and scribbling an edgy primer. (The writer is a commentator on society and politics)



This is the reality of intensive care: at any point, we are as apt to harm as we are to heal

Atul
Gawande

newindianexpress.com

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
— Ramnath Goenka

U.S. FED'S OUTLOOK UNDERLINES GROWING UNCERTAINTY ON RATES

THE US Federal Reserve rolled out its third and final rate cut of 2024 on Wednesday, marking a full percentage point of easing since September. This was widely expected, but what was not expected was the Fed's forward guidance. Citing inflation concerns and economic prospects, it pared back its previous forecast of four rate cuts in 2025 to just two, sending shockwaves across global financial markets, including India. The S&P 500 index fell nearly 3 percent on Wednesday, its worst tumble since August, while the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunged over 2.5 percent, falling for a 10th straight day—its longest losing streak since October 1974. Japan's Nikkei, too, crashed along with major Asian indices in China, Indonesia and South Korea. Back home, the Sensex and Nifty dived about 1 percent, while the rupee hit a historic low of 85.3 against the dollar as foreign investors pulled out of domestic equities.

This was not supposed to happen, as global central banks were about to declare victory over the price-rise monster. If 2023 was the year of the inflation, 2024 was all about interest rate cuts. While many of the monetary policymakers have made a pivot, the question now is whether the pace of rate cuts will be as aggressive as projected until recently. As it is, some argue that the prevailing monetary tightness is restrictive and is slowing down economies; so, the rates need to come down. Not even half-way through their projected cuts, central banks have now arrived at a point where it's uncertain how much further the rates should fall. Just as Fed chair Jerome Powell noted, policymakers are in a new phase of the monetary policy process and the path remains uncertain—especially on whether the global economy, particularly the US, will make a soft or a hard landing.

The US's interest rate trajectory and its growth will have a significant bearing on all emerging economies including India. Above all, there are fears about president-elect Donald Trump's threatened trade tariffs, which will weigh heavily on India's growth aspirations, and its struggle to create jobs and increase wages. The RBI's forthcoming policy meeting in February will be crucial and is being closely watched for signals on inflation, growth and interest rate cuts.

KERALA MUST DO MORE TO MANAGE TOXIC WASTE

KERALA is rightly being singled out for its practices in handling waste. The state has been pulled up by the National Green Tribunal for regularly dumping waste in Tamil Nadu. On Thursday, the southern bench of the tribunal asked Kerala to remove within three days the biomedical and mixed solid waste dumped at various places in Tirunelveli district. Establishments in Kerala, including hotels, hospitals and waste handling agencies, have been surreptitiously transporting waste across the border to dispose it in villages and forests of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka—a practice that exposes both the state's gross inefficiency in handling waste and its disturbing unneighbourly behaviour. The tribunal said Kerala should either take back the waste or make a deal with waste treatment facilities in TN for safe disposal.

Inspections conducted by the Central Pollution Control Board had found significant shortcomings in Kerala's solid waste management system. They revealed an insufficient number of management facilities, the absence of a system to monitor waste movement across state borders, and lapses in the collection and handling of biomedical waste. It was found that Kerala is equipped to handle only 30 percent of the waste it generates. The state currently has two centralised biomedical waste treatment facilities. Either they are inadequate or establishments find dumping in bordering villages more convenient than transporting to these facilities. In either case, the negligence and ineptitude of state authorities are apparent.

On its part, the Kerala government has agreed to remove the waste and has formed a team to investigate the illegal dumping. The State Pollution Control Board has promised action against the culprits and is preparing to introduce a system to track interstate waste movement. But that's not enough. The state must quickly put an end to the practice. Biomedical waste, if not treated correctly, can cause serious health issues and lasting environmental damage. Apart from setting up more solid waste management facilities and introducing a tracking mechanism, it must also create a waste inventory in each local body and an online system to monitor handling. Kerala must understand that endangering lives through unsafe disposal of toxic waste is a criminal act and treating neighbouring states as dumping grounds is not a responsible behaviour.

QUICK TAKE

REVERSING THE GAZE

SOMETIMES, one horrific crime can shake society out of stupor about a not-so-new evil. If it was the Nirbhaya case that shook India's conscience in 2012, this year it's the trial of Gisele Pelicot's ex-husband and his accomplices for mass rape that transformed European conversations around sexual violence. On Thursday, a French court declared the ex-husband and 50 other co-defendants guilty. The 72-year-old victim's extraordinary courage in waiving her anonymity and pushing for the details to be made public has made her a feminist icon. The world should heed her defiant line—"It's not for us to have shame, it's for them"—and reverse the stigma associated with sexual transgression.

ALL parents fondly wish that their children grow to enjoy a full and fulfilling life. Those children too desire to age well so that their lives are not marred by disease and disability. They hope to remain fit and functioning rather than frail and feeble till the end of their life. It will be a poor trade-off if their life expectancy increases but those added years are full of suffering due to poor health.

The 20th century saw a marked rise in human life expectancy globally, despite world wars and a host of infectious diseases. This resulted from a combination of improved living conditions and advances in preventive, diagnostic and curative medical services. Improvements in water, sanitation, nutrition, education, income, occupational safety and women's status in society accompanied economic development and education.

These also stimulated a surge of science and technology. Simultaneously, large populations in Asia, Africa and the Americas wrested freedom from colonial rule and charted their developmental journeys. More diseases were prevented and more lives were saved than ever before, to yield a bounty of long life expectancy. However, even a 'cured' disease of left behind disabilities that detracted from fulsome functionality and impaired the quality of life, increased dependency on others and carried high financial costs of chronic healthcare.

In the second half of the 20th century, maladies of maladapted modernity overtook infectious diseases, nutritional disorders and imperiled maternal and child health as the principal contributors to disease, disability and death. These 'non-communicable' diseases included cardiovascular diseases, cancers and disorders of kidneys, liver, joints, ears and eyes. Towards the end of the 20th century, overweight and obesity started rising alarmingly in many parts of the world.

While many of these disorders were called 'lifestyle diseases', they were propelled by commercial drivers. A wide variety of tobacco products, ultra-processed foods, sugar sweetened beverages, alcoholic intoxicants and narcotic drugs assaulted the body. These advertised addictions resulted in marketed maladies on a global scale, as production and sales became transnational activities.

The advent of automobiles, television,

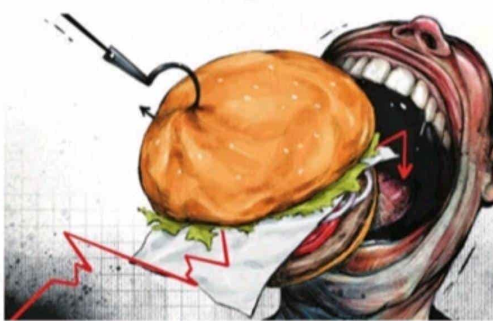
Even a 'cured' disease often leaves behind disabilities impairing the quality of life. If we can't ensure wholesome health, the expected demographic dividend will continue to elude us

WE MUST EXTEND HEALTH SPAN, NOT JUST LIFE SPAN

K SRINATH REDDY



Author of *Pulse to Planet: Disintegrating Professor of public health, PHFI*



STUDY BY

and later the internet saw a sharp rise in sedentaryness and a decline in physical activity. As people became digitally hyper-connected, they became emotionally disconnected. This has been manifest especially among young people. Road traffic accidents are rising in most countries, as are deaths from suicidal and homicidal violence. Air pollution is injuring human bodies everywhere, while climate change is bringing a host of new health challenges.

Skewed civilisational progress in the 21st century has seen a rise in life expectancy or 'lifespan', with a lag in healthy life expectancy or 'health span'. A recent study of these global trends was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2024). Armin Gar-

many and Andre Terzic accessed data on 195 countries from the World Health Organization's Global Health Observatory. They reported on changes in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy between 2000 and 2019, in different countries and in both sexes.

Globally, the mean gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy; during this period, was 9.6 years. The gap was wider by 2.4 years in women than in men. The largest gaps between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy were seen in the United States (12.4 years) and the United Kingdom (11.3 years). While accelerated economic development gave these countries a high life expectancy, they failed to ensure good health of their populations

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN RULE BOOKS GO OUT THE WINDOW

FOR the first time in decades, the principles on which the modern world was built are open to question. The healthy instinct of nations to hang together, first in security blocs and UN bodies, and then in free trade zones and multilateral mechanisms like the World Trade Organization, is being replaced by a disregard for the treaty-based and rules-based order that holds the world together. Meanwhile, the clarity which the culture of transparency had brought to public affairs is being replaced by the fog of state-backed disinformation.

This week, it was reported that US president-elect Donald Trump's administration would withdraw the polio vaccine. Then, he denied it in his first press conference when he won a second term. The point is not whether the initial report was true—what matters is that people took the news seriously. The polio eradication programme, which began in 1988, is of great significance for all of humanity. It could be the second great victory against a viral disease, after the eradication of smallpox in 1980. Success would also confirm that an organism which infects only humans can be tackled by herd immunity, without the challenging process of inoculating the global population.

Such projects need nations to follow a common rule book. And Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the disease remains in the wild, have faced criticism for breaking ranks. Their inoculators have been resisted due to the colonial-era perception that vaccination is an imperial plot to sap the strength of sons of the soil. It did not help that the CIA used a vaccination programme in Abbottabad to find where Osama bin Laden was hiding. But since diseases do not respect national borders, these nations could be endangering the world's children, not only their own.

Perhaps it doesn't matter to their governments, since they are not model members of the world order. But imagine the cost to the image of a country like the US if it were to withdraw from the push to eradicate polio. The government is unlikely to take the risk, even if the incoming health secretary is an anti-vaxer. But floating a wild idea and having the president-elect deny it is politically useful: it leaves the world a little less sure of what to believe, and more receptive to disinformation. This is useful if you plan to break some of the bonds of the rules-based world order.



PRATIK KANJILAL

For years, the author has been speaking easy to a surprisingly relevant public

SPEAKEASY

This year, the International Court of Justice issued warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former defence minister Yoav Gallant. Warrants were issued against Russian President Vladimir Putin, too. They must



Benjamin Netanyahu has thumbled his nose at the International Court of Justice's warrants against him. It's symptomatic of the collapse of organisations and treaties that held the world together for decades. It's now easier for state-backed disinformation to flow

be arrested if they travel to 124 ICJ member states. Well, they'll just change their vacation plans, won't they? Putin is suffering some real consequences, having to skip BRICS and G20 summits. Nevertheless, neither he nor Netanyahu have obeyed the ICJ's summons. They are letting the world know that they won't be constrained by the rules-based order.

The UN and its agencies like WHO were early institutions of that order. The first is now cautionary rather than regulatory. By flooding the world with advisories based on little knowledge and excessive caution, the latter confused the Covid response, brought needless hardships upon a suffering world and lost credibility. But the WTO, which was founded on the

keel Draft of the early 1990s as a global bargaining mechanism, has remained somewhat effective in managing disputes in international commerce.

Such institutions were born out of the understanding that nations could readily share a platform based on common rules rather than common political values, and that membership could be regulated by economic benchmarks (the EU is a good example). The WTO worked until Trump's first administration stuck a spanner in the works: in 2019, the US refused to confirm the appointment of judges to the appellate court of the body.

Without a functioning court of appeal, the WTO was crippled. Nations were free to file complaints about unfair trade practices, but no final decision could be arrived at. Now Trump is roaring back to office and threatening tariff barriers—exactly what the WTO's founding document addresses. If the WTO is dysfunctional over the next four years, tariff wars and differences over non-tariff barriers could turn into potent geopolitical weapons. The saving grace is that Trump may only brandish tariffs like the Soviets used to show off ballistic missiles at Moscow's Red Square as tools of deterrence.

Detente gave the Cold War the air of respectability, but the recent revelation of a 1963 Pentagon war game suggests that it's a slippery slope. It revealed that while all-out nuclear war, as seen in *Dr Strangelove*, is unlikely to start, conflict could begin with the use of a low-yield battlefield weapon and grow into an ever-escalating game of nuclear ping-pong. The game showed that nuclear conflict could spiral out of the control of the players.

A world free of nuclear war was perhaps the most important assurance delivered by the post-war, treaty-based world order. Today, if even nuclear deals can't be trusted, does it mean the old certainties have collapsed and nothing is for real anymore?

(Views are personal)
(On X @pratik.k)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Recall right

Ref: *Parliament needs to shun the 'grammar of anarchy'* (Dec 20). The happenings in parliament have overtaken the Kerala assembly ruckus of 2015 in its infamy. Such incidents highlight the need for a law to allow the recall of elected representatives. Globally, the incident is sure to cast a poor shadow on the 'proud' democracy in this land of the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi.

PRY Raja, Pandilam

Train lawmakers

I need to bow my head in shame as a citizen of the world's biggest democracy. I don't see any kind of discipline or maturity on either side of the political divide. Our parliamentarians can do with rigorous training in decorum and debates before the next session to ensure smooth running of the House.

Lawrence Yadukul, Manalur

Stunning lawlessness

The nation seems to see MPs fighting each other. These lawmakers have been elected to discuss issues concerning the common man. Instead, our MPs are behaving like college students who, in my younger days, would fight over strikes. The MPs have to change their attitude: else, people will lose hope in the Constitution and democracy.

B Sundar, Chennai

Kindergartens better

The nation should invite a group of kindergarten children to parliament and honour them over our veteran parliamentarians. The shallowness of our parliamentarians showing eagerness to cash in on trivial matters and their shameless disregard for their assignments reflect poorly on the legislative and administrative fields.

Ullattil Pukiteeri Raghunathan, Thiruv

Against Ambekar

It's wrong to see some blunders with regard to leaders like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and B R Ambekar. For example, the CPI had such animosity towards Ambekar that in the 1952 Lok Sabha elections it cooperated with the Congress to defeat him in North Bombay. It did so again in the Bhandara byelection. Only later did it repent.

T Hanuman Chowdhary, Hyderabad

Golden mean

Ref: *For grace in legal evolution* (Dec 20). Justice Krishna Iyer belonged to a school of socialism that considered distributive state properties among the poor. Justice D Y Chandrachud interpreted Article 39(b) in keeping with the present trend of privatisation. A golden mean is needed.

G Nataraja Perumal, email

KERALA



When roads turn killing fields

The scourge of road accidents continues to haunt Kerala, with around 4,000 people getting killed and close to 50,000 people sustaining grievous injuries on roads annually. This is not only exerting pressure on the public health system but also posing significant challenges to the enforcement agencies, writes **Dhinesh Kallungal**

Life put S. Shruthi, a resident of Choolamala in Wayanad, to test when she lost nine of her family members in the catastrophic landslides of July 30 early this year. Hardly a month after she got over the loss of her immediate family members, her fiancé Jensen, who stood rock solid behind her at the time of the devastating tragedy, was killed in a road accident at Vellaramkunnu, near Kalpetta, in Wayanad on September 12.

The van in which they were travelling collided with a private bus at Vellaramkunnu. Jensen, who was behind the wheel at the time of the accident, succumbed to his injuries two days later. Shruthi learnt about the shocking losses in her life on rainy mornings on both occasions. "I felt a major part of the sky over my head crumble to the ground," she says.

She felt lonely and her heart sank. "Life has been very cruel to me. I lost Jensen after the devastating natural disaster that killed my parents," she says. But life must go on and she is struggling to get her life back on track by taking up the job of a clerk in the State Revenue department offered by the Kerala government.

The roads of Kerala continue to be a killing field. And those who survive these accidents are either maimed or traumatised for life.

Fatal statistics

Each year, around 4,000 lives are lost on the roads of Kerala leaving hundreds injured, according to the State Crime Records Bureau figures.

Recently, six students of the Government Medical College, Alappuzha, met with a tragic end when the car they had hired collided with a Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus at Kalarcode in Alappuzha on the rainy night of December 2.

The car, which was carrying 11 first-year



The reasons for road accidents range from the rise in the number of vehicles to flawed designs of roads, speeding, and substance abuse.

SHIJU STANLEY
Society for
Emergency
Medicine India

MBBS students collided with the bus when they were going for a movie in Alappuzha town. Five of them were killed on the spot while a sixth person succumbed to his injuries later. The primary investigation by the Kerala Motor Vehicle department found negligent driving to be the main cause of the accident.

A night to forget

It was raining heavily when Vinaya Chandran (name changed), a native of Vijnayur, an IT professional in a U.S.-based company in Hyderabad, boarded an inter-State bus from Thrissur to Hyderabad after his betrothal in the 2018.

The vehicle was moving at a painstakingly slow pace through the main carriageway when it reached Kuthiran, a treacherous hilly terrain along the National Highway, following the rains coupled with the traffic regulations enforced in the region in connection with the road works as part of the six-lane highway tunnel project in Thrissur district.

As the bus inched its way through the narrow path, a truck that was descending the slope veered off the track and rammed the bus.

"I was about to alert the woman, who was sitting next to me, to the fast-approaching truck when it hit the bus at a high speed," recalls the young professional, with a shudder. The cries of the scared passengers filled the air.

The sirens of the ambulances tore the silence of the night. It was dark all around. It was raining incessantly as people volunteered to rescue the passengers from the wreckage.

By the time Vinaya Chandran regained consciousness, he was in a hospital bed with a bed sheet covering the lower half of his body.

An excruciating pain hit him as he tried to move his limbs. Doctors had to amputate his right leg, which was crushed in the accident, to save his life. Yet, Vinaya Chandran says he was

lucky to survive.

If the statistics maintained by the State Crime Record Bureau are any indication, the roads of Kerala are turning out to be death traps.

Till October this year, 3,168 people were killed in 40,821 road accidents in Kerala. The death toll was 4,080 in 48,091 accidents in 2023, while 4,317 people were killed in 2022 in 43,910 accidents.

The COVID-19-induced lockdown saw the number of accidents and deaths come down in 2021 and 2020 with 3,429 and 2,979 deaths, respectively. However, 4,303 deaths in 40,181 accidents had been reported in 2018 and 4,440 lives had been lost in 41,111 accidents in 2019.

Contributing factors

The reasons for road accidents, says Shiju Stanley, president of the Society for Emergency Medicine India, range from the rise in the number of vehicles in the State to flawed designs of roads, speeding, poor condition of roads along many stretches, and substance abuse.

Vehicles with poor safety ratings and reckless night-time travel are also contributing to the worrisome incidents. It's mostly the passengers of vehicles with poor safety ratings that fall victims, he says.

Another reason is that people have started travelling at night to save time and avoid daytime traffic. According to the Kerala Police, 60% of the fatalities were in accidents that occurred at night, although the share of night-time accidents is just 15%.

The speed of the vehicles is often high during night-time accidents. This has also contributed to the rise in the number of fatal accidents. This is evident considering accident rates among pilgrims, especially Sabarimala pilgrims, says Mr. Stanley.

The probability of an accident is high when a fatigued devotee who stands in queues for several hours for darshan drives a vehicle, says a Kerala Motor Vehicle Department official.

Data on breath analysis conducted on drivers of KSRTC buses who were on duty between July 21, 2021, and June 14, 2024, revealed that 319 persons - including drivers and conductors - turned up for duty under the influence of alcohol putting the lives of hundreds in peril which forced the State public utility to take disciplinary action against them.

On November 26, a lorry laden with timber ran over a group of people sleeping on a 'closed road' in Thrissur, killing five and injuring seven others. It was later found that the driver and the cleaner, who was at the wheel at the time of the accident, were in an inebriated condition.

Golden hour

B. Ekbal, a neurosurgeon and former Vice-Chancellor of Kerala University, says that a significant number of accident victims succumb to their injuries during the golden hour, which is an hour

after the accident.

Timely medical intervention is crucial in saving lives. Delays in providing first aid and in shifting the victims to hospitals are proving fatal, he says.

A collaborative approach involving the Health department, private hospitals, the Motor Vehicle department, the traffic police, professional organisations, and other relevant agencies is crucial to achieving sustainable improvements in reducing road accident fatalities, says Dr. Ekbal.

An analysis of the 2023 crash data by the National Transportation Planning and Research Centre (NATPAC) reveals that two-wheelers account for 50% of road accidents, followed by cars/SUVs (19%) and pedestrians (12%).

Vulnerable road users are mainly two-wheelers, pedestrians, cyclists, and three-wheelers, who together contribute to 69% of the road accident victims.

Samson Mathew, director of NATPAC, notes that the geometry (gradient, turns, visibility, and width) standards of Kerala roads are poor due to faulty designs and the non-availability of lands to rectify them along key stretches.

This, coupled with the rainy season, which lasts for about six months in Kerala, worsens the road conditions, including leading to hydroplaning, a phenomenon where a thin layer of water forms between the tyre and the road surface on wet roads, making it difficult to control or stop the vehicle effectively, resulting in collisions or overturning of vehicles.

Inexperienced drivers

Inexperienced drivers make things worse on the roads. The State should revamp the driving tests urgently to address the deficiencies in the present form of driving test, and scrap old and unsafe vehicles, says Mr. Mathew.

Inadequate facilities for training in safe driving techniques, according to Kerala Transport Commissioner C.H. Nagaraju, contribute to a large number of road accidents in Kerala. The driving tests also need to be upgraded to test the defensive driving skills of applicants, he says.

"Road conditions and weather conditions keep changing at different places and at different times. We cannot always drive a vehicle at 60 kmph in all places and in all conditions. The driver has to adjust his/her driving speed. Most accidents happen because the driver is not judging the vehicle's speed properly. Drivers are neither able to judge the speed of their vehicle nor that of other vehicles in the vicinity," he says.

Vinaya Chandran, who lost his legs, tied the nuptial knot a year and a half after the accident and returned to normal life.

Leaving behind the scars of the accidents and the natural disaster, Shruthi is in the process of rebuilding her life. But that's not the case with everyone.



CONTRAPUNTO

All men are frauds
- H L MENCKEN

Vijay, Nirav & India

The two, unpunished here, tell us a lot about our system

Nirav Modi's no 'heera', no jewel in the crown. Yet he continues to enjoy His Majesty's 'indulgence' in a UK prison. King of good times Vijay Malia rolls on, also in UK, now claiming he's 'entitled to relief'. Malia and Modi are reminders for India's govts and businesses. When those guilty of gross financial crimes don't get punished, their good fortune poses a question to the trinity of good practice - access to capital, robust regulation, honest oversight.

Malia secured loans of ₹10,000 crore against inflated valuations of Kingfisher Airlines that were engineered by falsified financials. He 'convinced' lenders, an SBI-led consortium of 14 banks, to accept the brand as collateral - an extraordinary decision by bankers. Smaller banks took the cue from Daddy SBI, which classified KFA as 'wildly defaulter' only in 2014, years after the airline defaulted. Diversion of loan amounts to shell companies meant capital took flight long before Malia did. But RBI failed to classify Malia's loans as NPAs. Weak regulation and netadon's wink & nod saw Malia expand, and get away without a repayment plan. His 3,000-strong workforce was also abandoned by law, given poor enforcement of labour laws and aviation sector's lax regulations. The other con, the diamond merchant, swindled PNB of ₹13,000 crore and sits pretty in a UK jail for years.

The duo defrauded govt banks and therefore Indian taxpayers of hundreds of crores. The blame squarely lies on regulators and enforcement agencies. Of course we need an aggressive entrepreneurial culture. But only robust regulation and equal access to capital ensure outcomes based on fair practices. The next Malia or Modi will stain India's reputation for doing business even more, because the economy is bigger, and so are the stakes. But UK courts are not blameless. Can we have Vijay Malia and Nirav Modi back home, as a Christmas gift from Britain?



Ferry Tales

A serene way to go from A to B. Keep it safe

Provided there's no DJ blasting away, a ferry ride can provide quite the meditative space. Historic landmarks to anonymous dwellings, the greens lining the water or sky rising beyond it, everything can seem nicer than it is. On-board romances are frequent. Gliding through water, sweet nothings flow better. Even when one is headed to a mundane destination, like work, the journey offers sublime delights the road cannot. In Kolkata, a Hooghly ferry provides fine sights of traffic on the Howrah bridge above. In Goa, a govt-run Mandovi ferry to Divar Island is still free. For taking a four-wheeler across on the ferry, you shell out the kingly sum of ₹10. Nothing extra is charged for exotic flora and fauna sightings.

Given this serenity, the shock of those aboard a ferry heading to Elephanta Island must have been horrific. It was rammed by a navy speedboat on Wednesday. When will accountability and punishment be fixed? Meanwhile, life jackets are suddenly in abundance on Mumbai's ferry travellers. Question is, will they stay on?

Chicago river architecture cruises bring alive how back during the great fire of 1871, flames were able to jump shores by burning all the trash in the water. The cleanup that ensued has endured. In South Korea, after a 2014 accident took over 300 lives, safety regulations were meaningfully strengthened. Ferry tales must go on, but after ditching the carelessness.



We Are All Tribals, And That's Okay

Tribalism, a deep human instinct, can be harnessed for good

Tribalism, defined as primal hatred for out-groups, is tearing the world apart, say pundits. But Tribal: How the Cultural Instincts That Divide Us Can Help Bring Us Together by Michael Morris shows tribal instincts are a superpower. These must be recognised, to remedy tendencies when they go out of range.

We survived by pooling knowledge, cohesing in clans, feeling solidarity within small groups, nested in larger communities. This has wired us in three ways: the peer code, the hero code and the ancestor code, each triggered by situational and inner needs.

We learn from social inferences, including the idea of what's 'normal'. Per codes vary by community so we perform different mannerisms in a gym or at a corporate event. Dress and language policies can trigger peer codes, often those of an organisational culture, say the military or medical settings. Lee Kuan Yew shined bicultural Singapore's norms to a British rules-based one by changing uniform and language. High-pressure settings, or uncertainty, heighten conformity.

The pull of heroism, of prestige and reputation, is another powerful tribal code. Society pays tribute to those of high status and confers, and defend, emulate their actions. It's why tech founders wear black turtlenecks like Steve Jobs. Hero codes are evoked by a tribe's symbols and icons, whether it's the national flag or totem animals. Leaders like Martin Luther King or Zelensky have adeptly employed language and symbol rather than rational argument to trigger group identity.

Another tribal instinct is tradition. We are driven to maintain and defend our ancestors' ways. It often encodes critical lessons about the environment, like the seafaring Moken people who knew to retreat from a tsunami. Tribal

ceremonies, whether it's a Catholic mass, a Greek wedding or a party's electoral convention, or the New Zealand football team's haka ritual, reference the collective past, and spur volunteering and commitment.

But all these codes can be spotted and shifted. Prevalence signals can change peer codes and habits. If you want to encourage a particular behaviour, say voting, 'everyone is doing it' appeals work better than 'don't be part of the problem'. For most people, the inner conformist is stronger than the inner activist. Latin American soap operas spurred women to limit family size, contrary to what priests and politicians had told them. Celebrities and influencers gain prestige from fame itself. People are wired to soak up social signals. A reconciliation drama between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda worked, not because it changed hearts, but because it changed the perception of the cultural ideal, of what society approves of.

Changing a toxic culture involves bringing in new prestige signals. Satya Nadella refreshed Microsoft by modelling humility and listening through friends and politicians had told them. Celebrities and influencers gain prestige from fame itself. People are wired to soak up social signals. A reconciliation drama between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda worked, not because it changed hearts, but because it changed the perception of the cultural ideal, of what society approves of.

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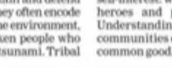
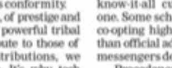
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mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Change Is Constitutional

Parliament debates on Indian Constitution miss a point. Amendments are crucial to democratic constitutions, which are living documents. They allow us to fail better and improve

Dipankar Gupta



A democratic constitution, such as ours, overtly protects the right to life, property and religion. These are guarded without a constitutional rethink. Yet, from the tangle of debates in Parliament these days it would seem as if every letter of the Constitution is unchangeable and sacrosanct. Often Rahul Gandhi is seen hoisting a copy of the Constitution in a manner reminiscent of Moses cradling the Ten Commandments.

Neither the 'one nation, one election' proposal nor the economic subdivision of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, can happen without a constitutional rethink. Yet, from the tangle of debates in Parliament these days it would seem as if every letter of the Constitution is unchangeable and sacrosanct. Often Rahul Gandhi is seen hoisting a copy of the Constitution in a manner reminiscent of Moses cradling the Ten Commandments.

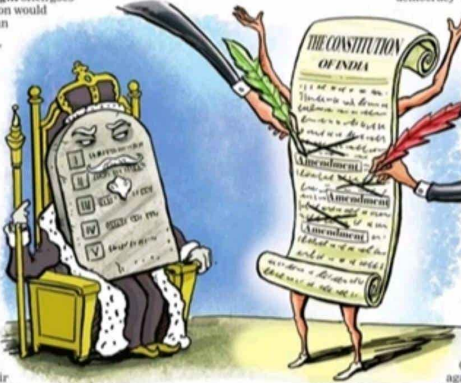
In correcting errors, we improve upon what we had earlier produced and this applies to the Constitution too. As Samuel Beckett, the famous Irish playwright, said, 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' It is, therefore, unbefitting to argue that every word in the Constitution is written in stone. When our fundamental freedoms can be advanced by attending to what was earlier overlooked, our Constitution only gets stronger, not weaker.

If that were not to be the case, democratic constitutions would lose their secular credentials and begin to resemble religious texts that are universally considered to be inerrant and perfect. A constitution, however, has been touched by human hands and, is therefore, prone to errors. It asks us to constantly 'fail better' and refine our past performances. This is why a constitution is open to corrections, also known as 'amendments'.

It is by these amendments that democratic constitutions have become richer. If democracy in Britain had rested after it gave proportioned classes the right to vote and kept denying that women, universal franchise would never have evolved. Today, this is unimaginable, but was accepted as just practice till the early 20th century when the suffragettes finally succeeded in getting women equal voting rights.

Also by correcting past oversights and errors, Britain gave its citizens real equality, unhindered by religion. The 16th century Test Act favoured Anglican Christians and barred Catholics, Presbyterians, Puritans and Jews from holding positions in govt or military, even if they were the most capable. University restricted admissions to them. It was only in 1889 that this Act was finally revoked across UK.

The Test Act made it a condition that a person



holding an official position in Britain must receive the Holy Communion in keeping with the rites of the Anglican Church alone and not of any other denomination. For long, Britain loudly proclaimed its progressive, humanitarian values, but the Test Act stayed till it was finally corrected. A thriving, living democracy forever tries to better itself and, in doing so, accepts errors and amends them.

The rules of amendment are clear; they must add to greater public participation by fully protecting the fundamental rights to freedom of speech, movement, property and faith. India too saw some major improvements through constitutional amendments. These were important course corrections and they

were possible because errors were first accepted and then acted upon. In doing so our democracy certainly grew more robust.

Fortunately, the sterling figures, beginning with Ambedkar saw the need to introduce amendments for it was accepted that even the wisest can make errors. Some of the significant amendments are now so much a part of accepted truth that we often forget that those were the result of corrections brought about by democracy in action. They raised the standards of public life because we strove to 'fail better'. Democracy never stops.

A few of our landmark constitutional amendments should make this point clear. Zamindari abolition freed serfs, linguistic states energised grassroots activism, the Panchayati Raj Act gave SC women a greater role in local governance, the provision to reserve 10% seats for the economically weak directly helped the poor. Finally in 2023, 33% of seats in Parliament and Delhi's legislature were reserved for women.

Then there have been negative amendments too. During the Emergency even the right to life was taken away and a supine judiciary acquiesced in this. It takes very little effort to realise that these were unjust amendments as they undermined citizen participation. Emergency provisions made it punishable to commit an error because what was deemed correct by the powers had no give, nor were they open to enquiries.

Democracy needs secularism which is not just overcoming religious dictates, but also being able to question state control (like the Emergency rule in India) where, again, truth is handed down as is. It is commendable when a constitution allows for questioning some of its provisions such that democracy can dig deep into its foundations. By doing so it enlarges the fundamental freedoms, namely that of life, thought, property and faith.

In fact, without the freedom to correct errors, there would be no social thought. Politics, through elections, corrects errors; the economy through the market corrects errors; and true history is nothing but a study of our progress through a time-series of errors. Only in pre-modern, absolutist monarchies were errors, banished from thought. In a democracy, on the contrary, the derivative right to be wrong is absolutely crucial.

To err is human, to amend constitutional.

The writer is a sociologist

Why GCCs Are Vital For GDP Growth

Global capability centres aren't white-collar sweatshops. They offer meaty assignments, career growth and higher salaries that have propped up demand for cars and other luxuries in India

Ashish Gaur@timesofindia.com



How's the economy doing? Auto sales are a ready reckoner. Data comes in month after month, and over the past three financial years it looked good. The slowdown that had set in pre-Covid deepened in FY2021, but then sales took off. Around 31L cars sold in FY2021-22, 36L in FY2022-23 and just over 42L in FY2023-24, which was 25% higher than the pre-Covid high of 33.8L cars. This feel-good story hid the fact that smaller, cheaper, so-called bread-and-butter cars weren't selling but high-priced SUVs were. Also, bike sales, roughly half the market is sub-125cc commuter bikes - in FY2024 remained 15% behind the FY18-19 mark. It seems disposable incomes rose at the top of the income pyramid, but stagnated or shrank below. So, where did the extra money at the top come from?

Foreign work, Indian staff | There's a view that this boom in not just expensive cars but premium goods overall partly resulted from the growth of MNC global capability centres (GCCs) in India. GCCs have not become a household word like BPOs were in the early 2000s, but they are similar. In both cases companies use cheaper workforce in India and other countries to keep costs down. But where BPOs are all about outsourcing - a company gives its low-value, like customer calling, to an external contractor - GCCs offshore the work but don't outsource it. They are foreign offices of the company. Big names like PayPal, Verizon and American Express have GCCs in India.

Back to our car sales meter, how did GCCs spur consumption at the premium end? Fact is, GCCs pay a premium to talent. In Aug, TeamLease analysed 15,000

positions and reported that GCCs paid 12-20% more than traditional IT companies. The jobs spanned an array of functions from software development to cybersecurity and project management, and the roles were spread across entry, mid and senior levels. Where IT firms pay software engineers an average starting salary of ₹5.7L per annum, at GCCs the starting pay for software developers is around ₹10L. At the senior level, the gap grows to about ₹1.1L per annum. And as TOI reported earlier, GCC employees have seen robust pay growth in recent years.



In 2020, when salaries were cut across industries, their salaries rose by almost 10%, on average, followed by 15.8% in 2021, 16.5% in 2022 and 12.2% in 2023.

Lakhs of well-paid workers | Chipmaker Texas Instruments set up the first GCC in India in 1985. There are 1,600 now - half of all GCCs worldwide - and the count could rise to 1,900 this time next year. The total number of jobs in these GCCs is around 16L, of which 6L were created in just five years, from 2018 to 2023. JPMorgan Chase, the largest bank outside China, alone employs 55,000 staff in its India centres. And these

numbers will shoot up because the GCC market size in India has grown rapidly, from \$19.6bn (₹1.7L cr) in 2015-16 to \$16bn (₹1.4L cr) in 2022-23. A Deloitte report sees the market growing to \$110bn (₹9.3L cr) by 2030. Govt's Economic Survey puts it even higher at \$121bn (₹10.2L cr), earning \$102bn (₹8.7L cr) from exports.

Industry body Nasscom says if you take their 'direct, indirect and induced impact' into account, GCCs contributed \$99.183bn in revenue in FY2020, paid \$5.4-5.6bn in taxes, and created 5.2-5.5mn jobs directly and indirectly. Today, their contribution to job creation and money flow would be much more. Their share in India's IT exports has also risen from 18% in 2015 to 23%.

Beyond paying their staff well, GCCs spend money around as they hoover up prime real estate. In Oct, they were said to occupy more than 240mn sq ft of office space across seven major cities, and while this is expected to increase by roughly 22mn sq ft this year, the yearly increase in 2027 could be 26mn sq ft.

Why future looks bright | Like BPOs, early GCCs in India were meant to reduce costs for companies, but a Nasscom report says the focus shifted to 'value creation and innovation' over the past few years. For example, GE Aerospace's John F Welch Technology Centre in Bengaluru is working on future aviation engines. Other GCCs are focusing on GenAI, machine learning, life sciences and healthcare. And with companies investing heavily in their India offices, building large teams, it's inevitable that Indian talent will get to play key roles in their overall organisation.

So far, Bengaluru and Hyderabad have been India's GCC hubs, followed by Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Pune and Chennai, but new centres are now coming up in smaller cities like Chandigarh, Jaipur, Kochi and Mysuru. Will India's car sales meter keep ticking?

Calvin & Hobbes

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[OUR TAKE]

Not in the name of Ambedkar

The raucous winter session was a disservice to his legacy, the illustrious track record of the Constitution and Parliament

The winter session of Parliament that ended on Friday saw a new low in the functioning of the august institution as lawmakers first squabbled over their interpretations of history and then, filed police complaints alleging assault by an Opposition MP on two Treasury bench representatives. This soapy high drama hardly did justice to the voters who expected their representatives to address issues of the day—from food inflation to national security to the long-term concerns of the climate crisis.

The session, coming in the wake of the BJP winning the crucial assembly elections in Maharashtra, started on a raucous note with the Congress party stalling the House over a US court order on the Adani group. A section of the Opposition moved an unprecedented notice for the impeachment of vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar for his allegedly partisan conduct in running the Rajya Sabha—the vice chairman has refused to admit the notice. The consensus to have a four-day discussion to mark 75 years of the Indian Constitution was expected to be a welcome break from political grandstanding and yield a riveting discussion on the founding document that has become the glue holding the Republic together despite multiple fault lines and serves a lodestar to a nation aspiring to find its space at the global high table. Such expectations were belied as parties chose polemics over substantive discussions on the Constitution and the cues it offers to negotiate the nation's future. Two important bills on simultaneous elections (one nation, one poll) were introduced in Parliament but have been forwarded to a joint parliamentary committee.

That the winter session pivoted around BR Ambedkar was not surprising. As chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, he infused the document with an egalitarian vision that sought a radical remaking of one of the world's most unequal societies. The political and intellectual work he undertook was not appreciated in his lifetime—the Congress and the Hindu Right-wing, both saw him as an adversary and did their best to marginalise him; Jawaharlal Nehru invited him to join the Cabinet as India's first law minister but did not stand by him when conservative Hindus attacked him over the Hindu Code Bill. However, the political empowerment of Dalits, a legacy of Ambedkar, has resulted in competition lately to appropriate him. It is this competition, in a manner that Ambedkar would have been uncomfortable with, that underlies the current face-off between the Congress and the BJP. The Opposition has weaponised Union home minister Amit Shah's remark about Ambedkar to attack the BJP leadership, while the latter has leaned on the past to question the Congress's appreciation of his work. Cut to the chase, the war of words, now stretching to allegations of physical assault and street mobilisations, is a political battle for the Dalit vote. In the melee, Ambedkar's contribution as a nation-builder was ignored; and the odd reflective speech on the Constitution was lost in the noise.

The right tribute to Ambedkar would have been to discuss his intellectual legacy, his contribution to shaping modern India, and how it could guide our ship at a time of great global churn. Lawmakers could have addressed issues such as the plight of conservancy workers—a large majority of them are Dalits—or the state of public education, central to Ambedkar's life mission. The low spectacle we were served did not do justice to Ambedkar, the Constitution, or the great institution of Parliament.

Opposition must tell its story better, or tell a new one

This winter session of Parliament offered an opportunity to the Opposition to put the government on the mat in relation to bread-and-butter issues or national security questions. Instead, the Congress is trading charges with the BJP on individuals

Perhaps Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party could borrow a critical lesson from the world of news media.

The Congress party—faced with a slew of defeats and embarrassments in the recent assembly elections after what seemed to be a moment of repair in the Lok Sabha elections—is increasingly trapped in esoteric battles. These may do well in the party's social media echo chambers, but don't pull in any new voters.

This is a mistake many of us in the media have made. Too, in journalism, we have had to learn the hard way that not all issues that obsess the navel-gazing circle of politicians and the reporters who cover them matter to the larger audience.

This does not mean that we should not report from conviction on things we still consider to be of public importance. But it is a warning to us to either make our storytelling more effective—so that more people care—or reflect on our editorial choices. Either way, we should be mindful of the impact (or lack thereof) of our content.

And sometimes, what powers our communication is the nuts and bolts of production—camera, lighting, and graphics, alongside how we structure and lead our teams.

Apply this now to the state of play in the Con-

gress party. Even at the height of a pitched battle between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress over BR Ambedkar and a speech made by Amit Shah in Parliament—And subsequent physical tussle—Rahul Gandhi suddenly invoked the Adani issue. His allegation was that the entire fracas over whether he had pushed a Member of Parliament (MP)—a charge made by the BJP—was to deflect from a larger debate around Adani's relationship with the government.

I would separate any institutional issues raised by the Adani controversy—the allegations in the United States, the role of Sebi, and the intervention of the Supreme Court—from the political impact of these issues. It's evident that in this political season, Adani is what Rafale was in 2019. Then too, the Congress raised the Rafale case at every available opportunity and got no electoral gains from it.

Rahul Gandhi's single-point fixation on Adani is also aimed in contradictions. The rest of the Opposition allies are clearly not on board. Sharad Pawar flaunts his closeness to the tycoon. Mamata Banerjee has never joined the chorus of Congress protests.

And even the Congress' own chief ministers will not take the Adani conglomerate on. It is a matter of some irony that the Telangana chief minister was accused of proximity to the Adani group by his opponents; in Delhi, Rahul Gandhi was accusing the Modi government of the

THE CONGRESS SEEMS OCCUPIED WITH COMPLEX CORPORATE ISSUES THAT ARE ALIEN AND INACCESSIBLE TO THE MAJORITY OF CITIZENS. OR IT SEEMS TO BE PULLED INTO POLARISING IDEOLOGICAL DEBATES



Why would the Congress party dilute an emotionally charged debate over BR Ambedkar to focus on the alleged relationship between the government and a business leader?

same.

Why would the Congress dilute an emotionally charged debate over Ambedkar to invoke Adani?

The party seems occupied with complex corporate issues that are alien and inaccessible to the majority of citizens. Or it seems to be pulled into polarising ideological debates. Take Priyanka Gandhi's Palestine bag, for instance. Now, of course, she is correct in saying that she is free to wear what she pleases. But as a major Opposition leader in Parliament, she obviously carried the bag to make a political statement. Depending on your point of view, that act is either one of courageous empathy or needless naivete. And, yes, she also raised the issue of Bangladesh Hindus the same day she carried the Palestine bag. And yes, she brought a Bangladesh bag the next day and became a talking point again. But is it worth spending political capital on issues that won't pull in a single new voter? And issues that don't immediately impact the lives of Indians at home?

Caught up in its own rhetoric, the real crisis of the Congress remains unaddressed—how to fix its organisational structure. And how to

manage elections more efficiently. Avant-garde videos may have upped the social media game of the party, garnering hundreds of thousands of likes. But, in a first past-the-post system, they don't necessarily correspond to votes and can lull you into complacency.

This Parliament session has been an absolute washout. It could have been a chance for the Opposition to put the government on the mat in relation to bread-and-butter issues or national security questions. Calls from within the Opposition for Mamata Banerjee to lead and rally the different parties have also added to the perception that the Opposition is not on the same page.

Instead, the BJP and the Congress are trading charges on two individuals—George Soros and Adani. Neither has anything to do with the price of onions. Or how to do effective booth management.

The Opposition needs to tell a different story. Or tell the same one better.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

India-Kuwait: Modernising the agenda for ancient ties

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's visit to Kuwait from December 21-22, coming 43 years after the last such visit by an Indian PM, marks a major milestone for ties and is set to reimagine the deep-rooted friendship between the two countries.

India-Kuwait linkages go back to ancient times, with recent excavations showing that connections between the Indian west coast and the Kuwait region pre-date the Indus Valley and Mesopotamian civilisations. Kuwait's strategic position made it a natural trading hub linking India, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Guided by monsoon winds, Kuwaiti dhows navigated the Indian coastline from Gujarat to Kerala, fostering robust commercial ties and interaction with local communities. India was a major market for Kuwaiti pearls, Arabian horses, and Basra dates, which were traded for our spices, textiles and food products. The emergence of Mikimoto cultured pearls in the 1920s and the Great Depression of 1929 disrupted the natural pearls market while surging oil revenues following the discovery of oil in Kuwait in the 1930s delivered a deadly blow to it. Reflective of our close commercial ties, the Indian rupee was the official currency in Kuwait till its independence in 1961.

Kuwait has, for many decades, been a major crude oil supplier to India, meeting about 3% of our current energy needs, while Indian companies have provided valuable expertise and ser-

vices to Kuwait's oil and gas sector. Nonetheless, our cooperation deserves to go beyond a purely crude oil trading buyer-seller relationship to encompass wider interaction in oil and gas. Indian companies like L&T and Kalpataru Power have been active in securing and successfully completing major energy-related construction contracts in Kuwait.

The Indian policy research organisation, TERI, has helped implement a major oil spill clean-up project in Kuwait, using cost-effective, eco-friendly bioremediation techniques. Kuwait's position at the northern end of the Gulf exposes its petroleum exports to the Hormuz Strait chokepoint, and it would be mutually advantageous to store some of its crude oil in underground casks offered by India on its western coast. Diversifying our energy ties to cover renewable energy has solid prospects and it is anticipated that Kuwait—a sun-drenched country like India—will shortly join the International Solar Alliance headquartered in Delhi-NCR.

India-Kuwait trade is just above \$10 billion annually and favours Kuwait, but Indian exports are growing. There are also significant two-way investments, including by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), in Indian infrastructure. India's strong macroeconomic fundamentals burlish its investment appeal in these turbulent times, and KIA enhancing such investments into India constitutes a mutually



India and Kuwait reaffirmed their desire to cooperate in addressing challenges such as terrorism and climate disruption.

attractive proposition. Kuwait conglomerate Alghanim Industries has made profitable investments in India via Kirby Building Systems.

Exemplifying our close ties, India supplied vaccines to Kuwait during the Covid-19 pandemic and the latter, in turn, reciprocated by providing a range of medical oxygen supplies to India during its second pandemic wave.

An India-Kuwait Joint Commission for Cooperation was established earlier this month, with new joint working groups on trade, investment, education, technology, agriculture, security, and culture. It will serve as an umbrella mechanism to comprehensively review and monitor our ties in the seven identified sectors, besides covering three earlier ones on hydrocarbons, health, and consular matters.

The one-million-strong Indian diaspora, easily Kuwait's largest expatriate community, has appreciably contributed to its economy, particularly in sectors like health care, construction,

engineering, education, and finance. Kuwaitis have great regard for Indians, viewing them as the "community of first preference" for employment. Indeed, whether filling vacancies for a construction or domestic worker, a doctor or banker, an engineer or nurse, Indians are highly sought after for being reliable, hard-working, professional, and law-abiding. Ensuring the rights and welfare of Indians in Kuwait has been and must remain a top priority for both governments. India has traditionally been amongst the top five countries in terms of inward remittances to India.

With their family-centred cultures, India and Kuwait have often shared identical or similar values. Indian cuisine too has long been popular in Kuwait, with quality Indian basmati rice being central to the eating habits of Kuwaiti households. Alphonso mangoes enjoy huge popularity across Kuwaiti homes. Bollywood films and Indian music have a dedicated following amongst Kuwaitis.

During PM Modi's interactions with the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and Kuwaiti PM Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, assessments will no doubt be shared on topical regional and international issues of common concern, like the Israel-Palestine conflict and developments in and around Syria. India and Kuwait would also reaffirm their desire to cooperate in addressing challenges like international terrorism and climate disruption.

Earlier this month, Kuwait took over the Presidency of the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the conclusion of the long-pending India-GCC Free Trade Agreement needs to be accelerated.

Ajai Malhotra is a former Indian ambassador to Kuwait. The views expressed are personal.

[ANOTHER DAY]

Namita Bhandare



Breaking the gender glass ceiling across disciplines

Hope lives in the town where the daughter of an auto-rickshaw driver grows up playing in the paddy fields of Wayanad, Kerala. At a school for tribal children, a sports teacher senses promise. And so begins S Sajana's cricket journey, her ₹150 daily allowance enough to keep her going. Earlier this year, when she was picked for ₹15 lakh by Mumbai Indians for the Women's Premier League, she was able to pay off her family's debts.

Hope shines through Gwaidia village in Harayana's Mewat district where non-profit Coquin

found it impossible to recruit girls to play football in 2012. This year, when the girls' team won a match, the proud punchy held a public felicitation. It was, says Coquin managing director Lora Prabhu, a "huge paradigm shift".

Women and girls everywhere are defying stereotypes and fulfilling their potential from sport to the armed forces. "This century belongs to women," says Kanta Singh, UN Women's deputy country representative.

Partly this is a result of women realising their own value as voters wooed by political parties with cash transfers and free bus

rides. Partly it's to do with bridging the gender gap in education. And partly it's the technology that is bringing the brave new world of possibility. "The girls are learning that they can be anyone," says Singh.

There is now a virtuous circle of a new generation of girls inspired by an older one that kicked open the door. Deepa Malik won the first women's para-Olympic medal in 2016; this year, women brought home 11.

There's a long way to go. Women's political representation in Parliament remains pathetic and it is scarcely better in the higher judiciary where far more than judgments are weighed down by patriarchy. Gender-based violence remained endemic with one in three women facing violence from a partner.

Women's rights teetered in Afghanistan where the sluggish Taliban are erasing the presence of women in public spaces and in Palestine, where half of the over 45,000 killed in the Gaza Strip by Israeli Defence Forces are women and children, and in Iraq, where it is now legal for nine-year-old girls to marry. In the United States, women are told to ignore life-threatening pregnancies or

face legal action. In France, a horrific rape trial reminds us the country's conviction rate for rape is 6%.

But there are too many bright spots to ignore. The election of Claudia Sheinbaum as the first woman head of Mexico stood in contrast to the election of convicted felon Donald Trump. In Denmark, the men's football team turned down a pay rise so the women's team now receives equal pay.

There were more than just a few cracks at the glass ceiling: Vice Admiral Arbi Sarin was appointed as the first woman director general of the Armed Forces Medical Services; Sujata Sanuk, Maharashtra's first woman chief secretary; and Anshu Gawai, the first openly gay man to be appointed national spokesman for a party, the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar).

Looking at the year gone by there is reason to believe the tide has changed. That the girls will save themselves—and us. That there is hope everywhere.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal.

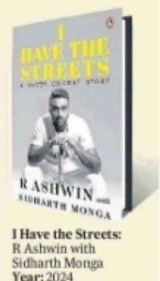
[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

CRICKET AT THE GRASSROOTS

Ace Indian bowler R Ashwin announced his retirement this week, bringing to a close an illustrious cricketing career that redefined the role of spinners in modern cricket. From the dusty streets of Chennai to global dominance, Ashwin's journey is one of relentless innovation and determination. This week, we recommend *I Have the Streets: A Kuttu Cricket Story* by Ashwin and Sidharth Monga. The book offers a nostalgic dive into Ashwin's formative years, playing "kuttu cricket" in Chennai's narrow lanes, where creativity and resourcefulness laid the foundation for his career.

Through vivid anecdotes, the book captures the essence of grassroots cricket while reflecting on the challenges and joys of a young boy chasing his dream. Ashwin's voice, complemented by Monga's narrative, is a heartfelt tribute to the game. As Ashwin steps off the field, this book reminds us how the simplest of beginnings can lead to extraordinary achievements.



I Have the Streets: R Ashwin with Sidharth Monga Year: 2024

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

It's unparliamentary

Govt, Oppn doing a disservice to Constitution

BARELY 15 months after the new building of Parliament hosted its historic first session, parliamentary propriety finds itself battered and bruised. The just-concluded Winter Session will be remembered for the wrong reasons. A slugfest between NDA and Opposition MPs, triggered by Home Minister Amit Shah's caustic remarks about BR Ambedkar, descended into a nasty free-for-all. A push here, a shove there—all hell broke loose as lawmakers locked horns in every sense of the phrase. Elected representatives disgraced not only themselves but also their voters with their words as well as actions.

Shah didn't exactly cover himself with glory when he observed that it had become a fashion to chant Ambedkar's name. He dragged the 'Father of the Constitution' into an unsavoury debate, and the Opposition—in a shambles after its stunning defeat in the Maharashtra elections—pounced upon this opportunity to target the ruling party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself had to intervene to defend Shah and slam the Congress for its 'rotten ecosystem' and 'malicious lies'.

Ambedkar is a national icon whom no party can afford to ignore. It's obvious that parties on both sides of the political divide are playing a game of one-upmanship over his legacy. What makes this slanging match all the more deplorable is that it's happening amid nationwide celebrations to mark 75 years of the Constitution's adoption. This living document has stood the test of time, affirming India's commitment to democracy, justice and equality. It is the collective responsibility of all parliamentarians to uphold the Constitution's ideals. Their unwavering focus should be on working towards ensuring social justice and inclusive development, not on hitting each other below the belt. Maintaining the decorum and dignity of the august House is the least they can do. Otherwise, the new 'temple of democracy' will be reduced to a no-holds-barred theatre of the absurd, spoiling India's deftly built image of *Vishwaguru* and *Vishwa Bandhu*.

Confront doping

Hisar revelation a blot on Indian sport

IN January, a 10-year global study of positive doping cases by minors named India as the second worst country, after Russia. Some months later, a report by the World Anti-Doping Agency concluded that India recorded the highest number of drug cheats in 2022. An expose by *The Tribune* highlights why the dubious distinction is no aberration. Used syringes and empty vials were found stuffed in a washroom during a state boxing championship held in Hisar. That the telltale signs of rampant doping came to light in Haryana, a state that is considered a shining example of nurturing excellence in sport, makes it even more disturbing. Such blatant malpractices point to an environment of complicity. It's a blot on Indian sport and reflects unwillingness to confront the malaise.

The lack of awareness among sports persons and coaches as well as the neglect in conducting anti-doping campaigns are major structural flaws. What must not be ignored is the widely held notion among athletes of losing out in terms of a career without a podium finish. The widespread use of banned performance-enhancing substances and fudging age are seen as quick-fix methods for winning a medal at any cost. The goal is not sporting glory per se, but the windows that open. For the vast majority, that means a government job. After the success of the Indian Premier League in the cricket-crazy country, India Inc has been pushing the boundaries in supporting various sporting disciplines. Encourage and incentivise the private sector to do more. Create ample opportunities for athletes, while sending out a clear message that doping has no place in sport.

For those entrusted with checking doping, the track record has been dismal. A culture founded on fraud defeats the very purpose of sport.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1924

Trade revival in India

IT is now clear that there is a general revival of trade in India. His Excellency the Viceroy referred to this fact in his recent speech at the meeting of the Chambers of Commerce, and statistics relating to Indian imports and exports during the current year establish it beyond doubt. As a result of this trade revival, there has been an all-round increase in the customs, railway and other revenues of the Government of India and it may be reasonably expected that local governments will also be benefited to some extent. Nor can the people be entirely unaffected by the change, though the extent to which they are benefited will depend on the activities of the commercial and industrial classes. The Senior Trade Commissioner in India has, in his review of trade conditions in this country during 1923-24, pointed out how the UK could take advantage of the Indian situation. In our opinion, it was far more his duty to show how Indian merchants and manufacturers could utilise the opportunity to the best advantage of the Indian people. He says that during the previous year, the balance of trade in merchandise reached the unprecedented total of Rs 144 crore in India's favour. This leads him to the conclusion that there is "an immense amount of latent purchasing power in the country which will be translated into actual buying if only manufacturers' prices can be reduced." There is nothing unusual in the fact that the trade balances have generally been in favour of India during the past years. India exports far more than she imports, for she is a debtor country and has to pay annually large sums in the shape of interest on sterling loans and in payment of salaries, etc., to foreigners employed in her services.

OPINION

Bhagwat offers balm to the soul

It has taken the RSS chief to remind his own govt about the nation's diversity



THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

AS the year turns, it may not be a far cry to say that 2024, in many ways, has belonged to RSS chief Mohan Madhukar Rao Bhagwat.

The RSS chief's latest comments on Thursday in Pune, during a lecture on 'India—the Vishwaguru' at the Sahyeevan Vyakhyannamla lecture series, seem startling enough to provide balm to the soul.

To say that "mandir-masjid disputes are unacceptable"; that "after the construction of the Ram Mandir, some people think they can become leaders of Hindus by taking up similar issues in new places and that this is not acceptable"; to ask, "who is a minority and who is a majority" and answer that question himself, "everyone is equal."

Bhagwat's comments, 75 years after the Constitution guaranteed a secular republic, should have been par for the course. Instead, they are the stuff of relief—and headlines. It has taken the RSS chief to remind his own government that the nation consists of folks with bewilderingly diverse views, traditions, customs, religions, language. And that if this 'kicchi' has to retain its distinctive flavour, then maybe there's no point trying to stuff it into the One Nation One People straitjacket.

Predictably, those on the political left are looking for a chink in the armour of his Pune speech—maybe something is lost in translation, since Bhagwat spoke in his native Marathi. Not so predictably, those on the political right are perhaps also wondering why Bhagwat is unhooking the saffron flag from its stump, especially since Hinduva's victory over Muslims is hovering around the horizon.

It's not clear when the penny dropped and what caused Bhagwat to make the comments he did in Pune. After all, for him to say that "we need to stay together"—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, all—mere weeks after the RSS began the year-long celebration of its 100th anniversary and on the eve of Christmas (which the Modi government marks as "good governance day", a working day to boot)—is both singular and interesting.

Perhaps Bhagwat realised, after five people were unnecessarily killed in police firing after the communities clashed over the architectural antecedents of the Sambhal mosque a few weeks ago, that the competitive politics over who is a better Hindu leader had to be properly ripped in the bud.

Perhaps he saw that India's 200 million Muslims, as much as 14 per cent of the population, had to live peacefully and equably with the rest, and that even contemplating another partition of the country was beyond the realm of contemplation. Perhaps he recognised



UNITY PITCH: For Bhagwat to say that "we need to stay together" is both singular and interesting. AN

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the dangers lurking closer than anyone else. Perhaps he looked around himself and saw how—and why—Islamic nations like Syria and Afghanistan and Palestine had fallen, like ninespins, in the past couple of years. Where would India's Muslims go if they were not allowed to live like equal citizens in their own country by bulldozer hotheds determined to raze their self-respect to the ground?

After all, back in 2018, Bhag-

wat had told reporters in Delhi that "without Muslims, Hinduva is incomplete." And last year, when the single Bench of the Allahabad High Court allowed a survey of the Gyanvapi masjid to see whether it had once been a temple and TV journalists began to palpitate over the implications of the decision, Bhagwat calmly said, "Why look for a shivering beneath every mosque?"

Certainly, it is nobody's case that the RSS chief and PM Modi are not peas in the same pod or that the RSS has not benefited enormously from the BJP being in power over the last decade. Of course, it has. The RSS knows that if not for Modi, there would be no Ram temple in Ayodhya or its expansion in 39 countries worldwide. The RSS chief is clear that all Indians of all religions are "Hindus", because once upon a time they were that.

In his Vijaya Dashami address earlier in October, Bhagwat made it clear that he had no time for "wokeism and cultural Marxism". He pointed out that Bangladeshis Hindus needed help from India. "Even the Gods do not care for the weak... What happened in Bangladesh should be a lesson for Hindu society."

Weakness is a crime," he added. But Bhagwat's RSS is interesting in many more ways. It is credibly said that Sangh cadres, who often tip the scales between winning and losing, did not enthusiastically campaign for BJP candidates in the 2024 General Election like they had done previously—one key reason for the party's lack of majority in Parliament. And that the RSS later decided to reverse course and pull out all the stops in the Haryana and Maharashtra polls. Certainly, the BJP is far more strengthened having Bhagwat as the wind in its sails.

Significantly, the RSS chief's comments come within days of Chief Justice Sanjay Khanna ordering courts not to accept any fresh suits or pass orders on existing petitions seeking the survey of mosques and whether any temple structures lie beneath. Khanna pointed out that the Supreme Court was separately hearing petitions on reopening the 1991 Places of Worship Act, which had sealed the character of the place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947.

For the time being, Khanna has shut down all legal conversation on whether mosques were once-temples. At least for the moment, Bhagwat is also trying to calm down his aroused flock—he is satisfied with the Ram Mandir, he's saying, no need to take over Kashi or Mathura or dig under the Sambhal shahi masjid or the Ajmer Sharif dargah.

It's more than likely that Bhagwat knows the inside story of the mediation that took place between Hindu and Muslim groups which resulted in the 2019 Supreme Court verdict that gave the 2.77 acres constituting the Ram Jannabhoori sanctum sanctorum to the "Hindu side". Bhagwat probably knows the give-and-take that took place over months, why the Muslims gave up what they did and what they were promised in exchange.

The question is, does all this make Mohan Bhagwat the man of the year? A straw poll beckons.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Intolerance betrays want of faith in one's cause.—Mahatma Gandhi

Xmas fervour in London

IPNINDER BEDI

CHRISTMAS preparations start in London in October, a good two months before the festival. Beautifully decorated and well-lit Christmas trees are displayed in every store as well as market square. Bundled up in layers of insulated clothing—woolly hats, scarves, overcoats and ear muffs—visitors brave the extreme cold to view the famous Christmas lights in Oxford Street and Regent Street. The Christmas Wonderland in Hyde Park has life-size ice sculptures, a special ice skating rink, ice mountain rides and games for kids and adults alike. Not to mention the traditional roasted hot chestnuts, hot chocolate and other delicacies.

The other day, my routine visit to the local supermarket in London proved to be a treat. There was a special aisle marked 'Christmas Goodies'. The child in me jumped for joy, although I have two grown-up children of my own.

I wandered around awestruck and spent an hour in that aisle, forgetting the grocery staples I had come to buy. I loaded my shopping trolley with the 'first view of Christmas pudding'. The gingerbread men and gingerbread mulled punch went in next, followed by an array of special treats like marzipan goodies and sweet mince pies. All sorts of goodies jumped by themselves into my trolley when, to my horror, I found that I had stacked up enough to last well after the festival. I was contemplating what to keep back on the shelves when I couldn't help overhearing two pairs of fathers and sons walking past the Christmas aisle.

One pair comprised a middle-aged man and his adult son. The father was saying that there was nothing 'healthy' to buy from that aisle. The son kept running back and forth, trying to persuade him to buy gingerbread or at least gingerbread cinnamon spice latte mix. He argued that ginger was good for health, but the father didn't bat an eyelid and walked to the 'healthy salads aisle', leaving the son moping.

The other father-son duo also lingered at the Christmas aisle. All attempts of the adult son to sneak in a Christmas pudding or a few chocolates into their shopping trolley were met with looks of disdain from the elderly father. The pair walked off as the son was unsuccessful in bagging any sweet treats. This showed how health-conscious families had become, with parents trying to set an example to their kids by opting for healthy food over sweet treats. I felt guilty for having overloaded on sweet treats and quickly went to the self-checkout area to pay and go home—before I changed my mind! There's no harm in indulging the child within us once in a while, especially during festivals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Be vigilant against China

Appropos of 'India-China talks', the consensus during the talks between special representatives of the two nations is a strong indication that bilateral relations are on the mend. However, this process is still in its initial stages and many ifs and buts remain. It is also worth noting that the Pentagon's annual report released by the US Department of Defence shows that China has neither reduced military deployment in the region after the Gabaon clash nor has it reduced the number of tanks, missiles and other heavy weapons. Although the process of withdrawal from that area is yet to begin, the need to remain vigilant cannot be overstated, considering China's track record.

RK ARORA, MOHALI

A wait-and-watch policy

Refer to 'India-China talks', the current thaw in bilateral relations is a welcome development. But we should not forget China's past intrusions. It is crystal clear that without addressing the border issue with China, we cannot expect stability in relations with our hostile neighbour. With US President-elect Donald Trump's clear anti-China policy in the offing, a trade war between the US and China would be the order of the day. Hence, Beijing wants to have peaceful relations with Delhi. But we should be wary of China. India needs to be cautious and adopt a wait-and-watch policy.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Strengthen diplomatic ties

Appropos of 'India-China talks', the meeting between the special representatives of two countries comes on the eve of 2025, which will mark 75 years of diplomatic relations. While restoring mutual links is important, it is necessary to be cautious so that the situation caused by the amassing of troops and LAC transgressions by the PLA, is not repeated. The presidency of Donald Trump is also a factor that neither New Delhi nor Beijing can ignore. India will not want to be caught on the wrong foot in case of a US-China deal that undermines New Delhi's interests. It can only avoid that situation by strengthening its own diplomatic channels with China.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

Check the terror surge

Refer to 'Another explosion in Punjab'; it is ironic that the Punjab Police have been in the denial mode despite being on the radar of terrorist groups which have been targeting police stations and posts. The failure of the state police in confronting the network behind the blasts points to the worsening law and order situation in the border state. Punjab has been in the crosshairs of elements across the border who want to disturb peace and communal harmony in the state. The police should not take lightly the serial explosions at its installations and intensify operations to thwart the rise of terrorism before it engulfs the entire state again.

ANIL VINAYAK, BY MAIL

Act on Ambedkar's ideology

It's unfortunate that the faceoff between members of Parliament over the perceived insult to Dr Bhabasaheb Ambedkar has taken an ugly turn. Political parties should rather consider how they can serve Ambedkar's ideology. They should consider these steps to show respect to him—a library in every village; affordable education to all; fill vacant posts as scores of eligible candidates are unemployed; equality before the law; food security for all; check concentration of wealth and give a chance to poor to grow economically through right policies; casteless society and social justice through liberty, equality and fraternity; electoral reforms, judicial reforms and economic policies to address inequalities. All parties should act unitedly in implementing these steps, which are in tune with Ambedkar's thinking.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM

New law for Parliament

Protests by the BJP and the Congress over the legacy of BR Ambedkar turned violent, leading to the hospitalisation of two BJP MPs and the registration of an FIR against Rahul Gandhi. This is a new low for Parliament. It is a let-down for the voters who elected these MPs. The Lok Sabha Speaker has done well to ban demonstrations by MPs and political parties at the gates of Parliament House.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Forgiveness is the final form of love
Reinhold Niebuhr

Clubs have made a mockery of licence revocation orders

Popular clubs along North Goa's coastal belt have made a mockery of the Goa State Pollution Control Board's action against sound pollution with those penalised brazenly advertising parties with timings extending up to 5 in the morning. Parties and high-decibel music have been synonymous in North Goa's coastal belt and have faced a public backlash for the past few years. Publicising parties by mentioning the time duration of the parties suggests that clubs would care less for the laws of the land and the directives of authorities.

Beneath the alluring façade of the Anjuna-Vagator coast, a troubling issue looms—escalating noise pollution precipitated by restaurants and clubs that blatantly flout regulations designed to protect residents and the sanctity of their environment. Explicit directives from the GSPCB, warnings, operating license revocations, and even High Court rulings seem futile in curtailing the raucous festivities that have become a hallmark of North Goa's nightlife. The imminent Liberation Day holiday on December 19 heralded a heightened frenzy among establishments eager to draw in party-goers, with promotional campaigns

Orders on paper are meaningless if they are not implemented in letter and spirit. Authorities in Goa have this peculiar habit of passing the buck over situations which they don't want to handle

boasting late-night events stretching into the early morning hours. This defiance is not merely about entertainment; it manifests a deeper disregard for the law, as establishments persistently ignore the Noise Pollution Act's stipulation mandating silence by 10 pm.

On the other hand, the GSPCB's imposition of a paltry Rs 10,000 fine for violations is woefully inadequate when juxtaposed against the revenue generated from these all-night affairs. For that matter, even the proposal of upscaling the fine to Rs 30,000 may not be good enough. The financial disincentive is minimal compared to the profits garnered from attracting crowds, fostering an environment where rule-breaking is seen as a risky yet profitable gamble.

The GSPCB's attempts at enforcement seem to have very little effect. We fail to understand how such parties were cleared in the first place, and what enforcement authorities like the police and collector/deputy collector were doing? A more effective regulatory framework is essential, incorporating swift response against such violations and authorities have to show a commitment to consistent monitoring. The posters of parties were out in the open for authorities to take cognisance, but nobody acted.

Orders on paper are meaningless if they are not implemented in letter and spirit. Authorities in Goa have this peculiar habit of passing the buck over situations which they don't want to handle. We have experienced cases in the past where the Pollution Control Board and the police were at loggerheads when the enforcement part was being debated in the High Court. The GSPCB states that the Collector and the police are the first responders to violations and are empowered to act against clubs promoting parties beyond the stipulated hours. The question is, what stops them from acting?

The ongoing conflicts in the coastal north are emblematic of a broader global challenge: the tension between culture, commerce, and community welfare. As the rhythm of Goa's nightlife continues unabated, there remains an urgent need for authorities to show accountability in restoring the balance. It is time for stronger action, not just orders on paper.

OPEN SPACE >>

Raw sewage and garbage tarnish Goa's image

This week, I posted online (including on Google Maps) photos of raw sewage/garbage at Colva Creek and the entrance to Colva Beach over quite a significant area, adjacent to the government-constructed toilet block on the beach. Hope the Goa government doesn't take action against me for spoiling Goa's image or file some defamation case. In my defence, I would like to mention that there is a High Court order passed on 16th October 2019 with respect to PIL (Writ Petition No. 15 of 2011) asking the Tourism Department to take charge and work with stakeholders, including GSPCB, Health Department, Colva Panchayat, and Colva Police, to address the menace.

The Goa Chief Minister, Tourism Minister, and other ministers seem to be more concerned about their personal reputation and are in denial of the actual poor state of governance in the state of Goa. Examples of so much sewage/garbage all over Goa are aplenty: I request visitors to just visit our food markets selling meats/fish, etc. (Example: SGPSA market in Margao). All this filth is something one does not see at the expensive roadshows the Tourism Minister conducts abroad to market Goa as a great tourist destination.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

Shift of ownership

Stringent laws like the Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code have reshaped the balance of power, rendering lenders more powerful than shareholders



AKSHAT KHETAN

>The writer is a distinguished corporate and legal advisor

In India's evolving corporate landscape, laws like the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) have shifted power, making lenders more influential than traditional equity shareholders. This is particularly evident among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which face a legal framework that often favours lender control when businesses experience financial distress. This shift highlights the need to reassess how corporate defaults are managed, ensuring room for genuine businesses to recover while targeting wilful and fraudulent defaulters.

"Financial distress is not synonymous with fraud; it is a condition requiring remedy, not retribution."

Traditionally, shareholders controlled companies based on their equity stakes, guiding decisions and strategic direction. However, with the IBC's introduction, control has increasingly shifted to creditors, including institutional and private lenders, particularly in sectors with heavy debt burdens. Once a company defaults and a creditor initiates insolvency proceedings, control is handed over to lenders and insolvency resolution professionals (IRPs). The IBC prioritises lenders' rights to recover investments, often at the expense of shareholders, potentially leading to leadership changes or forced liquidation—circumstances far removed from shareholder control and ownership.

Impact on MSMEs and SMEs

India's MSME and SME sectors play a crucial role in economic growth, contributing significantly to employment and GDP. These enterprises, however, often operate with limited capital and rely heavily on credit. A single setback, influenced by market conditions or policy changes, can trigger insolvency proceedings, leaving these businesses vulnerable to lender control. Unlike larger corporations, MSMEs and SMEs typically lack the financial resources and legal expertise to navigate the complexities of insolvency. A default, in these cases, may not indicate poor governance or fraud but could be the result of market fluctuations or short-term cash flow issues. Rigid application of insolvency laws in such cases can pre-

Today, lenders—both institutional and private—play a decisive role in a company's destiny. The framework grants creditors extensive power in determining the future of distressed companies, often sidelining the interests of shareholders



maturely end viable businesses, putting jobs and economic stability at risk.

Default vs Fraud

One of the core issues with the current insolvency framework is the failure to differentiate between default and fraud. Financial distress is common in business, and defaulting on loans does not always imply fraudulent intent. In the lender-centric system, however, defaults are often viewed with suspicion, blurring the lines between legitimate financial difficulties and deliberate deception. Financial challenges may arise from a variety of factors, including economic downturns, regulatory changes, or disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. Companies facing these challenges need sufficient time and support to stabilise. Treating all defaults as fraud creates an unfavourable environment for business owners, discouraging entrepreneurship and innovation.

Need for Breathing Room

For businesses experiencing temporary financial distress, strict recovery timelines often lead to forced insolvency instead of recovery. One solution to this problem is introducing grace periods and restructuring options, particularly for MSMEs and SMEs. A more flexible framework that provides temporary relief, while accounting for the size and nature of businesses, could help companies overcome short-term challenges. A structured grace period, allowing companies and lenders to negotiate repayment terms or restructure debts, could prevent unnecessary insolvency. Additionally, policymakers could consider creating specialised insolvency provisions for MSMEs and SMEs to help them manage financial distress without immediate threats to their ownership and control.

Addressing the Outliers

While flexibility is crucial, exceptions must be made for wilful default-

ers and fraudsters. A wilful defaulter is someone who deliberately avoids repayment despite having the ability to do so. Such behaviour undermines the integrity of the financial system and should not be tolerated. The IBC must maintain a firm stance against wilful defaulters, ensuring that fraudulent actions are met with strict penalties. This approach protects lenders' interests and preserves trust in the financial ecosystem. By distinguishing between genuine defaulters and those who misuse credit, the insolvency framework can create a balanced system that supports legitimate businesses while holding fraudsters accountable.

Potential Policy Reforms

Differentiating MSME/SME and Large Corporations: Insolvency laws could be tailored based on the size and nature of the business. MSMEs and SMEs could receive a more lenient, recovery-focused approach that allows them time to rebuild without facing immediate lender control.

Incentivised Loan Restructuring: Policies encouraging loan restructuring and repayment assistance programs could enable distressed businesses to regain stability without resorting to insolvency. This would allow companies to maintain ownership and control, avoiding the negative effects of lender control.

Clearer Definitions of Fraud vs. Default: A legal framework that clearly distinguishes between financial distress and fraudulent behaviour would prevent the misuse of insolvency laws. This distinction would protect legitimate businesses from being penalised alongside wilful defaulters.

Introduction of a Mediation Process: A mediation process between lenders and companies before insolvency proceedings could help both parties reach amicable solutions, preserving jobs, businesses, and valuable relationships.

-FFJ

THE INBOX >>

Time for soul-searching

Goa is celebrating the 63rd anniversary of its liberation from Portuguese rule, but today, the State faces numerous challenges that demand serious reflection. This is a day to pledge to restore Goa's reputation as the "Rome of the Orient". Land grabbing has become a significant issue and needs thorough investigation and corrective action. The law-and-order situation is concerning, with crimes becoming common, in stark contrast to the Portuguese era when even minor law-breaking was rare. The "money-for-jobs" scam highlights the lack of recognition for merit in governance. Road accidents have surged, with daily mishaps now a regular occurrence. The condition of roads has worsened, with pothole-riddled streets becoming the norm. Water in our rivers, lakes, streams, and ponds is increasingly polluted, and the air quality often fails to meet the required standards, with dust pollution affecting cities, towns, and even villages.

Monsoon flooding has become an annual problem, with no effective solutions in sight. Recently, a share market scam of approximately Rs 500 crores has further tarnished Goa's once-clean image. It is time for soul-searching and determined efforts to address these issues and liberate Goa from the problems that have taken root.

STEPHEN DIAS, Dona Paula

A vision of tradition and modernity

Goa, under CM Pramod Sawant's visionary leadership, is achieving progress by blending heritage with modernity. During his Liberation Day speech, he announced the Kunbi Handloom Craft Village in Sanguem, a Rs 10 crore project aimed at reviving the cultural identity of Goa's Kunbi community.

Attract tourists in best way possible

With reference to the article-cum-report titled "Tourism Turbulence: Goa Airlines Go Sky-High" published in The Goan Everyday on Friday, 20th December 2024, it is ironic that ministers and politicians enjoy unlimited perks, which should be drastically reduced, while tourists face rising airfare costs. Goa relies heavily on income from both domestic and international tourists. It takes years to build customer loyalty but only moments to lose it. Airlines must attract customers by offering loyalty points or discounts to regular flyers, encouraging them to continue flying. Additionally, transitioning to environmentally friendly hydrogen fuel, derived from water electrolysis, for jet and propeller planes could help lower ticket prices. The permanent abolition of airport taxes would further reduce costs for travellers. Hotels should also play their part by offering regular customers good discounts and improved facilities. These combined efforts would make Goa more appealing to tourists and ensure they feel valued, paving the way for sustainable tourism growth.

PETER CASTELLINO, Mumbai

This initiative empowers artisans with training, design, and sales facilities, preserving traditional weaving. Additionally, the proposal to establish an AYUSH City near Mopa will position Goa among eight such cities in India, promoting health tourism and alternative medicine. This sustainable project aims to make Mopa an economic hub. By preserving traditions and embracing innovation, Goa sets an example for holistic development, with Sawant leading the state towards a balanced, sustainable future.

VAMAN SANKHALKER, Harvalem

More than cities, free wifi is needed in rural areas

The Department of Information Technology, Electronics and Communications reportedly launched free public wifi hotspots at 75 locations in Goa on Wednesday. It is learnt that there are 46 free Wi-Fi spots in North Goa and 29 in South Goa. Eleven fully installed and operation-

al 4G BSNL towers were also inaugurated. Free WiFi has several advantages. It provides easy internet access to tourists. It allows people to access the internet without a wired connection or cellular data plan. It can help people save money on data plans. Free WiFi can provide access to educational resources. It can be useful in emergencies. In the cities free WiFi connection is provided in coffee shops, hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, etc. This is not the case in the villages. However establishing a dependable internet connection in rural areas can be challenging due to a lack of network coverage, physical barriers, and erratic electricity supplies. It may be recalled that during the COVID-19 pandemic students had to go to climb up the hills to get proper connectivity in order to follow online classes. In order to give rural people access, it is imperative that fiber internet connectivity be extended to these areas. Incidentally Satellite Internet is one of the most popular options for rural areas. It uses satellite dishes to connect to the internet, allowing access to high-speed internet even in remote locations.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Probe ferry incident thoroughly

A collision between a passenger ferry, "Nilkamal", and a naval speedboat near Mumbai has left 14 dead, with several passengers missing. The ferry, en route to Elephanta Caves, capsized after the speedboat attempted a sharp turn and crashed into it, as shown in a viral video. An inquiry will examine whether the ferry exceeded passenger limits and if life jackets were sufficient. This tragedy echoes the 2009 Thekkady incident in Kerala, highlighting lax safety norms. India needs enforce safety regulations and introduce survival-at-sea training in schools and workplaces to enhance preparedness and awareness.

GREGORY FERNANDES, Mumbai



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

Chautala was an amiable ally, a fierce opponent



YOGINDER GUPTA
SENIOR JOURNALIST

WITH the death of former CM Om Prakash Chautala, an era in Haryana politics has come to an end. Known for his strong likes and dislikes, 'OPC', as he was known to many, was equally amiable when he chose to be. He could be a fierce critic of his political opponents at one moment and dining with them the next moment, if it suited his interests. He would often say there are no permanent enemies or friends in politics. He put this philosophy to use on several occasions.

In 1998, his party, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), contested the Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Haryana. He assured the BSP supremo Mayawati that he would never go with the BJP or the Congress. But immediately after the elections, he extended support to BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Chautala had a strong res-

son to do so. At that time, Bansi Lal's Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) was heading the government in the state in alliance with the BJP. Chautala hoped that his support to Vajpayee would lead to collapse of the Bansi Lal government. But due to Sushma Swaraj's firm support to Bansi Lal, the BJP continued its alliance with the HVP. Within months, however, Chautala got another opportunity when after 13 months the Vajpayee government collapsed. In the 1999 General Election, Chautala's party won five seats. The Vajpayee government was again short of the majority mark.

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Parkash Singh Badal played a crucial role in persuading Chautala to again extend support to Vajpayee. Badal and Chautala's father, Devi Lal, shared a very close bond. They were known to be 'pag waf' (exchanging of turbans) brothers. OPC and the entire Devi Lal clan used to treat Badal like the patriarch of their family. However, this time Chautala agreed to support Vajpayee only after getting a written assurance from him that the BJP would withdraw its support to the Bansi Lal government within a few months.

Soon, the INLD formed the government in Haryana in alliance with the BJP and a



END OF AN ERA: Om Prakash Chautala used to treat Parkash Singh Badal as a family patriarch. FILE PHOTO

few defectors from the HVP. Chautala was known for his strong-arm tactics. He would often say a chief minister is of no use if a sleeping person does not jump out of his bed on hearing his name. In 1999, Chautala, however, worked hard to change this image, at least for the first few months. Once I jokingly told him "Chaudhary sahab aap ki yeh shakhsiat aap ko suit nahi kurti (this modestly does not suit you)". He laughed and said one changes with time. OPC culled for a midterm Assembly poll in 2000 and gained absolute majority. After that he was back to his old self.

In 1991, when Chautala

became the Chief Minister after his father Devi Lal became the Deputy Prime Minister, OPC had to become a member of the Assembly within six months to meet a constitutional requirement.

Two byelections, Mehram (Rohtak) and Thanesar (Kurukshetra), were due. Several delegations from Kurukshetra met Chautala to contest from their constituency. In Mehram, his protégé Anand Singh Dangri, who had fallen out with him, challenged him to contest from there.

When Chautala visited Ambala where I was then posted, I asked him why he was not contesting from

Thanesar from where his victory was assured. The GT Road belt had never got a chief minister from the area and its people were yearning for one. He said: "Nyota to vapas karna padta hai (Challenge has to be answered)." When I insisted that in that case why not contest from both the constituencies, his reply was what is the use of causing another byelection later. However, after the infamous mayhem in Mehram, Chautala contested from two places to become an MLA.

Whenever he was extremely polite with someone, it used to be an indication that the person was in trouble. Once during an Assembly election, Karan Singh Dalal, a fierce critic of Chautala, crossed him to go to the Speaker's podium. Chautala politely asked Dalal how was his elder brother. Dalal was very surprised at the courtesy. It was only after Dalal came out of the Assembly that he learnt that his brother had been booked in a murder case.

Towards the middle of his term (2000-05), Chautala became a little arrogant, almost bordering on audacity. Once he boasted in the Assembly that "Jab tak main zinda hoon, is kursi par main hi baithunga (Till I am alive, only I would be the Chief Minister)". The entire House was stunned. During the next elections, the voters

reduced the INLD's strength to nine in a House of 90.

Though Chautala never said so, those who saw him from close quarters feel that he was inspired by two politicians and wanted to surpass them — Bansi Lal in administrative skills; and Bhajan Lal in political jockeying. Like the former, Chautala kept the bureaucracy on a tight leash. Not many in the Haryana Secretariat could say 'no' to Chautala. Anyone who had the courage to do so, preferred to go to the safer route of Central deputation.

It was the eagerness of certain officers to please him which ultimately led to his and his elder son's conviction and jail term in JBT teachers' recruitment case for 10 years. It is a strange coincidence that the top leadership of the INLD and the SAD not only shared close family ties but also copied each other in governance and other models. It is also another strange coincidence that the fall of the political fortunes of the two parties have also traversed a similar course. The parties which were once calling the shots in their respective states, are now virtually in a political oblivion.

Will Chautala's death push his estranged sons to come together once again in a bid to keep the legacy of their grandfather and father alive? Divided they are bound to fall. Only time will tell.

Will Om Prakash Chautala's death push his estranged sons to come together? Only time will tell.

Why agri draft policy is not inclusive or progressive



BS SIDHU
FORMER COMMISSIONER,
AGRICULTURE, PUNJAB

THE draft National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing was circulated by the Centre to the states last month, inviting suggestions for its improvement. It has sparked a nationwide debate as well as apprehensions among different stakeholders. The draft accepts that small and marginal farmers are still not able to benefit from bumper production and growth in the agriculture sector. A significant gap still exists in rural and urban economies.

It admits that most farmers are struggling for optimum income due to highly fragmented landholdings, increasing cost of production, lack of demand-driven production, accessibility to good markets and optimum realisation of value for their produce.

The major marketing reforms proposed in the draft include permission to set up private wholesale markets and allow direct wholesale purchase from farm gate to organised retailers, processors, exporters and bulk buyers. It has also proposed for deregulation of perishables outside the market yard;

declare cold storages, ware-houses and silos as deemed market yards and permit establishment and operation of private e-trading platforms.

Other proposed reforms include single unified trading license and one-time levy of market fee across the state; rationalisation of market fee and commission charges and recognition of trading licenses of other states. It also provides for the exemption of market fees on direct sales by farmers' or farmers producer organisations (FPOs) at processing units or factories and the exemption of market fees on produce brought from other states for processing.

The farmers are protesting for the enactment of a law that ensures a guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for all crops. Such an assurance would protect their income and provide stability in agricultural markets. A legally binding MSP has also been recommended by the parliamentary panel on agriculture as a measure to provide financial stability to farmers. The MSP has to be the minimum benchmark to enable the farmers to realise a remunerative price for their produce. But the draft is silent on this issue and suggests 'Futures trading and options trading' as a price discovery and risk mitigating tool.

There are other apprehensions. Farmers are demanding India's withdrawal from the World Trade Organisation and the imposition of a ban on all free trade agreements. The draft policy is also silent about a clear commitment to



PANDORA'S BOX: The draft has sparked a nationwide debate among stakeholders. FILE PHOTO

such trade-related decisions, which affect farmers' income through highly unpredictable restrictions. These include export bans, stock restrictions and minimum export prices, imposed on exports from India. Duties are also lowered on import of products which are often highly subsidised by the exporting countries.

The draft policy provides to establish private markets to facilitate the visibility of trade transactions and enhanced competition. Farmers, however, feel that the elimination of government protections would make them vulnerable to big corporates. The draft framework provides for direct purchase from farm gates, at deemed market yards and proposed deregulated market yards for perishables. But in the event of deregulation, these multiple channels of marketing can be unfair and manipulative.

The draft does not specify what type of financial and other support the government will provide to bridge

the gaps between marketing and auxiliary infrastructure and carry out institutional reforms.

Suggestion to roll out a 'price insurance scheme' to insure the farmers' income at the time of sowing is apprehended to apply to contract farming by corporates or FPOs operated by them. What will be the basis for compensation — the MSP or contracted price and how the government will ensure it in a deregulated market? The experience of Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana in this context has not been encouraging for the farmers. The process of making payments to the farmers is also not trustworthy in an unregulated market.

Given this background, the effectiveness of an 'empowered agricultural marketing reform committee' is dubious. This appears to be a mechanism where all BJP-ruled states will be forced to accept the government's proposals so that any resistance at the national level due to genuine

issues can be sidelined.

The draft envisages making intense efforts to bring all farmers under one or other farmers' organisations i.e. cooperatives, FPOs, self-help groups, etc. to reduce their inaccessibility to market and price uncertainty. However, it has been observed that in many cases, the primary producers alone is not sufficient to enable the FPOs or other farmers groups to gain substantial income for their members. However, the provision related to value chain centric infrastructure (VCCI) does not commit firmly to providing all-out support to FPOs to set up the VCCI.

The 'ease of doing agri-trade' at the expense of protection of farmers' interests and 'promotion of contract farming' again reek of revival of the earlier farm laws. A narrative is building up among the farmers and other stakeholders that the reintroduction of basics of the repealed laws by the government under a new guise should be resisted.

The farmers' concerns about the weakening of the marketing infrastructure of markets, regulated by agricultural produce market committees (APMC) over time, are also not ill-founded. The policy draft suggests that the states consider allowing the buying of contracted produce outside the mandi yard and waive off the market fee when produce is bought for the purpose of processing and export to give impetus to these sectors. Organised retailers, processors, exporters and bulk buy-

ers will be able to make direct purchases from the farm gate or at deemed market yards where they can initially offer higher prices to the farmers due to lower taxes. It will also affect the income of APMC markets due to lower arrivals. Thus, over time, these will become unviable.

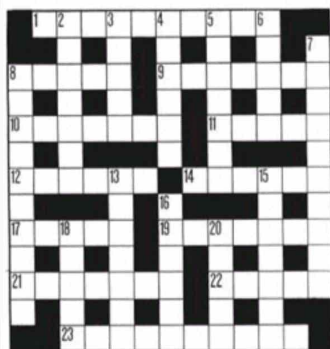
Though the draft policy takes cognisance of the fact that agricultural marketing is a state subject under the Seventh Schedule in the Constitution, its mere glimpse brings out the government agenda of addressing the long-standing challenges in agricultural marketing through a unified national approach.

To allay the fears of farmers and to make it inclusive, the policy framework should be redrafted after public consultations with farmer unions and meaningful engagement with state governments and experts. Public investment in agro-processing and cold chains for supply and storage should be increased to strengthen the agricultural marketing infrastructure.

Indian agriculture is facing a series of crises — income crisis due to the falling or stagnant prices, degradation of natural resources; adverse impact of climate change, and last but not the least the loss of interest of the younger generation in agriculture. An inclusive and progressive agricultural marketing policy can go a long way in meeting these challenges by addressing major issues like the MSP, higher public investment and a participatory quick response system for responding to changes in the international market.

The policy framework should be redrafted after public consultations with farmer unions and meaningful engagement with state governments and experts.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Cause widespread damage (5,5)
- Renowned (5)
- Wine of a good year (7)
- Disparage (3,4)
- A golf course (5)
- Clasp firmly together (6)
- A tropical woody grass (6)
- Incidivism (5)
- Absent-minded daydreaming (7)
- A Swiss firm cheese (7)
- Healthily red (5)
- Opposite (2,3,5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Parity, 4 Placid, 9 Tuition, 10 Nepal, 11 Freak, 12 Emerald, 13 Wide-ranging, 18 Typical, 20 In-law, 22 Drift, 23 Upfront, 24 Satire, 25 Fleece.

Down: 1 Put off, 2 Raise, 3 Trickle, 5 Lance, 6 Captain, 7 Delude, 8 Under a cloud, 14 Imprint, 15 Gainful, 16 At odds, 17 Swathe, 19 Cater, 21 Loose.

DOWN

- Love affair (7)
- Reproduction of sound (5)
- A Cuban cigar (6)
- Flavouring for ice cream (7)
- Sequence (5)
- Consider important (3,5,2)
- An variation on routine (3,1,6)
- Abstract idea (7)
- Russian scientist-composer (7)
- Gentle wind (6)
- Trick to attract attention (5)
- Left-handed page of open book (5)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 21, 2024, SATURDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1946
■ Margashirsha Shaka	30
■ Posh Purnasht	7
■ Hijari	1446
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 12.22 pm	
■ Puri Yoga up to 6.23 pm	
■ Purnvimsam Nakshatra up to 6.14 am	
■ Moon in Leo sign	

FORECAST

SUNSET 03:55	SATURDAY SUNSHINE	12:27 HRS 03:55 HRS	MAX	MIN
	Chandigarh	22	08	
	New Delhi	23	06	
	Amritsar	19	05	
	Bathinda	21	04	
	Jalandhar	19	05	
	Ludhiana	20	05	
	Bhiwani	20	05	
	Hisar	20	04	
	Sirsa	21	04	
	Dharamsala	18	05	
	Manali	15	00	
	Shrinagar	15	02	
	Srinagar	07	-06	
	Jammu	20	07	
	Kargil	01	-12	
	Leh	02	-11	
	Dehradun	—	—	
	Mussoorie	15	06	

COMPILATION BY TC

Opinion

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2024

Reforming agri marketing

Need for a GST-like body of state ministers to build consensus on a unified national market

ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT backtracked on farm legislation three years ago due to a year-long agitation by farmers, the reality is that the genie of reform is out of the bottle. There is no rolling back the government's Digital India initiative that uses technology to transform how it delivers services to farmers. Over 3.7 million IDs have been created for this purpose as part of the AgriStack project. The action has now shifted to the states for securing the best possible market and price for their produce. The union ministry of agriculture and farmers' welfare's draft "national policy framework for agricultural marketing" calls for achieving barrier-free trade in agricultural produce under a uniform pan-Indian framework. The need is for accessible markets for farmers to have a choice to sell their produce through any channel of marketing and also to any buyer offering the best bid for their produce. The application of digital technology is critical in this regard together with reforms in states' marketing laws and policies to create more uniformity in the nation's agriculture marketing system as it sharply varies across them.

What is the progress so far? The electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) was launched eight years ago to catalyse the digital transformation of mandi or marketplaces to enable farmers to secure competitive prices through transparent online bidding. However, there is still some distance away from the promise of "One Nation One Market". Trade in farm produce is still within each state as markets are highly fragmented. Interstate trade, which enables farmers in one state to sell their produce to buyers in another state, is picking up. The draft notes that a single unified trading licence valid across the states has been adopted by a majority of them although unevenly. Over 1,400 markets (out of an estimated 7,000) in 27 states and Union Territories are integrated with e-NAM which allows online trading in 219 agricultural commodities. Only a few states have allowed the operation of private e-trading platforms in their Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) markets. To scale up for a more unified market, the draft suggests a competitive ecosystem, including the establishment and operation of multiple e-trading platforms, including e-NAMs in the private sector, and moving beyond APMC markets.

More uniformity in the agricultural marketing system obviously calls for a more collaborative approach between the Centre and states. This should be welcomed as this is, after all, a state subject under Entry 28 of List II (State List) of the V11 Schedule under Article 246 of the Constitution. After being forced to withdraw its farm legislation, the Centre is doing the right thing by taking reforms forward in closer consultation with the states. The other interesting suggestions include establishing a quarterly "Ease of Doing Agri-trade" index to foster healthy competition among the states.

Another is to set up an empowered agricultural marketing reforms committee of state agricultural marketing ministers — on the lines of the empowered committee of state finance ministers on goods and services tax — to push them to adopt reform provisions of state APMC Acts, notify rules, and build a consensus for a more unified national market for agricultural produce. The draft, however, steers clear of the more controversial aspects of the withdrawn farm legislation pertaining to contract farming and purchase agreements between farmers and bulk buyers, including large corporate houses, before the start of cultivation.

Nike's half measures need another shoe to drop

THE FIRST SHOE has dropped at Nike.

On Thursday, new chief executive officer Elliott Hill set out his vision for turning around the world's biggest sportswear company, which has lost out to rivals after it prioritised selling through its own stores and website, and didn't deliver enough new products, relying instead on classic styles.

Hill warned that his efforts would be painful in the short term, with sales and margins in the current fiscal quarter expected to fall more sharply than in the previous three months. But he stopped short of getting all the bad news out of the way early, for example by writing off these out-of-fashion sneakers and lowering sales and earnings expectations for the coming years. That looks like a missed opportunity, and it means the continued threat of a reset as Nike embarks on the difficult task of winning once more. It's been obvious for some time what Nike should do. And Hill set out a plan to just do it.

The company will be obsessed with sport once more. Hill will organise Nike into "fields of play" around basketball, football, and soccer, with common divisions between men's and women's products within these. The hope is to unleash a wave of innovative new products.

He is right to focus on newness. Nike needs to release novel sports products that can drive broader trends. After all, while performance is the cornerstone of Nike, it and rival Adidas also resemble fashion brands, and need a pipeline of fresh items.

Hill will step up marketing to tell the story of Nike as a brand, aiming to get back to the great campaigns the company was traditionally known for. He will give more power to its athletes in cities and countries to restore connections with local teams. Nike, for instance, became less focused on neighbourhood running clubs, creating an opportunity for rivals such as Deckers Outdoor's Hoka. He is also reconnecting with the retailers that Nike abandoned under his predecessor John Donahoe, as it sought to emulate luxury brands by controlling large swathes of its products through its own stores and digital channels.

As part of this pivot, he will cut back on discounting on Nike's website, where promotions accounted for half of sales. Instead, he plans to turn Nike's own channels into premium destinations that elevate the brand and carry the broadest selection of products.

He will use Nike's outlet stores to clear excess inventory, part of broader efforts to get rid of old stock, making space for new items. The latter will be more carefully managed in an effort to make Nike's sneakers desirable once more.

His blueprint is sensible, but will be painful. Consequently, Nike cautioned that third-quarter sales would fall by a percentage in the low double digits, worse than the 8% contraction in the three months to November 30, as it gets rid of stale inventory. The gross margin, the difference between the price at which a retailer buys and sells goods, is expected to fall between 3 and 3.5 percentage points. Little wonder the shares fell almost 4% in pre-market trading.

But once more, Nike has stopped short of giving longer-term guidance. It might do so when Hill delivers his full blueprint at an investor day next year.

Thursday's earnings would have been a good opportunity to clear the decks. Inventory was flat at the end of the third quarter, but taking a charge for all the old Nike Dunks and Air Jordans that need to be sold off might have been wise. It would also have been a good time to reset longer-term expectations for sales and profits that are more realistic, and reflective of how difficult it will be to reorient the Nike juggernaut. This is what Hill's counterpart, Bjorn Gulden at Adidas, did shortly after becoming CEO at the beginning of 2023.

Hill will get few chances to make a decisive break with the past and provide himself with solid foundation. He has gone some way but needs to go further. He should not leave it too long. Nike's recovery won't be quick or easy, and the more time that passes, the more it will become Hill's problem, rather than that of his predecessor.



ANDREA FELSTED
Bloomberg

GREENBACK SUPREMACY?

IF TRUMP WERE TO RETALIATE AGAINST THE BRICS WITH 100% TARIFFS, THE MOVE COULD BACKFIRE

Can Trump save dollar hegemony?

IN 2023, THE leaders of Brazil and the other BRICS countries at the time — China, India, Russia, and South Africa — discussed collaboration on a new shared currency. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has been a vocal proponent of an alternative to the US dollar, the dominant global currency for the past 75 years, and Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly promoted the idea during the BRICS summit in October by brandishing a symbolic BRICS banknote. The bloc's new members — Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates — would presumably also be included in the new joint currency.

The proposed challenge to the dollar has already drawn the ire of US President-elect Donald Trump, who has threatened to impose punitive tariffs of 100% on countries that move away from the greenback. Two weeks ago, Trump warned BRICS countries against creating or supporting an alternative reserve currency. "We require a commitment from these countries that they will neither create a new BRICS currency nor back any other currency to replace the mighty US dollar, or they will face 100% tariffs," he declared on Truth Social, his social media platform.

This ultimatum follows Trump's threats to impose a 25% tariff on Mexico and Canada if they fail to curbentanyl smuggling into the United States, a 60% tariff on Chinese goods, and a 10-20% tariff on other trade partners. Despite Trump's bluster, these increasingly coercive threats will not result in one of his self-proclaimed "successful deals".

While Trump's rhetoric suggests he views a BRICS currency as a serious threat, such a project is likely to fail anyway, regardless of his actions or ultimatums. If the proposed currency is intended to exist alongside BRICS countries' national currencies, it will not gain traction. A successful international currency requires a home base. That is why English, not Esperanto, became the world's

JEFFREY FRANKEL
Professor of capital formation and growth, Harvard University and research associate, US National Bureau of Economic Research

lingua franca, and why the special drawing right (SDR) — the International Monetary Fund's reserve asset, whose value is based on a basket of major currencies — has not been successful as an international currency.

For a BRICS unit to compete with the US dollar, then, member countries would need to form a full-fledged monetary union, relinquishing their national currencies and establishing a unified central bank to oversee the new money.

But the BRICS economies differ too much from each other for a monetary union to function effectively. Successful monetary unions are typically formed by small, interconnected economies that trade extensively with one another and share common goals, cultural ties, correlated business cycles, and relatively integrated labour markets.

When member economies are too dissimilar, one may enter a recession while another overheats. In a monetary union, member states must give up control over their money supply, interest rates, and the exchange rate, limiting their ability to respond to cyclical economic fluctuations. In the absence of alternative adjustment mechanisms such as increased labour mobility and a strong political commitment, these disparities can lead to significant discord and needless macroeconomic instability.

Examples of successful monetary uni-

ons include the CFA franc zones, comprising West African and Central African states that use a common currency pegged to the euro, and the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union, which consists of English-speaking islands like Anguilla, Antigua, and Barbuda. These work because their members are small neighbouring countries that share cultural and historical roots. The largest member of the CFA, for example, is Côte d'Ivoire, whose GDP is smaller than that of Buffalo, New York.

The notable exception, of course, is the eurozone. But although it consists of relatively large economies, its 20 members also share borders, maintain integrated economies, and are bound by a shared commitment to the vision of a peaceful, unified Europe. Even so, European countries like the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Norway have chosen to remain outside the eurozone, and peripheral members such as Greece have struggled to adapt to the constraints of the euro's monetary strictures.

Some regional blocs have long discussed adopting a common currency but made little progress. In 2001, the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council announced plans to establish a currency union by 2010, but the plan failed to materialise. If even the small, culturally aligned, and cyclically correlated GCC countries have been unwilling to relinquish their monetary sovereignty, the pro-

Talking down the dollar aligns with other inflationary Trump promises, such as his threats to weaken the Federal Reserve's independence

posed BRICS currency stands little chance. Many of the BRICS+ countries are large. They span four continents. They speak different languages. And their borders have historically been sources of conflict rather than economic integration. China and India, for example, were locked in a protracted military standoff along their shared Himalayan border before reaching a fragile truce in October.

There is also little correlation among the BRICS economies' business cycles. Rising world energy prices benefit oil-producing countries like Russia, Brazil, Iran, and the UAE, while putting pressure on energy-importing countries such as China and India. This dynamic makes the BRICS far less suited for a monetary union than the GCC countries.

To be sure, a gradual global shift away from the dollar is already underway. This process, while slow, has gained momentum in recent years, driven partly by the US's increasingly frequent use of financial sanctions. But if the Trump administration were to retaliate against the BRICS with 100% tariffs, the move could backfire, prompting central banks to turn to the renminbi, smaller currencies, or even gold for their international reserves.

Trump's clumsy efforts to enforce the international use of the dollar are at odds with his other stated objectives, such as improving the US trade balance by devaluing the dollar against the renminbi and the currencies of other countries that run bilateral surpluses with the US. Talking down the dollar aligns with other inflationary Trump promises, such as his threats to weaken the Federal Reserve's independence and his proposed mass deportations. But an international reserve currency that is prone to inflation and depreciation is hardly attractive. Trump's tariff threats won't resolve that contradiction.

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A framework for fair interest rates



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Policy researcher and corporate advisor
Tweets at @ssrmbombai

THE DILEMMA SURROUNDING what constitutes a fair interest rate has been a long-standing debate in finance. For decades, regulators, lenders, and consumers alike have grappled with this complex issue. While the core principle of fairness in lending is universally accepted, the parameters for defining "fairness" have remained elusive. The evolution of lending models, particularly with the rise of non-bank lenders, has added layers of complexity to this intricate discussion.

As the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) takes a more active role in addressing usurious lending practices, it is evident that consumer protection and transparency remain paramount. However, fairness in loan pricing is not merely about capping rates; it requires a formulaic approach that balances consumer interests with the sustainability of lenders.

The purpose of any lending institution is to serve its consumers, enabling access to credit that fosters growth, opportunity, and financial inclusion. But this mission cannot ignore business realities. Loan pricing is a multi-dimensional challenge. Innovations in lending models have expanded access to credit, especially for underserved segments. Yet, these have brought complexity to the calculation of fair rates. Loan pricing encompasses various components, including interest rates, processing fees, contingent charges, and ancillary costs such as insurance. Lenders incur costs ranging from capital requirements to credit risk, operational expenses, write-offs for bad loans, and technological investments. If these costs cannot be reasonably recovered alongside a fair return on equity, lenders do not have pur-

pose to stay in the market. As the American economist Milton Friedman once said, "The business of business is business." In the absence of profitability, even the noblest missions cannot be sustained.

A regulatory framework must, therefore, acknowledge the dual imperatives of consumer protection and lender viability. Pricing models in lending are complex, reflecting several components: base interest rates, processing fees, contingent charges, and ancillary costs like insurance premiums. Without clear regulatory guidance, lenders are left to interpret fairness independently.

The RBI should consider defining a structured formula for fair-loan pricing. This formula could incorporate variables such as the cost of funds, credit risk premiums, administrative expenses, and a reasonable profit margin. For instance, the Bank for International Settlements highlights that fair interest rates should align with economic fundamentals, inflation-adjusted costs, and credit risks, all while promoting systemic stability. By codifying these principles into an operational framework, the RBI could eliminate ambiguity.

The concept of a FAIR interest rate goes beyond mere interest; it embodies a framework for accountability, integrity, and reasonableness. A fair rate ensures clarity and accountability in pricing decisions, allowing borrowers to understand and trust the terms of loans. It reflects

There is a keen interest and hope that the RBI would lead with a structured framework that removes second-guessing what's fair in loan pricing

integrity by protecting consumers from exploitative practices while supporting transparency in transactions.

Transparency is the bedrock of fairness. Borrowers must have complete clarity on all costs — interest rates, processing fees, and ancillary charges — without hidden surprises. Processing fees, in particular, require standardisation. These fees are often justified as covering documentation, manpower, or technology costs, but their variability across institutions raises questions about fairness.

Equally important is the need for pricing policies to be dynamic. Boards of lenders must regularly review their pricing models — quarterly, at a minimum — to adapt to changes in credit risk, liquidity costs, and economic conditions. Any cost efficiencies arising from economies of scale or improved credit ratings should be passed on to borrowers, as fairness is not just about transparency but also equity.

A robust framework must also account for the borrower's total cost of credit, including bundled products like insurance. While such products can provide valuable protection, they must not inflate the effective cost of borrowing unfairly. Regulatory clarity on permissible bundling practices would address concerns over opaque pricing.

Finally, the sustainability of the lending sector is important for regulatory watch. As much as consumers require protection, the sector must also ensure their busi-

ness models thrive. A healthy post-tax return on assets, typically within 3-5%, is essential to attract capital and maintain focused lending. Without this balance, the market risks losing lenders, pushing borrowers into higher-cost alternatives or depriving them of credit altogether.

A fitting analogy is that of traffic cops who station themselves just beyond a signal, often hidden behind a parked vehicle or tree, ready to flag down violators and issue penalties. Without formal guidance on fair interest rates, the industry fears that the RBI's supervision might appear similarly reactive — catching mistakes rather than providing a clear road map. To avoid such perceptions, it would be far more constructive for the RBI to set explicit guidelines, ensuring lenders know the rules of the sector and can drive their practices accordingly.

Even the boards of lending institutions appear uncertain about the principles and formulas for fairness, with many deeming their current practices as justified. This disconnect highlights the urgent need for regulatory clarity. It would be prudent for the RBI to issue definitive guidance on this matter — perhaps similar to its approach with microfinance institutions.

Regulatory guidance is not a constraint but actually a compass — steering businesses, markets towards fairness, transparency, and sustainable growth, where innovation can thrive without compromising integrity. There is a keen interest and hope that the RBI would lead with a structured framework that removes second-guessing what's fair in loan pricing.

and the US and the European Union have allocated \$3 billion and \$8 billion respectively. India's Quantum Mission, with a budget of \$800 million spent over five years, remains modest. Though a step in the right direction, it underscores the need for more investment in this field.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A lack of decorum

Every Indian must condemn Thursday's incident in the Parliament, where two Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members of Parliament were reportedly injured in a scuffle with Congress MPs, including the leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, during a debate on BR Ambedkar's legacy. Such behaviour from elected

representatives is not only inappropriate but also undermines the sanctity of our legislative institutions. Parliament is meant to be a platform for robust, respectful debate, where differences of opinion are expressed with decorum and dignity. Strong disagreements are an inherent part of democracy, but they should never escalate into physical altercations.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

India's quantum leap

The recent unveiling of Google's quantum chip, Willow, marks a monumental milestone in the evolution of quantum computing. However, India's progress in this field is constrained by relatively low investment in research and development. China has committed \$15 billion to quantum technology,

QUALITY MATTERS: SHUN CALLS FOR MORE NUMBERS

AS the year draws to a close, what particularly piqued the nation's curiosity and also that of many observers abroad is that there has been a clamor call by some people who matter for a 1.42 billion nation to have more babies. Cheering those advocates, India already became the world's most populous country with 142.86 crore people in April 2023, surpassing China which had a population of 142.57 crore.

Wryly put, besieged by so many problems, the nation can take heart that at least on one count it made China cede a number 1 position. Understanding, celebrations did not break out as sensible people weighed the pros and cons of the new global status. The UN estimates that India's population is virtually certain to continue to grow

for several decades. There is no saturation point in near future. If some people claim so, the government has to clear the air.

Speaking of India's numbers, the UN stressed that no one be left behind in ensuring quality life. Such a stupendous task before the nation. On account of stupefying incompetence of successive governments, the nation is still mired in backwardness in many respects. Meanwhile, politicians, both in power and in opposition, are busy politicking either to grab or retain power. People's issues, no matter how painful and urgent, go abeying in state assemblies and Parliament. No debates on the problems that matter most to the most people.

Back to the point of discussion.

Given these facts, strangely, there has been an ardent advocacy of the issue from the Chief Ministers of two southern states — Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. N Chandrababu Naidu and M K Stalin. They have spoken enough to stir debates. Naidu has even waived the two-child limit for contesting in local body elections, by scrapping the AP Panchayat Raj and AP Municipal Acts. Now, Telangana is said to be mulling similar steps. AP and TN CMs' concern has found an echo with RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat joining the chorus. He has been emphasizing, wherever he goes, that it is necessary for couples to have more than two children to ensure the survival of society. He raises the spectre of language cultures, even so-called, vanishing

should the total fertility rate (TFR) fall below 2.1. TFR is the number of children that would be born to a woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years.

Those concerned over India's lagging behind on many parameters, such as maternal/infant mortality, child malnutrition, hunger and diseases, and unemployment as well as unemployability of our youth, are simply baffled and not on the same page. Thankfully, PM Narendra Modi, too, differs. In his first in-pendence speech during his second term as the PM, Modi de-scribed keeping the size of families small as akin practising a form of patriotism. Every couple, before bringing a child into this world, should think if they can do justice to the child, giving it all it needs

for a bright future. He warned of population explosion and the many problems it triggers. He meant 'quality of life matters, not numbers.' We only have to check India's ranking in various poverty, life expectancy and health surveys made by global agencies. India ranks at 134 out of 193 countries and territories in human development index (HDI). Thus, should the world's most populous nation prioritise a further larger population? It is time, state governments heed the PM's message, and keep focus on improving the quality of life for their people, by bolstering capital expenditure on healthcare, education, infrastructure etc. We need more economic prosperity and greater well-being for all. Raising numbers is not a means of that end.

LETTERS

Rajasthan govt shows its bigotry

THE different languages used in India are one of the features of the nation's 'Unity in diversity'. All languages are unique and none of them is superior or inferior. Similarly, as a medium of communication, the importance of a language transcends beyond castes and religions. Unfortunately, languages like Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and Urdu are often misrepresented and misunderstood. Rajasthan govt's decision to remove Urdu terms from police and court vocabulary was taken keeping in line with such a wrong belief. Years of neglect and lack of patronage caused Urdu to fall into decline. This move by the government smacks of bigotry and prejudice.

Venu G S, Kollam

A black letter day in history of democracy

A black day for Indian democracy and a day of great sorrow to the people who sent members into parliament with great aspirations, but selfish and political party interests overtook people's aspirations. What a disgrace of lawmakers as opposition and treasury members dashed with one another at the door of temple of democracy, the parliament, on an issue which can be tackled in the House itself? It looked childish as if schoolchildren were fighting with one another and blaming the other party for the fight! The irony is that even senior and senior most members were just mute spectators as they lost control of their members. Is this the expectation of citizens who sent them to parliament and government, paying salaries, allowances etc., from taxpayers money?

JP Reddy, Nalgonda

REFER to your editorial on "Discretion of the temple of democracy" (Dec 20). What happened in parliament premises the other day is a shame on democracy. It is an assault on the Constitution itself. It shows the arrogance of the grand old party. Rahul is reported to have pushed an MP. He did not regret for the incident and did not help the injured MP to get up. Neither the Congress party nor its leader Rahul has learnt any lessons from its successive defeats in the elections. It is quite unbecoming of Rahul in such a manner.

Sruvansu Ramachandran, Chennai.

REALLY, Dr Ambedkar is the soul of our constitution. The MPs who lodged complaint against each other at the Parliament Street police station lowered their dignity. It is very sad as some of the Treasury benches MPs stopped the Opposition members at main entrance by wielding sticks. In the melee, some of the MPs on both sides received injuries. Even Prime Minister Modi is also supporting his cabi-net colleagues' unsavoury remarks against Dr Ambedkar, reflecting a sad state of affairs in the House.

Pratapada Reddy V, Tiruvuru, AP

NEVER a time in the history of Parliament, ruling and opposition parties got into a physical fight. This disturbing incident left an indelible scar on Indian democracy. Home Minister Amit Shah's utterances in the name of Ambedkar a few times cannot be termed as insulting him. Congress need not construe this seriously. Ambedkar is not alone the architect of the Constitution. Entire Constituent Assembly comprising chairpersons of various committees read the draft, made lot of changes in the comprehensive text and finalised. It is better hereinafter to refer to 'Constituent Assembly' only as Constitution maker.

Dr N S R Murthy, Secunderabad

WHEN the Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi went to check on the injured BJP MP Pratap Sarangi, he did not ask about his health and turned away from there in a sign of complete arrogance. Being the LoP and coming from Gandhi lineage, such a gesture was totally uncalled for. And in the evening during the press conference, he and Mallikarjun Kharge raised the Adani issue but deliberately kept silent on the two BJP MPs injured during the scuffle.

Bal Govind, Noida

Supply treated water, curtail wastage

A lot of water gets wasted in constructing multi-story buildings and in transporting the water by tankers wherein the water gets leaked on the way, which goes unmonitored. Our cities need centralised water supply system. Most of the rivers shall be interconnected and all such water shall be purified and protected. The rivers shall be inter-connected to various canals so that the water can easily be transported, distributed, purified and protected. There are well-educated and experienced professionals in the relevant field, who know how to use photocatalytic water purification technology along with reverse osmosis technology. Thus let us assure purified water supply easily to the millions!

Guidipati Anirudh, Secunderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Cops nab fraudster who leased house to 22 people in Bengaluru

BENGALURU: The Hebbal police have arrested a fraudster named N Girish, who had advertised on the No Broker app that he would lease a house and received more than Rs 1 crore in advance from 22 people.

The accused Girish originally from Malavalli in Mandya district was married to Deepa of Cholanagar Second Main Road near R.T. Nagar in Bengaluru. He was unemployed and settled in his wife's house in Cholanagar. The police said that the accused had advertised on the No Broker app that he would lease a house on the first floor of the same house.

Those who saw the advertisement had called and contacted Girish. The accused then showed the house to all the callers and took advance money of Rs 10 to 15 lakh from each of them. When the callers asked them to vacate the house, the accused lied by saying that the house was being renovated, that there was a financial problem with the current tenants and that he would give the keys after the current tenants vacated.

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

COAL GRADUALLY GIVING WAY TO CLEAN ENERGY

Energy generated from fossil fuels (coal, lignite and gas) is expected to dip from 77 per cent of the total in 2024 to 56 per cent by 2030



A 'green' transition in India's energy sector is about reducing energy poverty and mitigating climate change. Renewable energy is critical for addressing both — the question is, is India ready for that transition? Will it be able to meet its 2030 target of achieving 50 per cent cumulative electric power capacity from non-fossil fuel sources? asks Sunita Na-rain, Director General, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

"The challenge for the country is to augment the power infrastructure, to make it clean, and to supply electricity at affordable rates. The good news is that the Government of India is absolutely committed to this transition. An ambitious but feasible target has been set. We are hoping it will provide the green energy transformation that we desperately need," says Narain.

India is working towards reducing its emissions intensity by 45 per cent by 2030 (compared to 2005 levels). It has also said, as Narain mentions, that by 2030, 50 per cent of its energy capacity will be from renewable (non-fossil fuel) sources. The country's target for installed renewable energy capacity has been hiked — from 175 gigawatt (GW) by 2022 to 500 GW by 2030.

India's power demand is expected to surge by 2-2.5 times by 2047, says the 2024 Economic Survey. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) says that the growing demand will grow 77 GW of total installed capacity by 2030 — 44 per cent of this demand will be met by the 500 GW of non-fossil fuel sources that the country is planning to install.

The CEA says 426 GW of new renewables will need to be installed — solar power would be the driver of this clean

energy future. It will supply 23 per cent of the total power generated in India by 2030.

The displacement of coal has already started happening. CSE researchers point out that though coal is still the 'king' — with 217.5 GW installed capacity out of a total of 440 GW — it is losing its place. Energy generated from fossil fuels (coal, lignite and gas) is expected to dip from 77 per cent of the total in 2024 to 56 per cent by 2030. Says Narain: "The more dramatic change would be in the contribution of new renewables — from 13 per cent today, they would be expected to generate 32 per cent by 2030."

CSE researchers point out that there is now a need to also scale up generation. India does not have a stated target for percentage of generation of non-fossil fuel-based energy in the genuine taxpayer benefit — not those who evade taxes. No one was bothered about air and water pollution that is reaching dangerous proportions in many states in the country.

The Members of Parliament should have worked as much as they could for the country. But what did they do? The Congress leader Jairam Ramesh says, "We assess the Parliament's productivity by the intention of the government." This statement is as shameful as the face-off that took place outside the parliament on the penultimate day of the session. In the context of parliament, 'productivity' refers to the amount of legislative work accomplished during a session, measured by the number of bills passed, questions answered, and debates held, essentially indicating how effectively the parliament is functioning in passing laws and scrutinising government actions during a given period; a high-level of productivity means the parliament is efficiently completing its core duties with minimal disruptions.

Speaking at the Dialogue, Pradip Kumar Das, head of IREDA, said: "By 2030, India would need investments of around Rs 30-32 lakh crore in renewable energy. To scale up renewable energy, capital investment must be fast tracked; at the same time, risks emerging from land conversion and transmission delays need to be reduced."



V RAMU SARMA

THE 21-day Winter Session of Parliament which commenced on November 25 came to an end on Friday with very low productivity. The productivity of Lok Sabha is approximately 54.5% and that of Rajya Sabha is approximately 40%. But, the Congress says, "For us, Parliament's productivity was 100% because today the entire country knows what the Union Home Minister and Narendra Modi think about Dr Ambedkar."

What an analogy by senior Parliamentarians! No wonder then that people are fast losing respect for the political leaders. The way the parliament functioned, and the way the opposition parties led by Congress created ruckus in the temple of democracy make me feel that there is no need for any suffix or prefix like (Honourable) to be attached to the members. People had elected 543 Lok Sabha MPs so that they could discuss people's issues, the problems that the common man is facing in his constituency as well as the macro issues facing the nation. The parliament members are supposed to find solutions to those problems.

None of the opposition members had shown interest in raising the issues of agitating farmers, lack of basic infrastructural facilities in many parts of the country, rising prices, need to reduce and rationalise GST and other taxes or changes that need to be made in I-T rules to help the genuine taxpayer benefit — not those who evade taxes. No one was bothered about air and water pollution that is reaching dangerous proportions in many states in the country.

The Members of Parliament should have worked as much as they could for the country. But what did they do? The Congress leader Jairam Ramesh says, "We assess the Parliament's productivity by the intention of the government." This statement is as shameful as the face-off that took place outside the parliament on the penultimate day of the session. In the context of parliament, 'productivity' refers to the amount of legislative work accomplished during a session, measured by the number of bills passed, questions answered, and debates held, essentially indicating how effectively the parliament is functioning in passing laws and scrutinising government actions during a given period; a high-level of productivity means the parliament is efficiently completing its core duties with minimal disruptions.

But everything happened to the contrary in this session: Minimal work and maximum disruptions. Why? All the noise — theatrics, hungama

— was with an eye on the ensuing elections to Delhi Assembly before February-end. Before the dust of Delhi Assembly polls will settle down, the battle for Bihar Assembly will begin. Bihar Assembly elections are due before October. The opposition wants the poll pot to be kept boiling all the time and no wonder they are opposing the bill on 'One Nation One Election'. This is how the public money is being drained.

What did Parliament achieve? Face-off between the Congress and the ruling party, disruption of the proceedings of both houses from day one, physical attacks outside leading to bleeding injuries to two MPs, filing of FIR against LoP, complaint by a tribal MP that she was assaulted, BJP's charges of links of Sonia Gandhi with George Soros foundation, display of Congress ob-session of Adani, false narrative that the Constitution was under threat, display of buster by Priyanka on Palestine and Bangladesh, which does not serve any purpose either for the people of Waynad or country, and, last but not the least, the new found love for the legacy of Dr Ambedkar who was denied Bharat Ratna by the Congress.

This can be called 100 per cent productivity. It is shocking to hear such claims from senior leaders who worked as members. Does Jairam Ramesh hold the same analogy to 55 years of Congress party rule in the country? Members are sent to Parliament to fulfil the aspirations and needs of people. The voters are not bothered about what the intention of the government or the opposition is.

The session also displayed absolute arrogance of the Congress party and the Leader of Opposition when no empathy or sympathy was shown when fellow MPs were injured. MPs of different parties do defer on policies; they can shout at each other inside the Parliament or Assembly, debate issues and criticise opponents, but they should not treat their rivals as enemies at personal level. There should be no personal rivalry or animosity among lawmakers who are elected by the people for the people and are of the people as per the Constitution.

But instead, what was witnessed outside Parliament was jostling and pushing, which was nothing short of reckless rampage. The Leader of Opposition turned violent and did not have even a word of sympathy towards the injured. He went close to the septuagenarian MP Pratap Sarangi, enquiring, "Kya Hua?" But when told that the MP suffered a head injury, the LoP said, "I did not shove him, he pushed me," and walked away leaving everyone aghast.

The LoP is said to be shadowing PM and this is no way to behave when fellow MP is injured irrespective of which party he or she belongs to. On top of it, he told the media, "Ha hua Dhabka Mukki



In the eyes of public, the just concluded Parliament session is a washout, as their key issues are sidelined. But the Congress claims "100% productivity." None of the opposition members has shown interest in raising key issues facing the people. A high-level of productivity means Parliament is efficiently completing its core duties with minimal disruptions. But everything happened to the contrary in this session: Minimal work and maximum disruptions. The opposition merely wants the poll pot to be kept boiling all the time and no wonder they are opposing the bill on 'One Nation One Election.' This is how the public money is being drained. The BJP, too, needs to take the blame for the low productivity of Parliament



se kuch hota nahi hai." He further said as LoP it was his right to enter Parliament from that gate, but he was stopped, pushed and threatened. People have not elected MPs to see them lose their control.

Samajwadi Party, Priyanka Gandhi and Congress leaders keep saying BJP is Manuvadi party. Did anyone read Manu Smriti? My professor used to tell the students, "first understand the real meaning of the word you are using. Just don't use it because it sounds like a fancy word or someone else is using it. Don't fall prey to their ignorance." The term "Manuvad" is often used in a negative way in contemporary discourse particularly by the Congress party. LoP and the allies of INDIA bloc. I am sure none of them ever bothered to read the book.

Manusmriti is a discourse between Manu, the progenitor of man-kind, and a group of seers. It is dated between 200 BCE–200 CE. It is the first book on social science principles in the world. It covers a wide range of topics, including the creation of the world, time cycle, plants, politics, economics, crime control, administration, and social life. Is all this not part of administration?

THE ASIAN AGE

21 DECEMBER 2024

Indian democracy faces its darkest day in history

It was one of the darkest days in the history of India's Parliament as the elected representatives of the people pushed and shoved, jostled and scuffled on the premises of the temple of democracy. Two camps of MPs, diametrically opposed in their politics, were holding their respective protests in the premises of Parliament on December 19 when a furore triggered ugly scenes on the threshold of Parliament where the cramping of MPs led to injuries being sustained, some of the grievous kind.

Of course, the camps blamed each other though, truth to tell, they have together been guilty of progressively sullied the atmosphere of Indian democracy with their acrimony descending in most recent times to a rabid hate for each other. They have also destroyed the ambience of the Houses of Parliament by behaving like ruffians in a hall of MPs.

It would be pointless to seek a cause-and-effect sequencing in such a bizarre happening. The fact remains that far more serious injuries were sustained by two or three members of the ruling party who could only have been victims of the physical strength of their opponents. Ruling party members, including the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, may have been pushed to the ground or manhandled as they claimed.

Such scenes represent an unprecedented event in Parliament though physical violence and the weaponisation of handy objects like microphones and chairs and tables have been known to take place in State Assemblies. Why, even pepper sprays have been carried to cause harm to opponents in India's political dramas of the worst kind as legislators frequently display immaturity in the face of having to coexist when enclosed with their political rivals.

The irony is not complete in the fact that MPs were the ones who traded accusations after serving being guilty of dragging Indian politics to a low in which those opposed to their chosen points of view are seen as enemies and not fellow lawmakers. The image of the Indian politician is already low enough as they are seen as influence peddlers who are prone to aggrandising power and pelf at the cost of the very people who chose them as MPs.

Consider how ironic these events are as they come at a time when the best parliamentary values are supposed to have been imbibed in the 75 years since the writing of the Constitution. Its celebratory diamond jubilee will now be remembered for all the wrong reasons even as one of the most rancorous sessions of the Indian Parliament finally came to an inglorious close.

Police complaints have been filed and an FIR lodged against the Leader of the Opposition of the Lok Sabha under such sections as voluntary causing of grievous hurt, endangering life or personal safety of others, criminal intimidation, etc. in a jany of "offences", which just goes to show how things have come to such a pass that the very foundational principles of democracy could be under threat from elected representatives themselves. As democracy endured one of its worst days in the country, Madame Roland's death cry may be adapted to say — O Democracy! What crimes are committed in your name!

Can India beat US in tariff game?

US President-elect Donald Trump's warning to India about reciprocal taxes against India and New Delhi's not lower import duties on the American goods hints about the prospective US trade policy, which does not differentiate between ally and adversary.

The United States is India's largest export destination and it is one of the few countries in the world with which India has a trade surplus. In 2023-24, imports from the US stood at \$42.2 billion, while exports to the US reached \$77.52 billion. India's major exports to the US are IT, pharmaceutical products and textiles.

During Mr Trump's first term, he levied higher tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium, making India retaliate against almonds and apples from America. Going by his rhetoric, he could follow his same old model.

Even if India lowers its import duties in some sectors such as automobiles, it is unlikely for the US to match India's competitive advantage. However, there are sectors such as agriculture, seafood and poultry among others, where the US businesses have economies of scale and Indian farmers cannot match them.

If India opens its agricultural markets to the US, it could overwhelm the Indian farmers, whose average land holding is less than three acres compared to 464 acres in the US. It will also destroy Indian farmers affecting self-sufficiency in foodgrains.

Though the government uses tariffs as a measure to protect the local industry or farmers, it is at best short-term in nature. The real protection for the local industry lies in making the countries rather than farmers more competitive by helping them achieve economies of scale.

Overheads like the cost of land, official rent-seeking, and time and duration of litigation increase the Indian cost of production and need urgent attention. The Indian government should initiate reforms to make Indian businesses focus on their main line of business rather than make them turn into real estate investors. Hence, India must become competitive to beat Mr Trump in his own game.

THE ASIAN AGE

RAJESH MITTAL

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Farrukh Dhandy
Cabbages & Kings



"Shah Jahan was obsessed with his wife Is the Taj a monument to her life Or just to her death?"
A bitter life's breath
And an icon to the poor worker's strife?
Yes, they come to admire the Taj
For every tourist it is, by and large,
The tour guides present
To the history-seeking entourage."
— From Monkey Bath, by Bachchoo

Christmas seems to come earlier every year... amid the spirit of giving

In Britain in recent years, Christmas comes earlier and earlier. This isn't the consequence of the discovery of a new gospel proving that Jesus was born on the 25th of December but rather on the 24th of November or thereabouts. No, it's the retail trade cashing in on the sacred Christmas observance of the birth of the saviour to sell, sell, sell!

Though one is entitled to sneer at whole populations being induced to buy Christmas trees at uncompetitive costs, to avail of false "bargains" and to board soon-redundant presents, one must appreciate the fact that the consumerist celebration kills off the Scrooge in millions of people and turns them into fire-breathing gift-bringers. Then also there is the "plus" of people generously moved to donate to charities at Christmas — and that not only on or around December 25, but for weeks and months before.

Of course, retailers, small and large, have not only expanded Christmas like the folded flexible bellows of an accordion, through the first weeks of December, but have stretched it into November and, in one article I read, written by an Anglican priest, a wedding

Subhani



Air gets too toxic to breathe: Whose problem is it really?



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

Delhi's Central Pollution Board, the Committee for Air Quality Management (CAQM) for the National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas and the Central Government's Air Quality Early Warning System in Delhi have got into action as the national capital's Air Quality Index (AQI) moved into the "severe" category when it crossed the 400 mark — it was 433 on Tuesday — and invoked Stage 4 of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), shuffling from GRAP-3 to GRAP-4, which placed greater restrictions on construction and traffic movement of vehicles, especially those running on old petrol and diesel cars. Schools have been closed except for students in Class 10 and Class 12, and the hybrid mode — attending classes from home through the Internet — has been adopted. Doctors from Delhi's various hospitals have issued advisories to people about taking morning walks — that have been prohibited — and what kind of medicines those with hypertension should be taking. The other medical experts have warned about the long-term effects how even healthy people could become sick, and the rising cases of cancer because of pollution. It just is not about old people, people with co-morbidities, the very young, it is about healthy people of all age groups who are impacted by the air pollution levels. The days of severe AQI going into dangerous territory is supposed to be lasting from a few days to a fortnight, and the emergency conditions are supposed to recede. That it recurs every winter is

It is not enough for Delhiites to breathe a sigh of relief when the AQI comes down from 400 and more and hovers in the 300-plus or 200-plus range. Even if the pollution is moderate in the range of 101 to 199, it's not a healthy state.

1990s and the first decade of this century, and rightly so, is there not a need for a climate change awareness campaign at various levels? Do we not need a Greta Thunberg, the precocious Swedish schoolgirl with support from her parents, who became a vociferous spokesperson on the dangers of climate change. Climate-change denier and now US President-elect Donald Trump had dismissed her presence with his characteristic rude remarks. But what the world perhaps needs is a Greta Thunberg in every country and in every city. The climate crisis is not just the concern of environmental scientists and NGOs dealing with climate change. It is something that should concern everyone, irrespective of class and age and region. There is of course the need that the concern for climate, what it is, and how it is to be tackled, it should be on the top of the political agenda.

Many other cities in India may consider Delhi one of the most polluted cities in the world, and they may think that they are in a better place in Chandigarh, Dehradun, Lucknow, Bengaluru, Kolkata or Hyderabad. But every one of India's cities will grow larger and face the same problems as Delhi does today. There are lessons to be learnt from the Delhi ordeal. Young professionals want to move away from Delhi to places like Bengaluru, but they are moving from a worse

LETTERS SHAME ON GOVT!

The events in Parliament are making it look more like a theatre of the absurd than a place where decisions regarding the lives of 143 crores Indians are made. Obsessing about the past does no good. What concerns us more is the air we breathe, the cost of medical care and that of educating our children. The general public must not get pulled into the government-opposition tussle. Both sides are guilty. The ultimate irony is the need for a parliamentarian to be admitted to the ICU for a couple of cuts on the forehead, while thousands suffering from serious illness or injury are lying on the floors of the public hospitals for lack of beds!

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

GOLD IMPORT SURGE

THE RECENT SURGE in gold imports in India is driven by a confluence of factors. Gold's status as a hedge against inflation and a safe-haven asset has bolstered investment demand, including physical gold and financial instruments such as ETFs. The wedding season has also begun. Policy measures, including the reduction in customs duty from 10 per cent to six per cent in the 2024 Budget and preferential tariffs under trade agreements such as that with the UAE have further incentivised imports. The RBI's efforts to augment its gold reserves have also indirectly supported demand.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazratnagar, Jharkhand

POLICE AT FAULT

IT IS INDEED shocking that the shoddy of democracy has been violated by the irresponsible acts of leaders. Since both sides filed police complaints accusing each other nobody knows who is at fault. How can Delhi Police unilaterally register an FIR against Rahul Gandhi? It speaks volumes and hints at conspiracy allegedly hatched by the BJP against Mr Gandhi for his protests against home minister Amit Shah's remarks. Whatever be the modus operandi of the ruling party at the Centre, its political wisdom has gone missing as evident from the unfortunate incident in Parliament.

Arun Gupta
Kolkata

And rambling — though it probably

Was just an army cantonment bungalow. They say that early memories distort the size of things. I suppose David thought Goliath was a mighty mountain though

He dropped him with a pebble from a sling. That's another story, this one's about a Christmas memory. I have no doubt it has been subject to the distorting influences that a repeated tale is subject to — distortion will prevail

II My mum said for that Christmas she would bake Zeren and me each a gingerbread man. We promised, and in the kitchen, began

To knead the mixture and proceed to make Two gingerbread men. With black currant eyes and an icing grin They looked enticing on the baking tin. We were told we had to be patient when they went into the oven. In a while Mum pulled the baking tin out from the rack And noticed that one of them had a crack Oh horrors! Now she'd have to reconcile One of us to accept imperfection By persuading one of us the confection

III Would crumble as soon as we took a bite. In a flash the Judgement of Solomon

Occurred to Mum — there needn't just be one Cracked ginger man — that would lead to a fight So, she cracked the other whole one in two And offered us both the new-equal pair Since both were cracked this wouldn't be unfair She thought this was the wisest thing to do. We disagreed and started to howl And screamed and kicked our legs on the floor — And as we did our dad walked through the door. His enquiring features turned to a scowl "Exactly what the hell's going on here? Are these monsters bullying you my dear?"

IV Our Mum explained to him what had occurred We all could now see that her eyes were wet Our Dad was furious, I'll never forget His gathered brow. He spoke a single word: "Come!" he said gesturing to us to go With him. He put the biscuits on a plate He crushed the biscuits saying "Let's prepare Our ginger men for those who want them — where They'll be appreciated though they're crumbly." He flung them on the roof with a quick flick Saying "Kabootars, have a great picnic!"

Farrukh Dhandy's collected childhood memory stories in sonnet form have been published as Grannies, Grips and Growing up by Red River in India



FIRST COLUMN

UNLOCKING LIFE'S TRUE POTENTIAL

Embracing faith, cultivating humility and awakening spiritual awareness can elevate life



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

I am well and truly surprised that good people don't turn to God more actively than doing some rituals, going to a religious place participating in some festivals, etc. They probably are not realising what they are missing. God is ever so keen to take us in His team. He needs lots of us either to act as His 'nimitta' (instrument) as Arjuna was for a specific purpose or just be active mediums. Good people are best placed to be mediums for God's bounties to be given to other good people. They form the bulk of people, who support the working of the Creation. And they are amply rewarded for their 'karmas' (acts). For example, farmers are crucial for keeping humanity well-fed. Teachers are crucial for educating the masses.

Parents keep the Creation going by giving birth to children and then rearing them till they can be useful citizens. Doctors look after the health of people. Workers take the load of manual requirements of humanity. Good officers fulfil the administrative requirements of our societies. Priests enable us to be in contact with God. I can go on with policemen, shopkeepers, bankers, etc. They all benefit by doing so. Why aren't these actively pursuing a good connection with God? They can gain much more.

The first reason has to be a lack of faith due to widespread ignorance. The common man, even the educated class, is hopelessly unaware of all the benefits one can gain by taking shelter from God,



who owns everything. We get attracted to the richest, the most powerful, the very famous, etc., but ignore the real owner of all, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. To top it all, God controls everything. The richest normally try to accumulate more, and many have some money to give to charity, but God has everything to give; you just have to become deserving.

The second reason has to be the overinflated ego of practically everyone. It is hard to accept that God is too big to comprehend and we are too small to accept. But that is reality. By closing our eyes like a duck we don't do ourselves any favour. And we remain sitting ducks against 'karmaphalas', which surely manifest and cause havoc in the lives of all, barring a few, who have taken shelter in God. The third reason is keeping poor company.

Who do we like to spend time with? Those who criticise one and all and who can tell jokes of the kind you know. Public image is another handicap. Only the losers turn to God. We don't have to; we will manage. Surely, this management ends in painful death only. Devotees of God and their lives on a high and are assured of better birth also. Then spiritual activities do not enthrall; they appear so childish. We would rather be grown-ups and be subservient to fellow beings, who are likely to exploit us as much as possible. So we don't get started and lose out.

This article is an open invitation to fence sitters if they chance to read it. I will cite a few amazing benefits if one does that. There will be great cleaning of the self both internally and externally. Such are the powers of spiritual activities. One will become dutiful and most likely begin to live by dharma. One will not limit oneself just to knowing spiritual truths but will also implement them in life. If a painter knows how to paint and does not paint, what is he or she likely to gain? The Creation has been designed to smoothen the lives of devotees.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Philippines: The broken promise of democracy



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

The resurgence of the Marcoses, the entrenchment of the Aquinos, and the dominance of families like the Dutertes show the enduring grip of oligarchy



The 1987 Philippine Constitution, drafted in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution, was supposed to mark the dawn of a new democratic era. The ousting of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. after decades of corruption, repression, and dynastic rule, was a victory for the Filipino people, or so they were told. Yet, the Constitution, supposedly a tool for dismantling the oppressive old order, contains a glaring, unimplemented clause: Article II, Section 26, which bans political dynasties. Nearly four decades later, this promise remains a cruel joke, the prohibition nothing more than a symbol of a nation shackled by its feudal past. Political dynasties thrive unabated, and the Philippines remains trapped in a cycle of oligarchy, where power is passed down like a family heirloom, not earned through democratic means. The rise of Corason Aquino, the "hero" of People Power, has proven to be a double-edged sword.

While she restored democracy in name, she failed to eradicate the dynastic forces that had long plagued the country. Instead of dismantling the Marcos empire and the dynasties that thrived in its wake, Aquino's presidency paved the way for a new set of ruling families to stake their claim on the throne. The irony is staggering: Aquino, the symbol of resistance to Marcos, was unable to disarm the very forces that helped prop up the dictatorship. Her administration's failure to enact meaningful reform paved the way for the Marcos family's return to power, with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s rise in 2022 exposing the unyielding grip of dynastic politics, illuminating the eternal truth behind the words of José Rizal, a true revolutionary executed by the Spanish in Manila: "The Filipino is not a slave of the Spanish Government. He is a slave of his own people." The Marcoses, who plundered billions from the nation's coffers, are not the only ones to have manipulated the system to their advantage.

Under Cory Aquino, the promise of land reform was shattered, epitomised by the Mendiola Massacre of 1987, where farmers demanding land reform were gunned down. The Aquino family, despite their image as the champions of democracy, have blood on their hands, betraying the very

people they claim to defend. The hypocrisy of the political elite is staggering, with families like the Marcoses and the Aquinos using their histories of violence and corruption as stepping stones to further entrench their power. But the Aquino-Marcos rivalry is only the tip of the iceberg. In Mindanao, the Duterte family's hold on power pre-dates Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, with a history of death squad killings and iron-fisted rule. As mayor of Davao City, Duterte ruled with an iron fist, silencing dissent and using extrajudicial executions to rid the streets of perceived enemies.

His presidency, marked by a brutal war on drugs that left thousands dead, further entrenched the dynastic system, where political power is synonymous with violence and impunity. Duterte's rise to the highest office in the land was not a victory for the people, but for a political family that used populist rhetoric to cloak its real agenda: maintaining a stranglehold on power. The Macapagal-Arroyo family, meanwhile, turned corruption into an art form. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency was marred by scandal after scandal—from the "Hello Garci" election fraud to the NBN-ZTE broadband deal, which saw billions in kickbacks siphoned off to the ruling elite. Despite the overwhelming evidence of corruption, she escaped any lasting accountability, a reflection of the Philippines' toxic political culture where the powerful are above the law.

Like so many others, she found ways to use the machinery of the state to protect her interests. The brutality of the Philippines' political system is not just figurative. The 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, orchestrated by the Ampatuan clan, remains the deadliest attack on journalists in history. Fifty-eight people, including 32 journalists, were slaughtered in cold blood in a bid to eliminate electoral competition. And yet, despite the horrific nature of the crime, justice has been slow and incomplete, as political dynasties use their influence to shield themselves from the consequences of their actions. In regions like Cebu and Ilocos Norte, political dynasties such as the Osmeñas, Garcias, and Fariñas manipulate elections and use their wealth to maintain control, treating public office as their domain. This cycle of violence and impunity, where the ruling class prioritises their interests, extends to the economic realm, with families like the villagers growing their wealth through political power. The system persists due to cultural deference to family authority, weak institutions, and pervasive poverty, with voters often coerced into supporting the very dynasties that sustain their suffering.

Foreign powers, particularly the United States, have long been complicit in this system. During the Marcos era, the US provided crucial support to a regime known for its human rights abuses, all in the name of anti-communism. This foreign patronage emboldened the Marcoses and set a dangerous precedent for other dynasties, who continued to seek validation and support from foreign powers. The interplay between domestic power struggles and international interests further deepens the fractures within the Philippines, exacerbating the country's internal divisions.

The Philippines' educational system, which fails to foster critical thinking or civic engagement, ensures that the cycle of dynastic rule will continue. Schools produce citizens ill-equipped to challenge the status quo, while the media, often co-opted by powerful families, serves to protect the interests of the elite. Social media, too, has become a tool for dynasties to spread propaganda, rehabilitate their tarnished images, and silence critics.

The current political spectacle centred around Vice President Sara Duterte's public threats against President Marcos, is a stark reminder of how fragile the Philippines' democracy truly is. The alliance between the Marcoses and the Dutertes, forged during the 2022 election, is now on the brink of collapse. What once seemed like a partnership between the North and south's ruling classes has devolved into a bitter feud, exposing the cracks in a political system built on corruption, nepotism, and violence. This is not a battle for the people's interests, but a struggle for control between two families, each vying for supremacy in a system that has failed its citizens. This feud is not just political—it has geopolitical ramifications. Marcos' pivot towards the US and his opposition to China's claims in the South China Sea have reignited regional tensions, while Duterte's pro-China stance during his presidency deepened divides within the Filipino elite. This divergence in foreign policy has intensified the rift between the Marcos and Duterte families, as they seek to align themselves with opposing global powers. The Philippines, caught between these imperial rivalries, faces not only internal political decay but external pressures that threaten to destabilise the nation further. As the midterm elections approach, this dynastic battle threatens to unravel whatever semblance of governance remains. Marcos seeks to consolidate power, while Sara Duterte faces the looming threat of impeachment. Yet, the Duterte family's influence, particularly in Mindanao, ensures that this battle will not stay within the confines of parliament. The streets could erupt, worsening societal divides.

(The writer is a journalist and a policy analyst; views expressed are personal)



THE IRONY IS STAGGERING: AQUINO, THE SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE TO MARCOS, WAS UNABLE TO DISARM THE VERY FORCES THAT HELPED PROP UP THE DICTATORSHIP. HER ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE TO ENACT MEANINGFUL REFORM PAVED THE WAY FOR THE MARCOS FAMILY'S RETURN TO POWER

Patent risks: Key strategies for businesses amid rising litigation costs

Businesses today must adopt proactive strategies like Freedom-to-Operate searches and patent liability insurance to mitigate risks and protect their innovations

In November 2024, a US jury ruled in favour of Netlist, a company specialising in computer memory and storage solutions, ordering Samsung to pay \$118 million in damages for willfully infringing Netlist's patented technology. This follows an earlier verdict in April 2024, where another jury found Samsung guilty of similar patent infringements, awarding \$303 million to Netlist. Together, these penalties amount to \$421 million—an extraordinary sum that could destabilise even the most established organisations. In India, the Delhi High Court recently delivered a landmark judgment favouring the plaintiff, Antenna Inc., in a patent infringement case against Mobi Antenna Technologies.



AMIT SINGH

The court issued a permanent injunction against the defendant and ordered them to pay damages of USD 26.04 million (INR 216 crores) to compensate for the plaintiff's loss of profits due to the infringement. Protecting Intellectual Property: A recent American survey highlights the substantial financial commitment of research-based organisations in the pharmaceutical sector. The annual R&D budget in

this industry often runs into hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. The cost of developing a new drug ranges from \$314 million to \$4.46 billion, depending on the therapeutic area and assumptions used in data modeling. These figures emphasise the immense investments required in R&D, making intellectual property (IP) protection and preemptive strategies essential. In contrast, R&D expenditures in non-pharmaceutical sectors are generally lower. However, extensive patenting is increasingly common, posing risks for companies introducing new processes or products without adequate precautions. A company might unknowingly infringe on a competitor's patent, leading to unforeseen and costly litigation.

Tools to Mitigate Patent Litigation: Patent disputes can result in significant delays, financial losses, and reputational damage, even when unintentional. Escalating Costs of Patent Litigation: The median cost of litigating a patent lawsuit through trial ranges from \$600,000 for cases with less than \$1 million at stake to \$3.625 million for cases involving over \$25 million. Similar trends are observed in India, where litigation and settlements costs are substantial. Sometimes, defendants find themselves embroiled in patent litigation due to unintentional or inadvertent infringement. In such cases, the defendants are essentially victims, underscoring the need for safeguards to prevent unnecessary legal disputes.



Infringement Risks:

Patent Liability Insurance: One effective safeguard against the financial risks of unintended patent infringement is patent liability insurance. This insurance, provided by specialised firms, helps cover legal expenses and damages arising from unintentional infringement. While popular in several countries, its adoption is

steadily growing in India. Freedom-to-Operate (FTO): Another cost-effective tool to minimise patent infringement risks is a Freedom-to-Operate (FTO) search. This process evaluates whether a new product or process infringes on existing patents, enabling informed business decisions and reducing the likelihood of legal disputes. Many companies conduct FTO searches before initiating new R&D projects to mitigate financial and reputational risks. An FTO search involves analysing granted and pending patents to form a techno-legal opinion on whether a product, process, or service infringes existing IP rights. These searches can be conducted using free databases provided by intellectual property offices,

with directories available on the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) website. When Patents Block Freedom to Operate: If an FTO search reveals conflicting patents, companies have several options: 1. Licensing Agreements: Companies can negotiate to license or purchase patent rights to gain access to the necessary technology. 2. Patent Pools: Collaborative agreements among companies in the same technological field allow shared access to patents, resolving disputes and controlling costs, especially for essential products like medicines. 3. Designing Around: Companies can modify existing processes or products to avoid infringement.

Steps to Minimise Litigation Risks: Regardless of the strategy chosen, it is crucial for companies to address patent infringement risks early in the research and commercialization process. Proactive measures such as in-licensing, cross-licensing, patent pooling, and designing around can help avert future disputes. A systematic FTO search before launching a new product is indispensable for minimizing infringement risks. While an FTO search cannot completely eliminate the possibility of litigation due to limitations in patent databases and search expertise, it significantly reduces potential threats. (The writer is deputy controller of patents and designs, Kolkata; views are personal)

An abhorable practice

The SC's observation on witchcraft practices is a timely reminder that women still face humiliation under various pretexts

In a landmark observation, the Supreme Court of India recently described the victimisation of women under accusations of witchcraft as a 'blot on the constitutional spirit'. The case before the apex court, involving egregious acts of abuse and violence against women in Bihar's Champaran district, has brought the spotlight on the persistent issue of witch-hunting in the country. The court's remarks emphasise the urgent need to eradicate such practices that undermine the dignity, equality and human rights enshrined in the Constitution of India. The bench, comprising Justices C.T. Ravikumar and Sanjay Karol, was dealing with a petition concerning a disturbing incident that occurred in early 2020. Women were publicly assaulted, disrobed, and accused of witchcraft. One of the accused individuals, Lakshmi Devi, along with others, faced charges for these heinous acts. Reportedly there was police apathy towards the victim. The apex court expressed its shock and dismay at the brutality of the acts and the apparent indifference of the legal machinery.

Such incidents, the court observed, are a direct affront to the dignity and rights of women, particularly in rural areas where equality remains a distant goal. The court highlighted the role of superstition, patriarchy, and social control in perpetuating witch-hunting practices. It called for the eradication of these regressive beliefs, which often target vulnerable women such as widows and the elderly. Indeed, such practices stand in stark opposition to the scientific temper mandated by the Constitution. Unfortunately these are not isolated cases but are rampant in rural India. The Constitution of India guarantees justice, liberty, equality and dignity for all citizens. Practices like witch-hunting undermine these principles and perpetuate a culture of discrimination and violence against women. What is more shocking is the apathy of the government in such cases who are equal partners in crime. The court reiterated that the responsibility of investigating and adjudicating authorities is heightened in cases involving violations of human dignity. The Supreme Court also criticised the state for not challenging the High Court's non-speaking order, which granted a stay on the proceedings. The bench's observations underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to address witch-hunting. This includes strengthening laws to explicitly criminalise witch-hunting and ensuring stringent punishment for perpetrators. Besides, promoting scientific temper and educating communities about the illegality and immorality of witch-hunting. But most important is establishing support mechanisms for survivors, including legal aid, rehabilitation, and psychological counseling. The government machinery also needs to be sensitised in dealing with such cases. The Supreme Court's remarks serve as a clarion call to address the deep-seated issues of superstition and patriarchy that enable witch-hunting. The victimisation of women under such baseless allegations is not merely a social evil but a constitutional failure.



citizens. Practices like witch-hunting undermine these principles and perpetuate a culture of discrimination and violence against women. What is more shocking is the apathy of the government in such cases who are equal partners in crime. The court reiterated that the responsibility of investigating and adjudicating authorities is heightened in cases involving violations of human dignity. The Supreme Court also criticised the state for not challenging the High Court's non-speaking order, which granted a stay on the proceedings. The bench's observations underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to address witch-hunting. This includes strengthening laws to explicitly criminalise witch-hunting and ensuring stringent punishment for perpetrators. Besides, promoting scientific temper and educating communities about the illegality and immorality of witch-hunting. But most important is establishing support mechanisms for survivors, including legal aid, rehabilitation, and psychological counseling. The government machinery also needs to be sensitised in dealing with such cases. The Supreme Court's remarks serve as a clarion call to address the deep-seated issues of superstition and patriarchy that enable witch-hunting. The victimisation of women under such baseless allegations is not merely a social evil but a constitutional failure.

PICTALK



Elephants inside an enclosure at Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata

Revisiting the Places of Worship Act

The Places of Worship Act, 1991, was enacted to maintain the religious status of sites as of August 15, 1947 but there is misunderstandings about its purpose



PRAFULLA GORADIA

How the Places of Worship Act (1991) is being dealt with at present is due to many not being aware of how and why the Act came about. Evidently, the Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao (1991-96) in his heart of hearts was a staunch Hindu. He was anxious to contribute to help solving the then existing—or festering—problem at Ayodhya. Most developments that took place at the Janmasthan on December 6, 1992, spoke of Rao's silent participation in the cause of Ram Lalla.

The most clinching evidence of the Prime Minister's contribution was indicated by the facts when I left Ayodhya on that momentous day. It was 5:45 pm; all the three domes of the Babri edifice had been brought down. All the ten walls were still standing and so was the rest of the structure. Soon after we sat in our car to proceed to Lucknow, my companions and I heard on the transistor radio that the Uttar Pradesh government of then chief minister Kalyan Singh had been dismissed by the Centre, and Governor's rule imposed.

That meant whatever was done thereafter was the handwork directed by someone at the Centre. At the Centre, even the then home secretary Madhav Ghoshle is on record saying that he did not know a thing about what was happening and had learnt about it only through the radio and television. This author has not met nor knows anyone who has claimed that he has seen even a photograph of the edifice walls without their domes. At 10 pm that very night, PM Narasimha Rao addressed the nation on television, wherein he assured the people of India that he would rebuild the Babri Masjid as soon as possible. This gave the impression that the entire edifice had been destroyed. The walls were tall and thick as was the style of the architecture of the 16th century. The chabutras around the walls were also solid and tall, apart from being large. Even the domes, which had been the most vulnerable part of the structure,



took selected men of the Uttar Pradesh Public Works Department (PWD) to bring them down, an endeavour that began in the morning and lasted till 4:30 pm when the last dome fell. I came to know that they were men of the PWD, from two of the five photographers whose cameras had been smashed and they beaten up and left with bleeding faces. The photographers thought they were obliging the karsevaks, whereas for government servants, being photographed would have cost them their jobs.

A lady IPS officer who was second-in-command at Ayodhya on that day, in answer to my query told me later that the police had instructions not to intervene unless lives were in danger; presumably, not property. She assured me that there were 15,000 paramilitary personnel in readiness at Faizabad, just 4 km away. Incidentally, she added there were considerable numbers of bulldozers in the nearby vicinity, along with their operators. Evidently, all these preparations were deployed to see the end of the Babri edifice over the next 60 hours. Indeed, an enormous thing to accomplish, in such a short time. All this happened under Central rule. To restate, the Kalyan Singh government was nowhere in power after 5:45



EVIDENTLY, THESE AFGHANS HAD BROUGHT SOME ARCHITECTS WITH THEM, WHO BUILT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF BUILDINGS, INCLUDING MOSQUES

pm on December 6. It is only after being aware of these facts can one appreciate the need for the Places of Worship Act. PM Rao, being a Congressman, had to preserve his 'secular' image. The abovementioned legislation implies how much the Rao government cared to protect the character of every place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947. Ayodhya had to be the exception as it was then an object of litigation in the Supreme Court of India. Normally, while legislating, it is taken for granted that anything sub judice has its own rules. But Ayodhya was clearly brought under a provision of being excluded from the ambit of the Act, presumably because it was sub judice. Nevertheless, it was specifically kept out; in fact, it was a separate clause if the Act. Consequently, when being dealt with in the courts, never was Ayodhya, particularly the Janmasthan, mentioned even once in the context of the Places of Act. The thrust of this submission is that this act need not be taken seriously. What this statement means is that a legitimate difference must be made between genuine places of worship and those edifices or structures that are the outcome of dacoity. There are edifices that were either directly con-

verted from temples to mosques like the Adhai Din Ka Jhoda, about a furlong away from Ameer Sharif. Three temples were confined into one within 60 hours, or two-and-a-half days, so that the invader Mohammad Ghori would be able to pray there on his return from the decisive Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 AD.

There was no time to erase the Hindu structure. The pristine design has survived till this day. There are many such examples until the Lodi Dynasty conquered north India. Evidently, these Afghans had brought some architects with them, who built a significant number of buildings, including mosques. How can the courts refuse to hear and try a case when someone petitions against daylight dacoity of a temple, which is either converted immediately like the one described above in Ameer, or brought down and rebuilt like the Jama Masjid in Ahmedabad? Surely, dacoities can't be condoned out of hand? On the other hand, genuine cases of mosques having become victims of Hindu mischief can be kept out of the courts under the Places of Worship Act. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

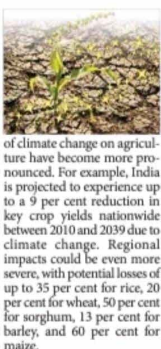
The key to tackling food security and climate change

Climate-Smart Agriculture emerges as a transformative solution, combining sustainable practices with strategies to mitigate emissions and secure food systems



HIMANSHU VERMA

The demand for food is steadily increasing due to dietary changes and the growing global population. Currently, approximately 690 million people or 8.9 per cent of the world's population suffer from hunger. By 2050, the world will need to produce nearly 70 per cent more food to sustain an estimated 9 billion people, which makes food security an increasingly critical challenge. Climate change further exacerbates this problem, intensifying the environmental impacts of food production. Agriculture, while essential, is also a major contributor to the climate crisis, generating between 19 per cent and 29 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Economic losses from natural disasters are also rising globally, and the agriculture sector is particularly vulnerable. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), disaster-affected nations experienced direct economic losses of \$2,908 billion between 1998 and 2017, with climate-related calamities accounting for 77 per cent of these losses. In recent years, the impacts



of climate change on agriculture have become more pronounced. For example, India is projected to experience up to a 9 per cent reduction in key crop yields nationwide between 2010 and 2039 due to climate change. Regional impacts could be even more severe, with potential losses of up to 35 per cent for rice, 20 per cent for wheat, 50 per cent for sorghum, 13 per cent for barley, and 60 per cent for maize. Climate change adversely affects food production and supply chains while accelerating the degradation of already fragile ecosystems. To counter these challenges, it is imperative to adopt Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices, which aim to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change on agriculture while sustainably enhancing productivity and income. CSA integrates sustainable agri-

cultural practices and rural development goals, contributing to broader objectives like better environmental management and hunger reduction, as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Climate-Smart Agriculture Practices in India: India is actively adopting Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices to combat climate change's impact on agriculture. These include conservation agriculture techniques like zero-tillage to boost yields and reduce emissions, agroforestry to enhance biodiversity and resilience, and precision farming technologies such as GPS and GIS to optimise resources. Water management strategies like drip irrigation improve efficiency, while efficient livestock management boosts revenue and product quality. Solar power is increasingly used for irrigation, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Practices such as crop diversification, rotation with legumes, and the cultivation of climate-resilient varieties enhance sustainability, while integrated pest management and crop residue management minimise chemical use and pollution, ensuring

long-term agricultural and environmental health. Challenges to Climate-Smart Agriculture in India: Despite its numerous benefits, the adoption of CSA practices in India faces several challenges. Climate Variability: Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and diminishing water resources threaten to lower crop productivity by 10-40 per cent by the end of the century. Rising sea levels, cyclones, and storm surges endanger agricultural lands, especially in regions like the Sundarbans, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. High Costs: Implementing CSA methods often involves significant financial investment, which can deter farmers. Policy and Regulatory Barriers: Inadequate policies and restrictive regulations hinder widespread CSA adoption. The adoption of climate-smart agriculture is no longer optional but an urgent necessity.

(The writer is Assistant Professor Agronomy, College of Agriculture & Environmental Technology, Sarangal University, Kichha, Uttarakhand; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OPPOSITION TARGETS AMIT SHAH

Madam — The Opposition claimed Home Minister Amit Shah had insulted B.R. Ambedkar. Accusing the Congress Party of opportunism, Shah charged then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with belittling Ambedkar, asserting that his resignation from the Cabinet would have no effect on the government. Shah also pointed out that when Ambedkar contested a Lok Sabha by-election in Bombay, the Congress not only fielded a candidate against him but Nehru personally campaigned to ensure Ambedkar's defeat. Amit Shah hammered home the point about Congress singing paeans to Ambedkar only after it suffered multiple drubbings in elections, remarking the party now opportunistically chanting, 'Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar... ita naam Bhagwan ka lete ho janno tak swarg mil jata.' The Opposition seized upon this admittedly poorly framed sentence to accuse Shah of insulting Ambedkar. Of course, this interpretation was far from the truth. Nevertheless, Shah's clumsy construction provided the Opposition with an opportunity to embarrass him. Shah's response during Tuesday's debate was a trenchant critique of the Congress Party. This frontal assault left Congress members squirming, with only feeble attempts to counter Shah's barbs. The Congress's lip service to Ambedkar continues to find few takers.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

DEBATE ON SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS

Madam — The proposal of holding simultaneous elections is fraught with a lack of clarity in its implementation and practicality for a country as vast and diverse as its expanse. The proposal has several loopholes, like midterm polls and the President's role, and there is a lack of consideration for regional parties as well. Primarily, the proposal fails to address how precisely the central government plans to hold simultaneous elec-

Revamp education system



The article 'From Kothari to NEP' presents a good analysis. No doubt, there is a conscious attempt made to undermine Indian education with long-term planning to subjugate the youth to be religiously oriented instead of scientifically and technologically excellent sections. The NEP has no provision to improve the standard of education and make it globally competitive. Still, the cream churned out migrants to countries abroad in search of fabulous pack-

ages and incentivised talent recognition. Medical colleges are growing in number, but the standard suffers due to insufficient expert teaching professionals, and focus has shifted to pecuniary aspects rather than imparting knowledge. Privatisation of education has its toll in terms of knowledge and employability, besides denying the aspiring poor its accessibility. The government coming up with programmes to start with skills to graduated youth is a clear example of this fact. The avaricious private players are producing marks without knowledge and degrees without employable skills. Astrology is a subject that could be learnt by anyone at any time and anywhere but need not be a part of the curriculum in university. Therefore, there is dire need to study the whole system and make education an objective one rather than a tool to hasten the process of communalisation.

A G Rajmohan | Rampur

tions for the nation's 96.88 crore voters at the same time, as such a gargantuan exercise will be practically challenging to execute considering India's demography. Also, conducting all the elections in the same year becomes a major federal issue because it would force current state legislatures to shorten or lengthen their terms to make the election dates coincide with the national deadline. The attempt to impose an artificial cycle of elections and restrict electoral choice compromises the spirit of democracy, which is a direct threat to the constitutional recognition of India as a democratic republic. A rushed and ill-conceived policy can produce unprecedented challenges to the polity of the nation.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

IMPOSE BAN ON FIRECRACKERS

Madam — In the recent verdict, the Supreme Court of India, instructed the Uttar Pradesh as well as the Haryana government to impose the blanket ban on the firecrackers in order to tackle the

menace of air pollution. Today, depleting air quality is among the biggest troubles for the majority of Indian cities. But the million-dollar question is, does such a blanket ban really work to control the air pollution problem in the Indian cities? Often the things that are banned officially were black-marketed unofficially. This is the actual reality of almost everything banned so far, be it crackers, liquor, or anything else. The extent of air pollution is so huge that even anti-pollution measures like Stage IV of GRAP failed to meet the very commitment. The behavioural changing approach is the need of the hour; more and more awareness has to be established in this regard along with more and more ecological improvement initiatives for tackling this very menace of depleting air quality. Let's us all walk the talk with respect to the circular economy and sustainable practices to improve nature in a real sense.

Kirti Hadhawani | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The Fed is as clueless as markets



JONATHAN LEVIN

In normal times, the conduct of monetary policy is a lot like driving a car through a thick fog of uncertainty. You have a general idea of where you're going, but you want to move slowly to avoid accidents. At the moment, it's more like driving while drunk and blindfolded — in a car with malfunctioning brakes. The most prudent move is to stop.

With its decision Wednesday, the Federal Reserve has now cut rates by 100 basis points to 4.25-4.5 per cent, appropriate adjustments given the meaningful moderation in inflation from the peaks of 2022. But nobody knows what comes next — and I mean nobody. The key feature of the Fed's latest economic projections was the uncertainty surrounding them. The median forecast on the Fed's rate-setting committee now projects that inflation progress will slow meaningfully in 2025, and that the central bank will cut rates just two more times by next December. But among the 19 Fed board members and Federal Reserve Bank presidents, 15 now say that the risks to their forecasts for core personal consumption expenditures (PCE) inflation data are skewed to the upside, the most since 2022. Fourteen said that their uncertainty about core PCE, the Fed's favoured inflation gauge, had increased since they last filled out the survey in September.

Why is everyone so uncertain all of a sudden? First, there's President-elect Donald Trump. Though Fed Chair Jerome Powell has been careful about opining on politics, Mr Trump's agenda introduces a raft of two-sided risks. His threat to place sweeping tariffs on America's trading partners could mechanically increase price levels. Yet, if we look to Mr Trump's first presidency, the trade war he unleashed prompted the Fed to cut rates in response to an upheaval in financial conditions and the prospect of reduced business investment.

Mr Powell brought to Wednesday's press conference details from 2018 Fed meetings that suggested looking past tariff-induced inflation. Yet this environment is clearly different from what existed pre-

pandemic in a variety of ways, with inflation expectations shaken by the past four years. Mr Trump has also promised to extend tax cuts enacted in 2017 and maybe add new ones, which could have the effect of further juicing economic growth and inflation — especially if they're deficit-funded. And he's threatened mass deportations of undocumented immigrants that could cut into the labour supply.

Second, there's the wobbly nature of the inflation data itself — a risk that Mr Powell played up. Asked if the uncertainty among officials was all about Mr Trump, he said that's not necessarily the case. The latest inflation readings had been far from pristine. The core personal consumption expenditures deflator rose by a too-high 0.3 per cent in each of September and October. Though the pace is likely to have cooled in November, the uptick is that realised inflation will almost certainly exceed the Fed's earlier 2024 projections. And recent experience suggests that upside inflation

surprises tend to be concentrated in the first quarter, despite attempts to compensate for such trends through seasonal adjustment. Overall, I suspect that Mr Powell emphasised these bumps and wiggles in the data partially to avoid too many Trump questions, but he's right that the data has been frustrating.

Thirdly, there's the uncertainty about how the interest rate backdrop is actually affecting the economy. Some members of the Fed's rate-setting committee have argued that the world has fundamentally changed in recent years, and that policy rates as they stand today may actually be close to the "neutral" rate — the setting that's neither stimulative nor restrictive but just right. As Mr Powell said Wednesday, "we're significantly closer to neutral" but also "still meaningfully restrictive" — whatever that word salad means.

Others think we might already be pulling into the neutral station. Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland President Beth Hammack, who registered the lone dis-

sent against Wednesday's rate cut, said this month that "we may not be too far from a neutral setting today." And Fed Governor Michelle Bowman said in November that "we may be closer to a neutral policy stance than we currently think." The upshot of all of this is that the Fed's best option is to put the car in park, and they've left the door open to doing just that. In his remarks Wednesday, Mr Powell said that the central bank is "at or near a point at which it will be appropriate to slow the pace of further adjustments." I don't think that of all of this necessarily means that rates will be suspended here indefinitely. Remember: There's a scenario in which the Trump agenda could ultimately precipitate an economic slowdown and rate cuts. It all depends on which campaign promises he keeps. All we know is that we don't know enough, and Mr Powell himself is as clueless as many in markets.

Bloomberg



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Rajya Sabha's tone and temper



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Members of Parliament (MPs) in the INDIA bloc on December 10 moved an unprecedented resolution — to impeach the vice-president and chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Jagdeep Dhankhar. As both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha had to pass the motion, and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has a majority in both Houses, defeat was certain. The notice has now been dismissed by the deputy chairman. So, despite the full knowledge that it would not go through, why did the Opposition press ahead with it?

First, let us be clear. A vice-president and Rajya Sabha chairman cannot be impeached because his manner upsets the Opposition. Mr Dhankhar can be brusque and loses no opportunity to make a point, legal and political. In August, Samajwadi Party (SP) MP Jaya Bachchan objected to his "tone", to which the chairman said: "Don't school me... You may be anybody, you may be a celebrity, but you've to maintain the decorum." Outside the Parliament House, she said it was "a most humiliating experience". But colleagues in the Opposition, including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), were clear that should the SP make these grounds to impeach the chairman, it would not get their support.

And rile them as it may, injured egos cannot be grounds for the Opposition to justify a move for his

impeachment. Nor were they trying to make a case on that basis. Their argument was "You don't let us speak". The Opposition has moved more than 40 motions under Rule 267 (equivalent to the adjournment motion in the Lok Sabha, demanding all other matters be suspended to discuss the extant motion, followed by voting if necessary). Mr Dhankhar has not accepted even one. In a ruling he said procedural failure in adjournments motions was the reason for their rejection. There was no bias.

Opposition leaders say his frequent interruptions break their train of thought and allow Treasury benches to jeer. At a meeting of the business advisory committee, which decides the time allotted to discussions, a Bill saw agreement for a three-hour discussion — "two hours for the Bill, one hour for the chairman", quipped a member of the Opposition. But impeachment because the chairman likes to hear the sound of his own voice?

Then there is the matter of suspending members. If one repeatedly interrupts proceedings, one has to be suspended. No argument. The suspension, according to rules, remains in place "for a period not exceeding the remainder of the session". However, several MPs have remained suspended for far longer — Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Sanjay Singh was suspended from July 2023 to June 2024. Everything the Rajya Sabha does is a precedent for Councils and Assemblies in states. So, there is nothing to prevent a presiding officer in a state legislature from suspending Opposition members for months, even years — because the chairman of the Rajya Sabha has done it.

These are worrying but hardly grounds for impeachment. And though the Opposition believes he is unfair and partisan, Mr Dhankhar's legal training teaches him how to navigate choppy waters.

In his home state of Rajasthan, he

is well known as a criminal lawyer. He started practice in the Rajasthan High Court and became the youngest president of the Rajasthan High Court Bar Association. When the Jat agitation was on in the state, he was the one who intervened to fight the scores of legal cases against Jats by the governments in both Haryana and Rajasthan. He was one of Salman Khan's lawyers in the controversial blackbuck hunting case in Jodhpur.

His commitment to public service is unquestionable. He was in the Congress (MLA from Kishangarh, Rajasthan, from 1993 to 1998); Janata Dal (MP when V P Singh was Prime Minister, a position he got because of the strong recommendation from the Jat leader from Haryana, Devi Lal); and minister for parliamentary affairs during the short-lived Chandrasekhar government (1990-91). One of his mentors in the BJP, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, too was vice-president.

His affiliation with the Bharatiya Janata Party came with his support (from behind the scenes) for controversial former RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) activist Swami Aseemanand, who was charged in the conspiracy that led to a bomb blast in the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in 2007 but was later acquitted. A few members of the RSS and Vishwa Hindu Parishad were accused in this case and at least two were convicted and awarded life imprisonment in 2017. Mr Dhankhar helped Union minister Bhupendra Yadav fight the case. That's why in the Rajya Sabha he described himself as an "Ekdhanya in the RSS for 25 years".

Mr Dhankhar once observed at a felicitation function in Jaipur after he became vice-president: "I have learnt my magic at the feet of Taw Devi Lal and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat."

Impeachment will not happen. But only magic can dissipate the current phase of bitterness between the government and Opposition in the Rajya Sabha.

When Bhagwat blows the whistle

When the RSS Sarsanghchalak is calling for a halt to the rash of 'masjids built over mandirs' claims, it could stem from the realisation that it will be impossible for the BJP government to maintain order if the issue spirals out of control

I a crow sits on top of a temple, can it become an eagle? Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Sarsanghchalak (chief) Mohan Bhagwat asked in a speech on Thursday as part of the Sanjeevan Yashwantham series in Pune. He also brought back the Sangh's ambition that India should rise as a vishwaguru, or teacher to the world. This is something the Modi government and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have stopped saying lately. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is now evangelising vishwamitra (friend to the world).

While these statements sound merely rhetorical, they aren't. These were important flourishes in what appears to be a determined effort to shift the current discourse on communal relations in the country, give a sermon to the BJP and its vast support base — especially in the Hindu heartland, which is seeing a rash of "masjids built over mandirs" claims, Sambhal and Ajmer Sharif being the latest. Since the Supreme Court has now called time-out on all these, and is hearing the old challenge to the Places of Worship Act, 1991, it might even be seen as a cue to the Court.

When even the sarsanghchalak is calling a halt to such activity and activism, you have to wake up and pay attention, whether you are a follower or a critic of the BJP. In an unambiguous speech, he called out wannabe Hindu leaders, saying that some people think that by raising such (temple-mosque) issues, they can become Hindu leaders. That's like a crow sitting atop a temple hoping to become an eagle.

The return to the vishwaguru aspiration is also rooted in the same sermon, India did not become a nation because of conquest, commonality of language, culture or faith, or even shared strategic interest. India became a nation through its unique ancient ideology and *samveshi sanskriti* (syncretic culture). We saw everybody as our own. Unity doesn't mean homogenising or destroying this diversity. "We used to say unity in diversity, now we must start

believing diversity is our unity."

He suggested that India try a little experiment by eschewing all issues that create enmity or revive the old suspicions. This experiment would demonstrate to the world that we can all live peacefully. This also answers his point about being a vishwaguru. Only if we can prove this to the world, can we become the natural vishwaguru.

While the secular and political parties still seem to be analysing what he said, surprisingly — or maybe not so surprisingly — criticism has come from the hard right, especially on social media. Many have claimed

that he's lost his mind or that he's presuming too much by thinking he can speak for all Hindus. And that just because he's calling a halt to the mandir-masjid issues, it doesn't mean people are going to stop, as this is a long-awaited quest for justice for all the "awful things done in the Hindu during centuries of Muslim rule by various dynasties".

This will face a test soon enough when we see what response the Modi government gives to the Supreme Court on the Places of Worship Act. Will it defend the Act, stand against it, as much of its support base seems to be doing, or maintain ambiguity. That will be a test of how seriously the sarsanghchalak is taken now. His statement is quite significant and detailed. He's taken you back to the time of Muslim rule, and very significantly, he says that a process of assimilation was going on, and then Aurangzeb came, and ruined it.

Then, he says that in 1857, a *maulvi* and a *sant* had decided to give the Ram Mandir to the Hindus and called for a ban on cow slaughter. That was all. But the British got alarmed by that unity and divided us. This finally led to the creation of Pakistan. We can't let somebody create similar "gudbadi" (mischief) again.

This is actually a piece of what he had said at an RSS office-bearers' training camp in Nagpur on June 13, 2022. He had said that we should be looking for a shilling under every mosque. Now, it's evident



SHEKHAR GUPTA

NATIONAL INTEREST

Entertainment's history & geography

EYE CULTURE

VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

Nikhil Advani's *Freedom at Midnight* (Sony LIV), based on Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's eponymous book, is a gripping watch. It takes you through the arguments, the highs and the lows, that took place over the months and years preceding the partition of India. It tells you more clearly than ever why the cleaving of India, however abhorrent it was to our founding fathers, was an imperative by the time India got its freedom. For instance, did you know that riots did not happen because of Partition? They were, in fact, engineered to force both the Indian National Congress and the British, who were eager to exit, into dividing up the country on religious lines. It worked and led to more riots in the North, where Punjab was broken into two, and in the East, where Bengal went through the same trauma.

It is a joy to watch past and contemporary history dramatised so well. And many creators are doing it — for example, Shiv Rawail's *The Railway Men* about an episode on the "night of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy" in 1984, and Anubhav Sinha's *CRJ4* on the Kandahar hijack in 1999, both on Netflix. There are many more in the making. Roy Kapur Films and UK-based wip are putting together a show based on William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*. Applause Entertainment is producing a show

based on Ramachandra Guha's *Gandhi Before India and Gandhi — The Years that Changed the World*. The Hansal Mehta-directed show will star Sam's Pratik Dandia in the lead.

Much of this action on historical raises two big questions. One, how do writers create a screenplay and dialogues out of moments in history? What is the brief when there is a published book? "My brief is, just internalise the book and imagine a story," says Danish Khan, executive vice-president and business head at Sony LIV and Studio Next at Sony Pictures Entertainment. Sony LIV has been focusing on "core shows", many of which have meant digging into books and contemporary history. There is Hansal Mehta's *Scam 1992*, based on Sucheta Dalal and Debashish Basu's book on the Harshad Mehta scam and Tuskar Hirani's *Scam 2003*, "inspired" by Sanjay Singh's book on Abdul Karim Telgi's stamp paper scam. There is also the biographical story of India's journey into space and as a nuclear power with Vikram Sarabhai and Homi Bhabha in *Abhay Panna's Rocket Boys*.

"We try to bring as much authenticity as we can get, without diluting the entertainment portion. Ultimately, people are there for the drama, not a documentary series. The difference between the two is that in a drama everyone has to be entertaining," says Khan.

This brings this to the second question that watching this steady stream of contemporary history shows brings. Since history is being rewritten and opinions vary so hugely,

how does one avoid offending the multitudes dying to take offence? For instance, *CRJ4* raised hackles for showing, accurately, that the terrorists were codenamed after Hindu gods. The series is inspired by *Flight Into Fear*, a book by Devi Sharan, the captain who flew that plane, and journalist Srinjoy Chowdhury, which was published in 2000.

If a show or film is inspired by or based on a book or a piece of research that has already been published and has been around for some time, anyone taking offence has little legal recourse. Or if it is a biopic based on limited people, like Rakesh Omkar Singh Mehta's *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) or Omung Kumar's *Mary Kom* (2014). The other way to protect a creative piece of work is self-censorship. It is being widely used these days. In many historical shows, chunks of facts, however accurate they are, are simply being dropped from the narrative to avoid controversy.

In the 1980s and '90s, it was the rare show on Doordarshan — such as *Bharat Ek Khoj*, *Tamas*, and *Buniyad* — that gave us history in a way that was fun to watch. For now, I am happy to celebrate the fact that there is so much of contemporary history to be absorbed in fiction form. The ideal next step would be making reels out of key moments and pivots so that these shows and their authenticity reach more people, especially those who depend on the fraudulent "WhatsApp University" for their understanding of history.

<https://x.com/vanitikohlk>

A bird that symbolises a nation



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

The bald eagle has long been an American ideal — freedom, resilience, and strength. It first appeared on the Great Seal of the United States in 1782, a decision by the founding fathers that elevated the bird to a symbol of national pride. Despite its lofty cultural status, it remained a national symbol. No law had ever formally named the bald eagle as the national bird. Well, that is about to change.

After nearly 250 years as a soaring symbol, the bald eagle is finally getting its official title. The US Congress has passed a bipartisan bill to formally designate the bald eagle as the national bird. The legislation, which gained approval from both the House and Senate on December 16 now waits for President Joe Biden's signature to seal the deal. This new legislation comes at a historic moment, emphasising not only the

eagle's national importance but also its enduring presence across North America and its spiritual significance for its indigenous peoples.

The Bill, introduced by Representatives Brad Finstad (R-MN) and Angie Craig (D-MN), was championed by passionate advocates, including Preston Cook of the National Eagle Center in Wabasha, Minnesota.

The bald eagle's name comes from the word "piebald", which means a place of black and white patches. It's the largest raptor in North America, with a wingspan of 7 to 8 feet. The bald eagle, way back in history, symbolised the new State taking its place among other sovereign powers. Over time, it has come to represent vigilance, perseverance, and justice; the symbol of peace and a deterrent to war; and, for the American nation, a symbol of self-reliance and virtue.

The bald eagle's role as a national symbol is linked to its 1782 landing on the Great Seal of the United States. Shortly after the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress gave Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams the job of designing an official seal for the new nation. However, the three founding fathers failed to come up with a design that the Congress approved, as did two

later committees tasked with the job.

In mid-June 1782, the work of all three committees was handed over to Charles Thomson, the secretary of Congress. Thomson chose what he thought were the best elements of the various designs and made the eagle — which had been introduced by artistically inclined Pennsylvania lawyer William Barton in a design submitted by the third committee — more prominent. Thomson also recommended the change of the white eagle used in Barton's design be replaced with an American bald eagle, and Congress adopted this design on June 20, 1782. (Contrary to legend, there's no evidence that Ben Franklin protested to Congress about the choice of the bald eagle. He lobbied for the turkey, although in 1784 letter to his daughter, he did label the bald eagle "a bird of bad moral character".)

As the design went on to appear on official documents, currency, flags, public buildings and other government-related items, the bald eagle became an American icon. Despite its symbolic significance, America's majestic national bird has faced a real-life threat of extinction. In the late-1800s, the country was home to 100,000 nesting bald eagles, but the number soon dwindled due to such fac-

tors as habitat destruction and hunting. In 1940, Congress passed the Bald Eagle Protection Act, making it illegal to possess, kill or sell the birds. A new threat arose when they began eating prey contaminated with DDT, a pesticide that came into wide use following World War II. In the 1960s, there were only around 400 breeding pairs left in the continental US, and in 1978, the bald eagle was put on the endangered species list. Thanks to federal protections as well as regulations involving DDT, the bald eagle population had recovered by 1996, leading to its status being changed from endangered to threatened. By 2007, it was completely removed from the list.

The bald eagle is currently on the back of the quarter coin of the bald eagle. It is also the dominant visual of the Presidential and Supreme Court seals. The bald eagle has appeared in a variety of comic books, ranging from *Superman* and *Super Girl* to *Captain America*. On July 20, 1969, the crew of Apollo 11 landed their lunar module "Eagle" on the surface of the moon. They called the module the "Eagle", as their insignia was a bald eagle landing on the moon with an olive branch. No bird could have flown any higher.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Two steps forward, one step back

Bilateral exchanges between India and China have regularised. However, Chinese actions appear to have driven Indian expectations of a peaceful boundary resolution to an all-time low



JABIN T JACOB

WHILE INDIAN STATEMENTS on the bilateral relationship with China are exercises in brevity, Chinese statements are more expansive by comparison. Taken together, however, they provide a picture of how the relationship is evaluated by each side. With the 23rd meeting of the Special Representatives (SRs) on the India-China boundary question concluding in Beijing earlier this week, bilateral exchanges at the highest levels might have gotten closer to regular service but the meeting also highlights continuing differences.

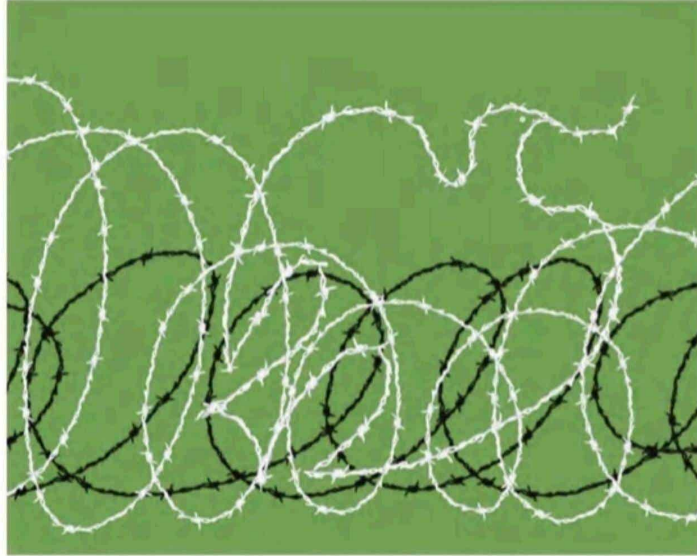
Comparing the six statements on SR meetings that have come out (three from each country) since the first "informal summit" between Indian Prime Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in 2018 – the 21st (in Chengdu, November 2018), the 22nd (in New Delhi, December 2019) and the latest one – it is evident that the Indian side has increasingly weak expectations of the relationship.

In its statement on the latest meeting, the Indian side specifically referenced the "frictions (that) had emerged... in 2020" and appeared keen to underline the decisions of the new patrolling arrangement and conclusion of the disengagement process as well as separate developments such as the "resumption of the Kalash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade". The Chinese too, noted the latter point but otherwise merely "positively evaluated the solutions reached by the two countries on border-related issues".

While the latest Indian statement stressed the need "to use, coordinate and guide the relevant diplomatic and military mechanisms" to "maintain peace and tranquillity on the border and advance effective border management", there was no talk any longer about specifically "promot[ing] exchanges and communication between the border personnel", reflecting perhaps, the desire to reduce direct contact between the actual troops on the ground as well as the reality of no-patrolling buffer zones in some areas along the LAC.

As in 2021, so also in their latest statement, the Chinese described a six-point consensus that the Indians did not acknowledge as such. While past Indian statements have described talks as "constructive and forward-looking" the latest talked instead about "resolv[ing] to inject more vitality into this process".

Oddly, however, the Indian SR statement talks about "seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for the settlement of the boundary question" even though such a framework already exists in the form of bilateral treaties, particularly, the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question. The Chinese references to the 2005 Agreement in its latest statement as well as in the last one obviously do not hold much weight given how they have repeatedly violated it. India, by contrast, has displayed a reluctance to refer directly to extant legal agreements and has – like the



C R Sasikumar

Chinese – preferred to reference instead the "guidance", "directions" or "decision" of meetings between Modi and Xi.

The danger now exists – as was the case post-Doklam in 2017 – that the Indian government could once again take its foot off the gas pedal of sustained political, diplomatic, military and economic pressure on China in order to achieve short-term interests. While another round of "informal summit" is hopefully out of the question, formal exchanges also need to be carefully calibrated in terms of their frequency, scope and deliverables.

Consider "the imperative of a diplomatic effort to defuse these heightened tensions and restore peace and tranquillity" that External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in his statement to Parliament earlier this month said was his government's effort following the 2020 transgressions. Why defusing tensions and the need to restore peace is always an Indian "imperative" but not a Chinese one is a question the Indian government has yet to answer. Instead, Indian diplomacy on China has for some time swung between extremes – either pomp and ceremony signifying little or a rather masochistic thrill in simply undergoing the ragda (Hindi slang for pointless grind, often as punishment) of endless talks as a way of proving one's diplomatic chops rather than actually focusing on the actual outcome and its longer-term implications.

And the outcome – even as many on the Indian side crow about strategic patience and resolve having paid dividends in the form of the disengagement process underway in eastern Ladakh – is simply that the Chinese

The danger now exists – as was the case post-Doklam in 2017 – that the Indian government could once again take its foot off the gas pedal of sustained political, diplomatic, military and economic pressure on China in order to achieve short-term interests. While another round of "informal summit" is hopefully out of the question, formal exchanges also need to be carefully calibrated in terms of their frequency, scope and deliverables.

have driven down Indian expectations of a peaceful boundary resolution to an all-time low given that the problem of de-escalation has to be dealt with first. In essence, then, it is the Chinese that have shown strategic patience and resolve having forced the Indians to back down from strong positions, even if these were morally and politically justifiable ones. It is quite likely that de-escalation will now proceed even more slowly than disengagement did, if it proceeds at all.

Given that India's lack of proactive, like-for-like responses to China's 2020 violations of bilateral agreements on the LAC is now clear, Beijing can perhaps breathe a little easier that the front with India is not likely to pose a major threat if China were to concentrate on its other fronts with active territorial disputes. For China then, its 2020 action and the current disengagement process is effectively a case of two steps forward, one step back, and one step gained.

This reality might draw even more pressure from the Americans under Donald Trump – now stronger and more determined to follow through with his threats to adversaries and friends alike – for New Delhi to get with the larger American approach to China instead. It also risks confirming for India's other partners similarly involved in long-standing tensions with China that New Delhi cannot be expected to intervene usefully in order to reduce Chinese pressure on them.

The writer is associate professor, Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, and director, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The politicians who have applauded Gisele Pelicot must now make good on her demands for change by ensuring justice for other women and addressing the culture that enables such crimes."

— THE GUARDIAN

Debate, without demonising

Opposition ruckus in Parliament over Ambedkar is uncalled for. Political class must treat national heroes with respect even while disagreeing



RAM RAJYA RAM MADHAV

THE POLITICALLY-MOTIVATED protests of the Congress Party over Home Minister Amit Shah's statement in Rajya Sabha, that led to a scuffle and hospitalisation of a couple of MPs, are most unfortunate. While addressing the Congress Party members in the House, Shah said: "Nowadays it is fashionable (for the Opposition) to chant Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar... Had god's name been invoked so many times you would have attained heaven for seven lives. We are happy that you invoke Ambedkar's name. Invoke it hundred times more but let me reveal what your true opinion about Ambedkar was. Why was Ambedkar forced to resign from the first cabinet of the country? Ambedkar had said that he was unhappy about the treatment meted out to SCs and STs, he was in disagreement with the government's foreign policy, with Article 370. Hence, he wanted to leave. B C Roy wrote a letter expressing concern over Ambedkar and Rajaji leaving the cabinet. Jawaharlal Nehru replied that Rajaji's departure could cause some damage, but the cabinet won't be weakened by the exit of Ambedkar. That is your thinking (about Ambedkar). How fair is it to invoke the name of someone just for votes whom you oppose?"

He reminded the Congress leadership about its refusal to build a memorial for B R Ambedkar at his birthplace in Mhow in Madhya Pradesh on the spurious argument that personal memorials should be built using private resources. "Were not so many memorials (of Congress leaders) built all over?" he questioned. He told the House that the BJP government had built memorials for Ambedkar at Mhow, London, Delhi, Nagpur, and Mumbai, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi described as "punch teeth" – five sacred places associated with Ambedkar.

Where is any insult to Ambedkar in this? Shah's intention was to expose the duplicity of the Congress Party. His comment about heaven was not for the admirers of Ambedkar, but for parties like the Congress that view Ambedkar just as an instrument for garnering votes. The reality is that there were no protests from the Congress Party during the 90-minute speech of Shah. Only after several hours, as though at the instigation of someone, the Congress and its allies started protesting. Clearly, it was not any real sentiment of hurt, but a political afterthought.

Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Ambedkar and Savarkar shouldn't be treated as the property of any one group or party. They are our national heroes. They did not always agree with each other. Gandhi wrote in one of his last statements that the Congress should not be allowed to become an instrument for power and it should be disbanded. Ambedkar was a lifelong critic of Congress and said at one point

that he would prefer suicide to joining that party. Savarkar too had his disagreements with Gandhi's politics. Yet, they always demonstrated utmost maturity. It was Gandhi who told Nehru to include Opposition leaders like Ambedkar, Rajagopalachari and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee in the interim government of 1946. Savarkar invited Gandhi to Ratnagiri in 1934 and both held day-long discussions. Beyond their political differences lay their great contributions to the nation, its freedom and reconstruction.

The Opposition also demonstrated its immaturity through a futile attempt of cornering the ruling party on what scholar Shashi Shekhar Sharma called the "imagined manuvad". None of those waving copies of Manusmriti would have read it. But they were sure did not read Ambedkar fully either. It is nobody's case to insist that a code written several centuries ago should be considered appropriate in this age. But to identify one party or a group as Manuvadis betrays intellectual bankruptcy.

Several codes, including Manusmriti, existed in ancient India. But none of them were made mandatory by any ruler. They were largely moral codes. There were some elements in those that outlived their purpose. Ambedkar fought against those regressive elements by symbolically burning down Manusmriti at a public event in 1927. But he was not blind to certain valuable elements in those texts. Speaking in the Constituent Assembly on the Hindu Code Bill on February 24, 1949, Ambedkar said that Manu and Yagnavalkya "rank the highest among 137 who had tried their hands in framing smritis", reminding the House that those smritis had made daughters entitled to one-fourth share of the family inheritance. However, the British government had ruled that the customs overruled texts. Ambedkar remarked that "it has destroyed the efficacy of the texts". Complaining that the decision made it impossible for the judiciary to examine what laws were laid out by "our rishis and our smritikars", Ambedkar ruled that "if the privy council had not given that decision", "some lawyer or a judge would have unearthed this text of Yagnavalkya and Manusmriti, and women today would have been enjoying, if not more, at least one-fourth of the share of their property". On a couple of later occasions too, Ambedkar stated that he had used Manusmriti for issues like caste determination and inheritance rights.

It is not unusual that great leaders are subjected to scrutiny and criticism. Bismarck was hailed as the greatest unifier in German history, the "Iron Chancellor". Today, his legacy is both respected and critically examined. Abraham Lincoln is considered the greatest American president in history. Yet, he also endures criticism for using racist language and supporting Black voting rights very late in life. In the UK, Winston Churchill is regarded as the national saviour. But his complex history is a subject of great debate and criticism.

Can our political class imbibe that maturity about treating national heroes with respect while agreeing to have constructive differences of opinion, without deification or demonisation?

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



JEFFREY DROPE AND MUKESH KEJRIWAL

A smoker check

Higher GST on tobacco can improve societal health, revenues

IMAGINE A BK, vibrant joint family filled with young, ambitious members, who dream of education, better opportunities, and a healthy life. The family head prioritises essential needs like food, clothing, education, health and life insurance to safeguard their future. To afford these, he would naturally cut back on non-essential or harmful expenses.

Interestingly, this common-sense approach is exactly what the Group of Ministers (GoM), set up by the GST Council, has proposed for the country's tax structure. It has recommended a major revision of taxes, aligning them more closely with the critical and essential priorities of the common person. Essential items like bottled water, bicycles, and exercise books will see reduced levies. Simultaneously, there is momentum to reduce the GST on health and life insurance premiums, making these essential services more affordable. High-value luxury goods, including tobacco products, will face higher GST rates.

Just as a family prioritises investments for the well-being of its members, this proposal reflects a national vision for a healthier, more equitable India.

Using tobacco products like cigarettes, bidis and gutka kills about half of the people who use them and takes 11 years off a life on average. In India, tobacco kills nearly 13 million people each year and makes millions more sick. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent families torn apart and enormous societal costs in terms of lost pro-

ductivity and healthcare burdens.

However, there is a proven way to reduce this needless death and disease – taxation. Raising taxes on tobacco products to increase their prices is the single most effective policy to reduce consumption. Higher prices discourage people from starting, encourage current users to quit, and prevent relapse among former users. This is particularly true for young people, who are highly price-sensitive. Many smokers would quit, many young people would never start, and hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved even in the short term. To add another big win, because consumption declines disproportionately less compared to the tax increase, these tax increases will lead to substantially higher tax revenues, which can be used to support health, education, and other policies that promote societal well-being. And because lower-income people are more responsive to price, they are more likely to quit or consume less, and the benefits will go more to them. In other words, taxing tobacco products is a highly progressive policy.

In this context, the proposal to place tobacco products in a higher slab of the GST at 35 per cent is an excellent policy for both public and fiscal health. It will also help to correct a somewhat rocky recent path for tobacco tax policies in India that began well when the GST was introduced.

The Economics for Health programme at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health evaluates countries' tobacco

tax policies biennially on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being the top score. It evaluates the overall price, the tax share of price, the change in affordability, and the tax structure. India's overall score in the latest edition was 1.5 out of 5, which was below the global average of 1.99. India's tax share of prices of all the major tobacco products falls significantly short of the WHO's recommended minimum of 75 per cent.

India continues to struggle on both tax structure and change in affordability. Like many of its South Asian neighbours, India maintains a tiered structure wherein excise taxes are lower on some brands. This means that when taxes and prices increase, there remain cheaper, similar products to which users can switch. Furthermore, bidders have much lower or even no tax and are therefore very inexpensive. Because of both the problematic tax structure and the lack of regular, significant tax increases, from 2016 to 2022, tobacco products like cigarettes, bidis and chewing tobacco products have become more affordable on average.

For India to maximise the health and fiscal potential of tobacco taxes, it is necessary to improve on several things. In brief, India needs a unified tax structure – the same rate applied per cigarette no matter the brand, price, or other characteristic – that relies more on specific excise taxes and is adjusted upward annually more than the combination of inflation and income growth. The government must

also consider how to regulate and tax bidders, the other major smoked tobacco product, more effectively, and eventually smokeless products, too.

Just as every family must balance its books wisely, so too must a nation. India is on the right track with the proposed increase in the GST for tobacco products. The GST Council's deliberations on restructuring the tax system come as a timely opportunity to address these gaps.

While these proposals are commendable, they require strong political will to overcome opposition from the powerful tobacco industry. This industry, with its vast resources, will undoubtedly resist any move that threatens its profits. However, the stakes are too high for hesitation. The GST Council has an opportunity to demonstrate courage and foresight by adopting these reforms.

A higher GST slab for tobacco products will not only save lives but also align with India's broader goals of creating a healthier, more productive population. The revenue generated can be reinvested in public goods, reinforcing the nation's commitment to universal health and social equity.

Jeffrey Drope is Director of Economics for Health (formerly Tobacco Economics), as well as a Research Professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Mukesh Kejriwal is a Delhi-based journalist works on health and tobacco control issues

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EXTENDING A HAND

THIS REFERS TO the article 'The bridge to Moscow' (IE, December 20). The article highlights the importance of India-Russia relations in the current geopolitically complex world. A diplomatic relationship between them two is pivotal in mitigating global disorder. India serves as a crucial bridge, connecting Russia to the West and preventing its complete isolation from global conversations. This strategic partnership offers mutual benefits, including energy security, economic cooperation, and shared interests in Arctic governance. While geopolitical complexities and ethical concerns persist, the enduring significance of this alliance cannot be underestimated. India's ability to navigate this relationship will be instrumental in shaping the future growth of these two countries.

Sharadhiya Mitra, Kolkata

AMBEDKAR'S LEGACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Over Babasaheb' (IE, December 20). Union Home Minister Amit Shah's comment on B R Ambedkar has ignited a political firestorm, with the Opposition uniting across party lines to demand his resignation and an apology. Shah's remarks, made during a debate in Parliament

while discussing the Constitution, were perceived as disrespectful to Ambedkar, the chief architect of India's core document. It goes without saying that for millions, Ambedkar represents the foundation, empowerment, and equality of India's democracy. As protests continue, the debate over Shah's remarks reveals deeper divisions in India's political discourse – divisions over who truly respects Ambedkar's ideals and who uses his name as a tool for political expediency.

Kholan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Over Babasaheb' (IE, December 20). Babasaheb's legacy isn't limited to Dalits; it has a profound influence on everyone, and his determination to create a casteless society is well-known. However, what is happening today can only be described as disappointing. No one can claim to be a true devotee of Ambedkar unless they genuinely adhere to his ideology, which is taught yet worthwhile. He stood for universal civil liberties and rights and was a saviour for those who lacked these fundamental freedoms. The political carnival taking place in his name today tarnishes his dream for India. To truly uphold his words and aspirations, political parties need to address equality and justice for all.

Vishwas Singh, Lucknow



The Indian EXPRESS

 FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NYAY gone wrong

Social benefits may be enormous in long run. But in the short run, tangible costs outweigh intangible benefits



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

TOWARDS A THAW

Delhi-Beijing Special Representatives meeting is a beginning. Addressing fundamental issues will require patient diplomacy

THE OUTCOME OF the first formal meeting between the Special Representatives (SRs) of India and China in five years is cause for cautious optimism over a thaw in bilateral ties. Building on the momentum of the talks between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, in October, the SRs announced confidence-building measures (CBMs) that seek to restore a degree of normalcy in ties after a prolonged military stand-off. While NSA Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi have interacted in the last half-decade, these meetings were under the shadow of China's expansionist moves along the Line of Actual Control. The People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) aggression vis-à-vis India was a piece with its actions in the South China Sea, East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, which led to strategic and diplomatic pressure from the US and several middle powers. The restoration of the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra, trade at Nathula and data sharing on trans-border rivers must be viewed in this context. These CBMs are an incremental step, an attempt to find common ground between the two countries.

The respective statements after the meeting frame the fundamental differences between Delhi and Beijing. For India, a settled border, free of conflict, is the priority while Beijing seems to be looking at fewer restrictions vis-à-vis the large Indian market, and other economic opportunities. While the Indian Foreign Ministry stressed the need for "peace and tranquillity" on the border as fundamental to the deepening of bilateral ties, Beijing sought to view the border as a part of the broader relationship. The fact remains that China's violations in the Ladakh sector beginning in 2020 have eroded trust and undermined earlier pacts and mechanisms, notably the 2005 Agreement, which finds a mention in the Chinese statement. The Indian side's emphasis on the need for a "framework" on the boundary question must be viewed in this context. The CBMs are a beginning, a gesture of goodwill ahead of the more difficult task of de-escalation and de-induction along the LAC. The task will be challenging, given that the People's Liberation Army has reportedly built military infrastructure in border areas.

The complexity of the relationship and the differences between the two countries should not deter future engagement. Neither country can choose its neighbours. China is the world's second-largest economy and military power. India, too, has been rising on the global stage and has become a formidable economic power. Both Delhi and Beijing have much to gain from more stable ties. The hurdles can be overcome if China and India find better ways to relate to each other. The CBMs announced by the SRs do send out the message that the two countries seem willing to make an attempt in that direction. The neighbours now have to lay the foundation to resolve the fundamental issues that have plagued their relationship. That might be a painstaking task. It will require patient diplomacy, but it cannot be delayed.

A PARTIAL RECOVERY

State finances have improved from pandemic times. Concerns in sectors such as power remain

DURING THE PANDEMIC, state governments had witnessed a marked deterioration in their debt-deficit position. In 2020-21, the combined fiscal deficit of all states had edged up to 4.1 per cent of GDP and their debt-to-GDP ratio had risen to 31 per cent. However, as the RBI's latest report on state finances notes, state governments have in the years thereafter stuck firmly to the path of fiscal consolidation, bringing down their debt to 28.5 per cent by March 2024 and their deficit to 2.9 per cent. Alongside, they have also managed to ramp up allocations for capital expenditure. Their total capital outlay has risen from 2.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21 to 2.6 per cent in 2023-24, and is further budgeted to increase to 2.8 per cent in 2024-25. These are encouraging developments.

However, the report also flags several areas of concern. For one, the power sector: The losses of power distribution companies stood at a staggering Rs 6.5 lakh crore by 2022-23, despite many attempts to improve their financial metrics over the years. To put this loss in perspective — its equivalent is around 2.4 per cent of GDP. In recent years, states have also seen a sharp increase in subsidies, due to "farm loan waivers, free/subsidised services (like electricity to agriculture and households, transport, gas cylinder and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women). The amounts involved are significant. According to an Axis Bank report, 14 states now have income transfer schemes for women with a spending of Rs 2 lakh crore. This amounts to roughly 0.6 per cent of GDP. Such forms of spending will limit the resources available to governments for expenditure on more productive avenues. Then there are contingent liabilities. As per the RBI report, state guarantees have witnessed a steady increase, rising from 2 per cent of GDP at the end of March 2017 to 3.8 per cent by March 2023.

As state debt remains considerably above the level recommended by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management review committee, the RBI report calls for — rightly so — a "credible roadmap for debt consolidation." In particular, it says that states with high levels of debt — these would include states such as Punjab, Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal — "may establish a clear, transparent and time-bound glide path for debt consolidation." The report also calls for "next generation" fiscal rules which, while providing states the flexibility to deal with shocks such as the pandemic, would be guided by the objective of ensuring medium-term fiscal sustainability. These suggestions should generate more debate in the coming weeks and months.

ICC'S COMPROMISE

India will play Pakistan at neutral grounds. Spare a thought for fans in both countries

HAT ALL INDIA-PAKISTAN games in International Cricket Council (ICC) events staged at either of the two countries will now be held on neutral turf is a result of Pakistan putting its foot down and demanding equal treatment as their neighbours refuse to visit for any event. The 2025 Champions Trophy isn't the first time the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) will not send its team across the border, citing government instructions. At last year's Asia Cup too, India's matches were held in Sri Lanka. The Pakistan team, in contrast, came to India for the 50-over World Cup.

The schedule and venues for the tournament can be announced now, and the marketing and promotional campaigns begin in earnest. The announcement will certainly bring a sense of relief to broadcasters. The arrangement also averts the uncertainty that looms over any big event scheduled in either India or Pakistan — at least till 2028. But it is unfair on local fans. India-Pakistan is arguably the biggest fixture in international cricket and the social media chatter it generates is off the charts. But a match in Dubai or Colombo isn't the same as one in Lahore or Kolkata. For one, not all cricket enthusiasts in the two countries can afford to go abroad to cheer for their teams. The match will anyway be big, but without the home-and-away atmosphere, the electricity will not be the same.

This is the first ICC event Pakistan will host since 1996 but the most anticipated matches won't be held on grounds in the country. Not only will they have to play India on a neutral ground — ICC always ensures an India-Pakistan game in the league stages of its competitions for commercial reasons — if India advances to the semifinals or final of the tournament, those games will also be played outside Pakistan. This makes a bit of a mockery of the country's status as tournament host.

PAGE 21 OF the Congress party's 2019 Lok Sabha election manifesto said "To eliminate abject poverty by 2030, Congress will introduce a Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) to provide Rs 72,000 a year to the poorest one-fifth of all families. The money will be transferred to the bank account of the woman head of the family". The Congress party lost the 2019 election badly. But this idea of an unconditional cash transfer to women in poor families has won huge.

Five years after NYAY was first proposed, 15 states governed by eight different political parties have implemented some version of NYAY, after promising it in their state election manifestos. Sixty per cent of India's women live in these 15 states. So, a majority of poor women in India now are beneficiaries of an unconditional cash transfer from the government. Going by the trend, it is only a matter of time before other large states follow suit. This is an astonishingly rapid paradigm shift in India's welfare model. From just an academic "universal basic income" idea mooted in the 2017 Economic Survey to a concrete election promise by a major political party in 2019 to nearly 100 million women receiving roughly \$25 billion every year as unconditional cash transfer by 2024, this must rank as one of the largest and fastest "lab to reality" economic policy ideas in recent history anywhere in the world. But such a wide-scale rollout of cash transfers in such quick time is a warning, not a jingle bell.

Feminists and social scientists support unconditional cash transfers for its power to liberate and empower women, especially in underdeveloped countries. Economists believe it can boost consumption demand and help stimulate the larger economy. Efficiency hunters find cash transfers appealing for their simplicity and efficiency of governance. Libertarians like because of the freedom it provides to the individual family unit in making spending decisions. But we do not yet know how many of these promised benefits of cash transfers to women have been fulfilled in India. While some studies such as the Pratiichi Trust's assessment of Bengal's cash transfer scheme report some encouraging findings, they lack rigour and neutral-

Noisy rhetoric aside, cash transfers to women is clearly not the electoral magic bullet that it is made out to be. Yet nearly all political parties in India have pounced on this idea. The Aam Aadmi Party is upping the ante on cash transfers to women for the upcoming Delhi elections and predictably, other parties will follow. NYAY has become the inevitable sapling in India's electoral landscape that may not attract voters, but its absence can be conspicuous.

ity. The truth is that it is still too early to assess the real impact of \$25 billion a year "NYAY" type programmes on social development and women's empowerment.

But it is obvious that the idea has gained enormous political currency, with nearly every political party promising it in their election manifestos. However, there is no empirical or scientific evidence that cash transfers to women, either as a scheme by a ruling party or as a promise by an opposition party, have material impact on influencing voter behaviour. The Congress party promised the largest cash transfer for women in 2019 and even made it its core election plank, but lost. Similarly, in the recent Maharashtra elections where contrary to media punditry, there was no difference in voting behaviour between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the ruling BJP alliance's cash transfer to women scheme. The Congress alliance's promise to significantly increase the cash transfer amount too didn't strike a chord with women voters in Maharashtra.

Noisy rhetoric aside, cash transfers to women is clearly not the electoral magic bullet that it is made out to be. Yet nearly all political parties in India have pounced on this idea. The Aam Aadmi Party is upping the ante on cash transfers to women for the upcoming Delhi elections and predictably, other parties will follow. NYAY has become the inevitable sapling in India's electoral landscape that may not attract voters, but its absence can be conspicuous.

These schemes come at a substantial cost, politically and financially. Cash transfers subvert the very essence of politics in terms of representing people, understanding their real issues and solving them with specific policies and programmes. If all it takes to govern is to throw money at people and let them address their needs themselves, it hollows out the politics of representative governance, as Ruchi Gupta pointed out ("Too much or too little", *id.*, December 16).

Most importantly, the financial burden of such cash transfer schemes is large, real and current. Nearly \$25 billion is being spent by all state governments combined on cash transfers to women every year, roughly 10

per cent of what each state government earns annually. More worryingly, these schemes have significantly increased the state government's deficits and debt burdens. Ironically, the rising debt of state governments due to NYAY-type programmes comes back to harm the same poor women beneficiaries through increased prices (inflation) and costlier access to money (interest rates). This is why the 2019 Congress manifesto that proposed NYAY also committed that "it will be funded only through new revenues and rationalisation of current expenditure with a commitment to keeping the fiscal deficit to less than 3 per cent of GDP". All political parties seem to have borrowed the NYAY idea unconditionally.

So, after five years, \$25 billion and 100 million women beneficiaries, the social, economic and even electoral gains of NYAY are still unknown and intangible, while the political and financial costs are known, tangible and large. It is likely that the social benefits of NYAY-type programmes in terms of women empowerment are enormous in the long run. But in the short run, the tangible costs far outweigh the intangible benefits. It is thus prudent to calibrate spending on cash transfers slowly every year rather than expand rapidly in one go. To be clear, this is neither a mea culpa on the NYAY idea nor is it a call for state governments to abandon the scheme. When costs are immediate, but benefits are spread over a long term, it is important to scale slowly and not too fast, be it in physical infrastructure projects such as metros or in social infrastructure projects such as women empowerment. But with the misplaced excitement and belief about cash transfer schemes leading to electoral victories, all political parties are now engaged in a "my NYAY is larger than yours" slugfest. This is a dangerous race to fiscal ruin that can collectively sink the nation ship, only for the rich to escape with their lifeboats while the poor drown helplessly. NYAY can turn into ANAY for a poor woman, if it is not slowed down.

The writer is chairman, Professionals' Congress & co-author of the Congress' 2019 NYAY proposal

SHE, THE ANCHOR

Raj Kapoor's women leads were full-bodied in the script, holding the 'hero' together



RINKU GHOSH

WHILE RAJ KAPOOR@100 is trending, do pause at the posters commemorating the do-film-maker's genius. They are testimony to the equity given to women characters at a time when mainstream Hindi films had a very gendered view of the word "hero". In fact, the word "heroine" was a dismissive construct, somebody who would embellish the hero, rather than being one herself. But the director himself didn't shy away from giving them pride of place.

While modern cinema has somewhat demystified the term "actor", the gendered view of the hero persists, with films still classified as "women-led" or "women-driven". For Kapoor though, the male and female characters were inseparable, with each feeding off the other, growing and evolving together. In this sense, he was ahead of his time.

Critics have often pointed out the duality of Kapoor's women characters — objectified on one hand, but also deified on the other. Remember the iconic wet-sari image of Mandakini in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985)? For all his concern for marginalised people and the latent messaging of Nehruvian socialism, why were the women in his films, as the trade talk was those days, "bold", a bait for male fantasy and a commercial trope? But it was precisely this "goddess versus temptress" duality that Kapoor wanted to demolish, conceiving them in the fullness of being, rather than being seen as mere avatars of male emotion and desire.

Kapoor's female leads were always full-

bodied in the script, holding the "hero" together. In fact, the male leads, some of which he played himself, were at times frail, undecided, predictable, cardboard-ish even, needing the support of the leading women. If Rita (Nargis) in *Awaara* (1951) appears in a delectable in the film poster, she is also the feisty defence lawyer, who rescues a tramp from the fringes because of the purity he represents, and fights the injustices he faces. She is the moral voice, questioning social hypocrisy and even her own father's decisions. Similarly, in *Shree 420* (1955), Nargis's character Vidya acts as a moral anchor for Raj Kapoor's character, a boy from Allahabad who is dazzled by the city's temptations. It is her steadfast values that help center him. In *Jagte Raho* (1956, produced by Kapoor), it is Nargis once again, who revitalises a homeless man in the dead of night, reviving the protagonist when no one else would. This gesture goes beyond physical sustenance, symbolising the nurturing role of women in his films.

But perhaps the strongest voice is that of Radha (Vyjayanthimala) in *Sangam* (1964), who chastises both men who love her for treating her as a trophy in a contest of chivalry and never seeking her opinion on who she wants to be with. Without a *sangam* (confluence) of minds, a man-woman relationship can never be completed. And that's evident in the last frame of the film where Radha and her husband Sundar are perverse and fractured, although a couple. *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) is an outright tribute to women. Would the joker

be what he is without the three women? Mary, the teacher who led his sexual awakening, Marina, his transient but true love and Meena, who prioritises herself over her love, Raju, the joker, and his women never had expectations of each other but were crucial to understanding their respective journeys. If Roopa, the village belle with a disfigured face, was sexualised in Satyram Shivam *Sundaram* (1978), it was to critique men like her husband, who rejected her for her face scar but accepted her when she masked herself and posed herself as his mistress. Ganga in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* was a metaphor for the pollution of a river civilisation that once pivoted on women. She denounces patriarchy, demanding paternal rights from the father of her love child rather than seeking validation as his wife.

Perhaps, Kapoor, who was torn between relationships in his personal life with his leading women, embodied his alter ego in films. The leading man relinquished his strengths to the woman, knowing she was always capable of heavy lifting. Acknowledging his flaws and insincerity of wanting both the goddess and seductress equally, he depended on women to give him clarity. Be it guilt or courage, Kapoor was sure of one thing. That women needed an equal voice. Sadly, women in gun-toting commandos in 400-crore hits or in script-backed niche films have rarely built on the ground laid by the showman.

rinku.ghosh@expressindia.com

DECEMBER 21, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

INTERPOL: PAK GUILTY

THE PISTOL THAT was given to the hijackers of the Indian Airlines Boeing 737 aircraft at Lahore airport on August 24 had been procured by the chief administrative officer of the Pakistan Defence Ministry from a West German armament firm, as per a telegram New Delhi received from Interpol.

PM TO AKALI DAL

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi urged the Akali Dal to publicly state that extremists and terrorists have no place in their party. Addressing public meetings in New Delhi on

his whirlwind election tour, Gandhi said that the Akali Dal must prove that they stand for the unity and integrity of the country and declare that extremists and terrorists are not a part of them, but a separate group altogether.

BUSES FOR VOTERS

SIX VOTERS IN 12 relief camps in New Delhi will be provided government transport for going to their residential areas to cast their votes on polling day. This will be part of the special arrangements being made by the Election Commission to ensure that minority communities and weaker sections can vote without fear. Both the People's Union for Civil Liberties

and the Nagrik Ekta Manch asked the Election Commission to give security to eligible voters belonging to minority groups.

ZIA-UL-HAQ WINS

GENERAL ZIA-UL-HAQ was given a fresh mandate of five years as President of Pakistan. The Pakistan chief election commissioner Justice S A Khuram, announced that, out of about 35 million registered voters, 21 million cast their franchise in the referendum held on December 19. The affirmative vote was 97.71 per cent of the total votes cast. By and large the turn-out in all the provinces was exceptionally good.



EXPLAINED FOREIGN POLICY & STRATEGY

As Dissanayake visits, takeaways from the India-SL engagement

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

THE VISIT of Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Disanayake to India this week — his first trip overseas since becoming leader of his country — saw some classic diplomatic deal-making, with give and take on both sides.

Win some, lose some

AKD, who is popularly known, committed to not allowing the use of Sri Lankan territory for any anti-Indian activities.

"I have given an assurance to the Prime Minister... that we will not have our land... used in... a manner that is detrimental to the interest of India," Disanayake said after bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday.

The joint statement said "President Disanayake reiterated Sri Lanka's stable position of not permitting its territory to be used in any manner inimical to the security of India as well as towards regional stability."

This was a signal to China — whose "research vessels" frequently visit Sri Lanka, and are seen with suspicion in New Delhi. The fact that the President, who is seen as being pro-China, has clearly articulated this position is a relief to India.

On the issue of Tamil minorities, however, AKD did not yield to the formulation preferred by New Delhi. There was no explicit mention of the implementation of the 13th amendment in the Sri Lankan Constitution, which gives powers to the Tamil minority — a long-standing demand of the Indian government. AKD does not support the implementation of the amendment, and has opposed any investigation into alleged war crimes during the last phase of the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military.

Modi said the two leaders had discussed "reconciliation and reconstruction" in Sri Lanka, and hoped that the Sri Lankan government would "fully implement the Constitution and fulfill its commitment to hold provincial council elections".

AKD, on his part, mentioned unity, social protection, and sustainable development. "Diversity," he said, is the "cornerstone of democracy".

Confident President

The joint statement suggested that the new establishment in Sri Lanka had got its way in its framing.

About two months ago, after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met AKD in Colombo, the Indian statement had said that Jaishankar reiterated India's support for the aspirations of all communities, including Tamils, for equality, justice, dignity, and peace, while maintaining the unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

"The full and effective implementation of the 13th Amendment... and the early holding of Provincial Council elections would facilitate these objectives," it had said.

Two and a half months later, AKD — emboldened by the historic parliamentary majority in the November election — is much more confident in his dealings with big pow-

ers such as India and China.

This confidence has been visible in the President's actions at home as well, where he has appeared determined to abide by the anti-corruption principles of the "Clean Sri Lanka" campaign that propelled him to power.

A case in point was the controversy, days before the President travelled to India, about the academic qualifications of his close political ally, Speaker Asoka Ranwala. The senior member of AKD's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was forced to step down after AKD made a thinly-veiled reference to the party's intolerance for even the appearance of impropriety.

Focus on mutual benefits

The message from the Ranwala incident was that the President wanted no distractions as he went about his difficult and ambitious agenda to rebuild Sri Lanka after the social and economic crises of recent years. That focus was visible in the India-Sri Lanka joint statement, "Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future".

On bilateral development cooperation, the joint statement said the two leaders ac-

knowledgeed the "positive and impactful role of India's development assistance to Sri Lanka that has significantly contributed to its socioeconomic growth".

The countries agreed to work together for the timely completion of ongoing projects such as Phase III & IV of Indian Housing Project, the three islands' Hybrid Renewable Energy Project, and High Impact Community Development Projects across Sri Lanka.

The elements of cooperation range from digital connectivity — the Aadhaar project and UPI — to energy cooperation. The countries are discussing the supply of LNG to Sri Lanka, the development of Trincomalee as a regional energy and industrial hub, high-capacity power grid interconnection, and the development of offshore wind power in the Palk Strait.

On physical connectivity, apart from the resumption of the passenger ferry service between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai, the two leaders agreed that officials should work towards the early commencement of the passenger ferry service between Rameswaram and Talaimannar. They will also

explore the possibility of working on the rehabilitation of Sri Lanka's Kankesanthurai port.

It was also agreed to "explore the possibility of concluding a framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation", provision of "defence platforms and assets to augment Sri Lanka's defence capabilities", and intensify collaboration through joint exercises, maritime surveillance, and defence dialogue and exchanges, according to the joint statement.

PM Modi flagged the importance of maritime security, cyber security and counter-terrorism among the issues to be discussed through the Colombo Security Conclave mechanism.

All of this suggests that even though India is now no longer dealing with the traditional set of interlocutors who have dominated Sri Lankan governments, priorities and interests have not fundamentally changed for either New Delhi or Colombo.

AKD is looking at a consequential five years in power, while India, which has deep strategic stakes in Sri Lanka's success and stability, is keen on a "mutually beneficial" partnership.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHY AND HOW DID THE UNITED STATES ERADICATE 'MURDER HORNETS'?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

THE NORTHERN giant hornet, nicknamed the "murder hornet", has been eradicated in the United States, the Department of Agriculture said on Wednesday. The insect was first spotted in Washington state near the Canadian border in 2019. Efforts quickly began to track down and get rid of the invasive species which poses a threat to bees and agriculture. Washington was the only state in the US that has had confirmed sightings of the northern giant hornets.

through most beekeeper suits, delivering almost seven times the amount of venom as a honey bee. Moreover, they have the ability to sting multiple times.

How did the US eradicate 'murder hornets'?

State, federal, and international government agencies joined forces to eradicate northern giant hornets in the US.

The first task was to find the nests of hornets. This was a challenge as hornets usually build their nests in forested areas, often in an underground cavity, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

"In some cases, entomologists captured a live hornet, attached a radio tag to it, released it, and tracked the hornet back to its nest," a report by CBS News said.

After locating a nest in a tree, entomologists "plugged the nest with foam, wrapped the tree in plastic and vacuumed out the hornets" the report said. They also used carbon dioxide to kill any of the remaining hornets.

The public participated in the process by helping entomologists track down hornet nests, and agreeing to place traps at their residences.

Dr Mark Davidson, deputy administrator at USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said in a statement, "By tackling this threat head-on, we protected not only pollinators and crops, but also the industries, communities, and ecosystems that depend on them."

The eradication, however, does not mean that the hornet cannot return to the United States.



AMITABH SINHA

SOME OF the biggest challenges facing humankind — like climate change, biodiversity loss, and hunger — are interconnected, meaning that an integrated approach is needed to address these, according to a major new scientific report. Trying to deal with these challenges separately, while ignoring how they interact with and influence each other is not only likely to be ineffective, but also counter-productive, the report concluded.

The first-of-its-kind report was produced by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a global group of scientific experts. The report examined the interlinkages among five major challenges — climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, water scarcity, and health risks.

The report found that the world's current economic direction was negatively impacting all of these challenges, leading to unaccounted-for costs of at least \$10-25 trillion annually.

Role of IPBES

The IPBES is to biodiversity and natural ecosystems what the more famous Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is to climate change. It periodically examines all existing scientific knowledge on biodiversity and nature to assess its current state. Like the IPCC, the IPBES does not produce new science — it only evaluates existing knowledge to make consolidated assessments.

The information provided by the IPCC, which came into being in 1988, has formed the scientific basis for climate change negotiations. The IPBES, set up only in 2012, informs several multilateral environmental processes, including the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention on Combating Desertification (CCD), the Ramsar Convention

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

How global crises are connected

A major scientific report studied interlinkages among five global challenges — climate change, food insecurity, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and health risks. Its findings shed light on how to deal with these

SOME CRITICAL NUMBERS

2-6% is the decadal decline in biodiversity over the last 30-50 years

MORE THAN 50% of the global population lives in areas most impacted by biodiversity decline, increased health risks, water and food availability, and climate change

\$58 TRILLION is the value of economic activities dependent on nature (in 2023)

UPTO \$1 TRILLION is the annual financing gap for biodiversity restoration needs

\$100-300 BILLION is the annual value of illegal resource extraction in forests, wildlife and marine trade



Plants are seen in a burned forest in Bolivia in September 2019. Reuters

on Wetlands, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

In its first ever report in 2019, the IPBES assessed the prevailing threat to global biodiversity and found that of an estimated eight million species of plants and animals in the world, one million faced extinction threats — more than ever before. This was mainly due to anthropogenic changes in natural ecosystems. The report found that nearly 75% of Earth's land surface and 66% of marine environments had been "significantly altered", and over 85% of wetlands had been "lost".

This information became the basis for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework finalised in 2022. This international agreement set 23 targets to be met by 2030 in order to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, including the so-called "30x30 targets" which aim to protect 30% of land, freshwater, and marine ecosystems, and restore at least 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030.

Nexus Report findings

The key takeaway of the latest assessment,

which is being called the "Nexus Report", is that responses to the five aforementioned challenges need to be harmonised such that positive actions taken on any one of these does not result in negative impacts on others.

For example, an attempt to scale up food production, a positive action to deal with hunger, could increase the stress on land and water resources, and biodiversity. Exclusive focus on climate change could also go down on the same pathway. Similarly, protecting land and oceans could restrict choices on climate change and food security.

The report, therefore, argued that it is important to adopt synergistic approaches that deliver benefits across the spectrum. It went on to identify 70 such synergistic response options that produced positive outcomes across all five elements. These include restoration of carbon-rich ecosystems like forests, soils and mangroves, effective management of biodiversity to reduce risks of diseases spreading from animals to humans, promotion of sustainable healthy diets, and reliance on nature-based solutions wherever possible.

There were other response options that

deliver benefits on two or three elements but not all. These were important, but needed to be implemented carefully, the report said. According to the report, the aim must be to find and implement actions that focus on sustainable production and consumption, while also conserving and restoring ecosystems, reducing pollution, and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Why nature is important

The report emphasised that protecting nature and biodiversity was important for purely economic reasons as well. It said that more than half of the global GDP (about \$58 trillion annually) was moderately to highly dependent on nature. Deterioration of natural ecosystems, therefore, could directly hurt productivity and adversely impact economic output.

As it is, the world has been witnessing biodiversity decline at the rate of about 2-6% on an average, every decade over the last half a century, the report said. It highlighted that existing economic systems still offered trillions of dollars in incentives every year for actions that have direct negative impacts on biodiversity and natural ecosystems.

In another report released simultaneously, IPBES called for fundamental and transformative shifts in the way people view, and interact with the natural world in pursuit of its well-being. The so-called "Transformative Change Report" found that current and previous approaches to deal with ecological decline had failed, and a new and different approach was needed to halt the slide further.

This new and transformative approach, the report said, must be based on four fundamental principles — equity and justice, pluralism and inclusion, respectful and reciprocal human-nature relationships, and adaptive learning and action.

It said the world needed to act immediately on such new approaches because the cost of delaying action would significantly increase the costs of action, which would double in a decade. There were also economic benefits of acting immediately. The report said that \$10 trillion in business opportunities, and about 400 million jobs, could be generated by 2030 through sustainable economic approaches that rely on nature-positive economic models.

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In Pushpa 2's recipe for success, the role and ingredients of masala films

ARUSHI BHASKAR
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

WITH THE success of Allu Arjun's film *Pushpa 2: The Rule*, released on December 5, the focus is once more on masala films. Cinephiles have pointed out that it took a Telugu hero to bring back masala into the Hindi audiences' film diet, with Bollywood, once the consummate master of the genre, of late churning out only lacklustre fare that has disappointed critics and the box office alike.

But what is a masala film? And why does the genre matter?

What are masala films?

Simply put, a masala film has wildly different elements thrown together (similar to how spices are combined in Indian cooking) to form a coherent narrative, with music and choreographed dance sequences comprising a major part of the runtime. Picture this: an emotional scene between a widowed mother and her young children is followed by a raunchy "item number" fea-

turing the film's villain, which is then followed by a romance sub-plot, and then an action sequence. By the film's end, these elements have come together to form a harmonious medley of flavours.

Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change, written by Gokulind and Wimala Disanayake, postulates that the conventions of a masala film have been shaped by historical art forms. First are the Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which have multiple side characters, flashbacks, and subplots. Second are ancient Sanskrit dramas or *natyas* (including *Kalidas's Ashvamedha* and *Sudra's Mchhakulika*). They utilised song and dance to create stylised spectacles, seemingly to maximise entertainment as well as the emotional responses of the audience.

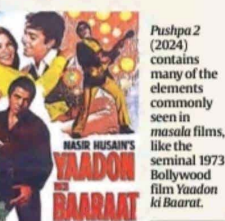
Third come indigenous folk theatre forms, ranging from the *Harikatha* traditions of the Telugu states to *Uttar Pradesh's* *Ramleelas*. The fourth influence comes from Parsi theatre. The Parsi plays contained crude humour, melodious songs and music, sensationalism and dazzling stagecraft," they write.



How did Bollywood get masala-fied?

The answer lies in the *Nasir Ki Baarat* (1973) was the first masala movie from Bollywood. Director Nasir Hussain, and the writers Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar are now considered pioneers in popularising the format — full of plot twists, heavy emotions, action sequences, comedic sub-plots, and of course, dance numbers.

Salim-Javed wrote some of the most seminal masala movies in Bollywood: a few examples are *Sholay* (1975), directed by



Pushpa 2 (2024) contains many of the elements commonly seen in masala films, like the seminal 1973 Bollywood film *Yaadon Ki Baarat*.

Ramesh Sippy that routinely features in 'best of Bollywood' lists. *Devdatta* (1975), directed by Yash Chopra and among the most iconic 'Angry Young Man' movies of the 1970s; *Don* (1978), directed by Chandra Barot and the inspiration for remakes across languages.

Why does masala matter?

The simplest answer: masala movies are made to cater to a large section of people. Since they contain so many different elements, something is bound to appeal to

everyone, from family audiences to 'angry young men'. This could translate to big profits for producers and fame for the artists.

Further, if masala movies choose to deliver a social 'message', they are potentially delivering that message to a wider audience than any 'arthouse' film could.

Masala films have also influenced how Indian film industries, specifically Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, have been popularised globally. The Mithun Chakraborty-starrer *Disco Dancer* (1982) still enjoys a fan base in China and Russia. Rajinikanth's *Muthu* (1995) started off a fandom wave for the superstar in Japan, and the S S Rajamouli directorial *RRR* (2022) won the Best Original Song award at the Oscars.

What about the masala films of today?

Post the economic liberalisation of 1991, the themes of Hindi films started changing. With globalisation, they also started dealing with the Indian diaspora. Several movies from this period had NRIs as the leads (most famously, 1995's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*).

With increasing exposure to Western media, there was a gradual shift in aesthetic sensibilities too — the 2000s saw the rise of

the term 'multiplex film', for movies made with a niche, urban audience in mind.

This did not mean that masala films completely faded away. The South Indian industries made masala films with superstar actors like Chiranjeevi and Rajinikanth. Bollywood had a few stars who delivered on this front (the likes of Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar and Ajay Devgn). But the Kannada, Tamil and Telugu industries soon took over Bollywood as the biggest supplier of masala. Their Hindi dubbed versions on YouTube also became popular with north Indian audiences.

Which brings us back to Allu Arjun. His fandom in the Hindi heartland is now huge, with the film making around Rs 620 cr of its total Rs 900 cr-plus haul domestically through the Hindi version. Another recent 'pan-Indian' success, *KGF*, starring Kannada star Yash, also centred on an 'angry young man'.

Both film franchises contributed to the discourse on whether Bollywood has lost its masala. A complaint against many recent Hindi masala films is that they take the audience for granted and lack emotional or intellectual sincerity. Examples include *Shingham Again* (2024) directed by Rohit Shetty, and *Salman Khan's Kisi Ka Bhai Kisi Ki Jaan* (2023).