

How was ‘Vikatan’ made inaccessible?

What are the rules? How do website blocking orders work in India? What can a website owner do?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:
The website of the Tamil magazine, *Vikatan*, was rendered inaccessible for several readers on February 15, after the BJP’s Tamil Nadu president K. Annamalai sent a letter to L. Murugan, the Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, complaining about a cartoon featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump. The magazine, as well as State leaders like Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, have condemned the move as an attack on freedom of expression.

Why was there a complaint about a cartoon?
Ananda Vikatan has been a mainstay in the Tamil magazine space, and in its most recent avatar has been a constant source of political and entertainment reporting. The magazine also publishes an online e-magazine for paying subscribers called *Vikatan Plus*. The February 10 edition of this digital magazine had a cover cartoon featuring Prime Minister Modi shackled in chains, seated next to President Trump. The shackling was a reference to the plight of the migrants being deported from the U.S. to India aboard military planes in chains.

Website blockings are governed by Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. The law broadly empowers the government to block a website in the ‘interest of sovereignty and integrity of India’ and ‘information and Broadcasting (MIB). He accused the magazine of “operating as a mouthpiece of the DMK”.

How was it rendered unavailable?
The Union government did not issue any statement confirming or denying that the website was made inaccessible. *The Hindu* was able to confirm with four people aware of the order that led to *Vikatan*’s inaccessibility, that it was issued by the MIB. The I&B disseminated the instructions through the Department of Telecommunications to internet providers and telecom operators, after which the website was not accessible in majority of their networks.

Website blockings are governed by Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. The law’s language broadly empowers the government to block a website in the “interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement”. The blocking orders are confidential, and a copy has not been provided to *Vikatan* or to the public.

The Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009 details the operation of these Rules, empowering Ministries and State government departments to refer a blocking request through a nodal officer to a designated officer under the IT Ministry, which then constitutes a committee that takes a decision. If a blocking is directed, the Department of Telecommunications is looped in to send the order to broadband and telecom players. This is different from the framework for removing content within a given website or streaming service. That is governed by the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which are regulations under the IT Act empowering the I&B Ministry and the IT Ministry to issue emergency orders blocking content on social media platforms, streaming services, online news websites, and so on. Since the introduction of secure HTTPS websites, blocking a specific piece of content within a website is not possible without the cooperation of the website’s publisher, as internet networks can only see the name of the domain, and not what a user is viewing on a given website.

What can ‘Vikatan’ do?

Under the 2009 blocking rules, a notice should be sent to the website which is liable to be blocked, so that they may make a representation. This can be considered by a review committee. The publishers of VLC Media Player were able to obtain an unblocking of their website in 2022, after engaging in discussions with the IT Ministry. No such prior notice was sent to *Vikatan*. On February 16, the day after the order was issued, the magazine received a notice for the cartoon under the 2021 IT Rules governing content blocking within websites, which did not acknowledge the website’s overall inaccessibility. After getting a notice, a website owner can typically make their case to the committee formed under the 2009 Rules. If the committee does not accept the defence, this can be appealed in a High Court. In *Vikatan*’s case, the notice from the I&B Ministry called for a hearing on February 20. The magazine presented its case, and has vowed to legally challenge the order if the outcome of the hearing “does not align with press freedom principles.”

What is India’s dilemma over fighter jets?

Does India have to opt for the F-35 offered by U.S. President Donald Trump? What about defence deals with Russia? Why were plans to acquire the SU-57 dropped? What is the status of an indigenous fighter jet? Is India too dependent on foreign capabilities and technology?

Dinakar Peri

The story so far:
The two foremost Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) of Russia and the U.S., the SU-57 and F-35, got a lot of attention at Aero India, which was held from February 10-14 in Bengaluru, with the former undoubtedly being the showstopper with its manoeuvres. Just as that wound up, U.S. President Donald Trump, addressing a press meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said the U.S. is also paving the way to “ultimately” provide India with F-35 stealth fighters.

What’s the F-35?
The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is a single seat, single-engine strike fighter jet with three variants, F-35A, which has a conventional take-off and landing for the Air Force, F-35B short take-off/vertical landing for the Marine Corps and an F-35C aircraft carrier variant for the Navy and the Marine Corps. In addition to the U.S., the programme has seven international partners, and 10 foreign military sales customers, and the jets are expected to be in service well into the 2080s. As of January 30, 2025, 1,110 F-35s were delivered, according to the lead contractor Lockheed Martin, with 20 participants in the programme.

Noting that it wasn’t a firm offer yet and what Mr. Trump meant was that they will look at a roadmap for making the F-35 available, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh said recently that India “will look at that offer once it becomes a firm offer.” Pointing out that there is a protocol to be followed, he said that first requirements have to be raised by the services, and only then



New wings: A U.S. Air Force F-35 Lightning II fighter jet on display at Aero India 2025 in Bengaluru. DINAKAR PERI

The costs are substantial and India has never operated a U.S. fighter jet

are options on offer studied. “Creating an option of this type is important for us and we will certainly look at it with an open mind,” he said.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which is mandated by the U.S. Congress to review the programme, said in a May 2024 report that the Department of Defence estimates that these development efforts – as well as the costs to maintain and operate the 2,470 planned aircraft through 2088 – will exceed \$2 trillion. Based on various estimates, the F-35 costs upwards of \$100 million per aircraft with armaments and associated costs. India has never operated a U.S. fighter, and an advanced fighter like the F-35 will need new facilities for training and maintenance.

What is the status of the Russian fighter jet?

It is pertinent to note that in 2010, India and Russia signed a preliminary design agreement to jointly produce the FGFA, now the SU-57, for use by both countries after which each had invested \$295 million for preliminary design which was completed in 2013. But protracted negotiations followed over the high cost and limited technology transfer. One of the limiting factors was that it was a single seater and the creation of a twin-seater variant, the IAF’s preference, would mean a steep rise in costs. India eventually pulled out of the FGFA project and decided to go with its indigenous FGFA, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA).

What is the IAF’s squadron strength?

The IAF has a sanctioned strength of 42.5 fighter squadrons, but, is languishing today at 31 squadrons with a significant proportion of ageing platforms. “Somewhere India got left behind and is stuck in the middle. There is a big gap and major countries have moved forward,” noted a senior official. China, Russia and the U.S. have already fielded fifth generation fighter jets, with China recently stealing a march over everyone else as it flew two advanced fifth generation fighters, dubbed by some as a sixth-generation jet, in addition to the two jets already developed and inducted. Reports suggest that Pakistan is looking to acquire 40 J-35 fifth generation jets from China.

In December, the government constituted a high-level committee led by the Defence Secretary to chalk out a roadmap for the IAF and address operational gaps. The report which was scheduled to be submitted by end-January, is still in the works, officials confirmed.

What is in the pipeline?

India has an ambitious plan to acquire over 500 fighter jets, a bulk of them variants of the Light

Combat Aircraft (LCA) and the AMCA, that is at least a decade away from induction.

There has been a delay in the deliveries of 83 LCA-Mk1A already contracted, with 97 more to be ordered. The delay in deliveries has been partly due to engine delays from General Electric (GE), and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has now assured that 12 jets will be delivered to the IAF this year; the order for 83 jets will be completed in three-and-a-half years. Officials said that the more capable LCA-Mk2 is expected to make first flight in early 2026. The AMCA prototype is expected to roll out by end-2026 or early-2027, certified by 2032 and ready for induction by 2034. In addition, there is the proposal for 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) to be imported and licence-manufactured locally but has seen no progress for many years, with the Request For Information (RFI) issued in April 2019. However, given the gap in numbers, the MRFA as envisaged may now be too expensive and too late to address the crisis. Last October, IAF chief Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh said the MRFA was “needed as on yesterday.”

While several experts and observers pitched for two F-35 squadrons as a stopgap, given the complex process and timelines, it would be a decade before the jets arrive. The 36 Rafale deal contracted at €7.87 billion from France in 2016 is a case in point. In addition, India had paid over €1 billion in one-time research and development costs for India-specific enhancements on the Rafales. Speeding up the domestic programmes is of critical importance as any new addition to the IAF’s already diverse fleet will create a maintenance nightmare and also take away focus and resources from indigenous efforts.

When did diversification begin?

Russian military hardware has constituted a bulk of the Indian military inventory, including the IAF, for decades and diversification began in the early 2000s. However, diversification shouldn’t mean moving from one dependency to another. As per the current plan, by early 2040, the IAF will have 220 LCA-Mk1 variants, at least 120 LCA-Mk2s and the initial batch of AMCA, all powered by the GE F-404 and F-414 jet engines, a significant proportion of the fighter fleet.

The licence manufacture of the F-414 engine or the new IIOKN engine, likely to be co-developed and co-produced with France for the AMCA-Mk2, will mean that India would be dependent on others for the most critical systems. The Indian aero engine space for both fixed wing and helicopters will be powered by the U.S. and France for the rest of the century, as French co-developed engines power India’s indigenous helicopters.

So adding new fighters, that too of the highest technological threshold of the U.S., would surely come with a lot of riders, some intrusive and some that could stymie operational flexibility and impact plans on indigenous manufacturing.

Why is three-language policy controversial?

Why has the Centre withheld funds to Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha programme?

When did the State adopt a two-language policy? What is its stand on mandatory imposition of Hindi? What is the central government’s view? How can the issue be resolved?

D. Suresh Kumar

The story so far:
The Union Government has withheld ₹2,152 crore in funds due to Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha scheme for refusing to join the Prime Minister Schools for Rising India (PMISHRI) initiative. While T.N. is eager to participate in the PM SHRI scheme, it staunchly opposes the accompanying mandate to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. One of the State’s core objections to the NEP is its insistence on adopting a three-language formula in schools. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has rejected any concessions, insisting that T.N. must align “with the Constitution”. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, questioning which provision of the Constitution justifies such mandates, has declared that the State will not submit to “blackmail” or abandon its historically adopted two-language policy.

What does the NEP 2020 state?

The NEP 2020 has retained the three-language formula, a concept first introduced in the NEP of 1968. The key difference, however, is that back then the NEP advocated for Hindi to be a compulsory language across the nation.



Not backing down: Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin and his allies protest against NEP’s three-language policy in Chennai on February 18. R. NAGU

Tamil Nadu, with its long-standing two-language policy, has consistently outperformed many other States in key education metrics

Hindi-speaking States were required to teach Hindi, English, and a modern Indian language – preferably a south Indian language – while non-Hindi speaking States were expected to teach the local regional language, Hindi, and English. In contrast, NEP 2020 offers greater flexibility, technically not imposing any specific language on any State. It states that “the three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and, of course, the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.” This means, in addition to the State’s language, children would be required to learn at least one other Indian language – not necessarily Hindi. The policy also emphasises bilingual teaching, particularly in the home language/mother tongue and English. Conspicuously, it places significant emphasis on Sanskrit as an optional choice within the three-language formula.

Why is there opposition to this policy in T.N.?

Tamil Nadu has long resisted the ‘imposition of Hindi’. In 1937, when the C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) government in Madras proposed making Hindi a compulsory subject in secondary schools, the Justice Party fiercely opposed it.

Two young men, Thalamuthu and Natarajan, who participated in the agitation, died and became icons in the anti-Hindi imposition movement. Rajaji eventually resigned, and the British government withdrew the order. In 1965, as the deadline for adopting Hindi as the sole official language across India approached, the State witnessed violent protests that led to the deaths of at least 70 people in police shootings or self-immolations. The agitation resurfaced when Parliament adopted the Official Languages (Amendment) Act, 1967, and the Official Language Resolution, 1968, which mandated the teaching of Hindi as part of the three-language formula. In January 1968, the Madras Assembly, led by the C.N. Annadurai-led first Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government, adopted a resolution calling for the scrapping of the three-language formula and the elimination of Hindi from the curriculum in T.N. schools. Since then, the State has steadfastly followed its two-language policy teaching Tamil and English.

Major political parties, including the ruling DMK and the principal opposition All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have consistently opposed any efforts to alter this policy. In 2019, backlash led the Kasturirangan Committee to remove the mandatory Hindi learning clause from the draft NEP.

Why is the three-language policy seen as an attempt to impose Hindi?

Political parties and activists in T.N. view the three-language policy as a “smokescreen” and a “backdoor” attempt to impose Hindi. They argue that, in practice, the implementation of a three-language scheme would inevitably lead to the teaching of Hindi, given the limited resources for providing additional language teachers and learning materials. Moreover, the Union Government and prominent BJP leaders have periodically advocated for the promotion of Hindi. In 2019, the Union Budget allocated ₹50 crore to support the appointment of Hindi teachers in non-Hindi speaking States. Critics contend the Centre’s actions do not match its rhetoric on promoting regional languages, as evidenced by the lack of efforts to hire adequate regional language teachers in Kendriya Vidyalayas or to ensure south Indian languages are taught in schools above the Vindhya.

Mr. Pradhan has defended the withholding of funds to T.N., making it clear that adherence to the three-language policy is non-negotiable. He urged Mr. Stalin to “rise above political differences” and criticised the State for viewing the NEP 2020 with a “myopic vision”. In response, Mr. Stalin has accused Mr. Pradhan of attempting to “impose Hindi” under the guise of the NEP’s policy. Mr. Stalin has vowed that, as long as the DMK and he are around, Tamil and T.N.’s interests will not be compromised.

What is the way forward?

The only viable solution lies in constructive dialogue and a practical compromise between the Centre and the State on an issue like education, which was transferred from the State to the concurrent list during the Emergency. Notably, T.N., with its long-standing two-language policy, has consistently outperformed many other States in key metrics such as Gross Enrolment Ratio and reduced school dropout rates. Disagreements over teaching a third language should not be allowed to derail funding for Samagra Shiksha, a comprehensive programme for education.

PROFILES

From the wings to the centre

Rekha Gupta

The 50-year-old first-time MLA, who began her political activism with the ABVP in the early 1990s, has been chosen by the BJP to lead the government following the party's return to power in Delhi after 26 years

Satvika Mahajan

The slogan 'Sabko Dekha, aa gayi Rekha' (We have seen many, now Rekha has arrived), reverberated outside Rekha Gupta's home in Shalimar Bagh on February 19, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) affirmed its faith in her as the next Chief Minister of Delhi. The first-time MLA was sworn in along with her council of Ministers the very next day at the Ramlika Maidan.

A leader with grassroots links, Ms. Gupta will oversee a new era of the BJP in the capital. The saffron party has been in the Opposition in Delhi for nearly 26 years. Hours after the BJP emerged victorious on February 8, the immediate question that came up was who would be the party's pick for the top job. There were several front-runners, including sons of former Chief Ministers, former Delhi BJP presidents, and MLAs who stood against the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) tide. But Ms. Gupta, 50, emerged as the eventual answer.

While the pick surprised many, an insider in the BJP said the party has always rewarded those who have stood quietly in the waiting wings, not making a fuss about the responsibilities and duties given to them. Ms. Gupta is a prime example of exactly that. She stood as the Mayoral Candidate of the party in Corporation polls in 2023 against the AAP's Shelly Oberoi, despite knowing that the numbers were stacked against her.

Her grooming in politics began in 1992 with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, while she was a student at Daulat Ram College, Delhi University. She went on to serve as the Delhi University Student Union president in 1996. According to BJP leaders, during this time, she worked closely with J.P. Nadda, the current party president who was then the in-charge of the Delhi wing of the Yuva Morcha, and

Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. "Rekha ji has been active in politics from the 1990s. She has brought in change, she has worked on issues of women empowerment, encouraged parents to send their girls to school, and is a role model for many young women, hoping to enter politics," a councillor at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), who had worked with Ms. Gupta, said.

Clad in a saffron saree on February 20, Ms. Gupta folded her hands greeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, other senior BJP leaders, and the crowd who had thronged the Ramlika Maidan to see her swearing in as Delhi's fourth woman Chief Minister. "While the overt reasons to pick her included the fact that the BJP was looking to project a women face and someone from the Vaisya background, which is a sizeable population in the capital, she is someone who has worked in the background of the party for years, holding personality developmental courses for first-time women councillors during her first term, among other initiatives," said a party insider.

Non-objectable face

Ms. Gupta is also a non-objectable face within the Delhi unit, as she has not sided with any factions and comes with strong ground connections, say party workers, explaining that the leader has a good sense of what the public wants. In 2014, she initiated a party membership drive on DTC (Delhi Transport Corporation) buses.

A senior BJP leader who was part of this campaign said, "we boarded buses from the terminus near Shivaji Stadium and spent whole days on the move, connecting with citizens, and asking them to join the party".

Born on July 19, 1974, in Nandgarh village, Haryana, Rekha Gupta moved to Delhi with her family at the age of two. She formally joined the party in 2002. Her father was an employee of the State Bank of India. She served as



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

the national secretary of the BJP's Yuva Morcha and made her debut in electoral politics in 2007 as an MCD Councillor.

Since then, Ms. Gupta has seen a steady rise within the BJP. She was made a National Executive Member of the party in 2012, and National General Secretary, Mahila Morcha, the women's wing of the party, in 2013. However, the journey has not always

been smooth, as she lost Assembly elections in 2015 and 2020 from Shalimar Bagh constituency. However, in 2025, Ms. Gupta became a legislator for the first time from Shalimar Bagh, defeating incumbent Bandana Kumari of the AAP, with a majority of 29,595 votes.

Ms. Gupta has been lauded for her grassroots links with people, especially party workers. "After the 2020

Assembly polls, I was made an observer to appoint a district president from her area as the party was revamping its organisational structure after the loss. During my survey of the area, we found that approximately 87% karyakartas (party workers) voted for her. I had never seen such numbers before, but when I reached out to her to discuss this, she gave three names of people that can be chosen instead of hers," said a Lok Sabha member from Delhi.

"When I asked her why not her, she said, 'I have already been awarded by the party many times, a fresh face should take the reins now instead,'" the MP told The Hindu.

BJP's promise

When Ms. Gupta was named the Chief Minister, a video from 2022 resurfaced, where she is seen breaking a microphone inside the MCD house as AAP and BJP members were clashing. Additionally, many objected to her old tweets about the AAP, and a statement from her, referring to students of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) as "freeloaders" when they had protested over hikes in hostel fees. She then encouraged people to protest against the university, stating, "I think that such a university should not exist in the country and should be stopped immediately".

But that's a different era. Now that she is the Chief Minister of Delhi, tall tasks are awaiting her. With the capital facing several challenges, and many in her Cabinet being senior to her within the party, Ms. Gupta has her job cut out. Immediately after the swearing in ceremony, accompanied by party leaders, including State BJP in-charge Bajajant Panda and Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva, Ms. Gupta told reporters that her government will not waste a single day in fulfilling the promises made by the party to Delhi — a 'Viksit Delhi for a Viksit Bharat'. For Chief Minister Gupta, 'Kaam hi Pehchan' (Work is her identity).

THE GIST

Born on July 19, 1974, in Nandgarh village, Haryana, Rekha Gupta formally joined the BJP in 2002. She served as the national secretary of the BJP's Yuva Morcha and made her debut in electoral politics in 2007 as an MCD Councillor

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A quantum phenomenon

Majorana 1

Microsoft's new quantum chip may consist of particles with unusual properties that physicists believe could be used to build qubits that are less error-prone

Vasudevan Mukunt

In a head-turning announcement earlier this week, Microsoft unveiled a new quantum chip called Majorana 1. According to its press release, it consists of four qubits made of a "new state of matter".

Qubit is short for 'quantum bit', the fundamental unit of operations in a quantum computer, similar to classical bits in conventional computers. A single qubit represents more information than a single bit. A quantum computer heightens the advantages of this ability using quantum phenomena like superposition and entanglement to solve complex mathematical problems in fewer steps than perhaps the most powerful conventional computer.

Quantum computers differ depending on their choice of qubit. For example, Google's Willow chip uses small circuits that mimic the properties of atoms in a quantum state. Microsoft has said its new chip uses Majorana particles, elusive subatomic entities supposed to appear in materials called topological superconductors. These particles have unusual properties that physicists believe could be used to build qubits that are less error-prone than the designs Google and IBM use.

"Topological qubits can win if, and only if, they turn out to be so much more reliable than they leapfrog the earlier ap-



proaches..." University of Texas at Austin professor Scott Aaronson wrote on his blog, "Whether that will happen is still an open question, to put it extremely mildly."

A physics primer

If you cool some water vapour, it will become water and then ice. If you keep lowering the temperature until nearly absolute zero, the system will have minimal thermal energy, allowing quantum states of matter to show. In the 1970s, Michael Kostleritz and David Thouless found that the surface of superfluid helium sometimes developed microscopic vortices that moved in pairs. When they raised the temperature, the vortices decoupled and moved freely. It was a new kind of quantum phase transition: the object's topological attributes changed in response to changes in energy.

Topology is the study of the properties an object retains when it is deformed continuously, e.g. when it is stretched but not ruptured. Topological materials are materials with topologically protected states:

the 'protection' keeps the state stable against impurities or small disturbances. For example, a vortex in a bucket of water will fade as it loses kinetic energy. But vortices in superfluid helium are topologically protected. With the right internal conditions, they will keep spinning. Only quantum physics allows this. Similarly, topological superconductors are materials whose ability to conduct an electric current without resistance is topologically protected. The signature of a topological superconductor is its ability to host Majorana particles. These materials are not found in nature. Instead, scientists engineer them in the lab to have the combination of internal properties that allows Majorana particles to exist. Microsoft has reportedly used aluminium arsenide with indium.

A fundamental tension But since the announcement, independent experts have asked whether the new chip really has Majorana particles. Many previous attempts, including some sponsored by Mi-

crosoft, that claimed to have found these particles were later overturned by further scrutiny.

Microsoft's press release also claimed that a paper simultaneously published in *Nature* provided "peer-reviewed confirmation" that its team had created signature of a topological superconductor for use as qubits — but the paper, authored by the same team, stated that the work therein didn't test whether the particles were really Majorana. Microsoft researcher Chetan Nayak later clarified on Mr. Aaronson's blog that the team submitted the paper to *Nature* in March 2024 and that team members have "continued to make progress in the intervening year".

The contradiction still subtracted from confidence in Microsoft's claims because it had leaped from a paper describing older work to a press release making new claims. This is a familiar problem: when the private sector does cutting-edge research, its need to protect IP may prevent it from sharing all the information necessary to confirm the validity of a claim, at the expense of doing right by the research community whose approval it seeks.

For now, scientific opinion about the alleged prowess of Majorana 1 is uneven but also mostly sceptical. Microsoft thus has a lot to gain, or lose, by showing the chip at work, but its actions may have left it with little choice.

Chief of polls

Gyanesh Kumar

The Kerala cadre IAS officer is taking over as the CEC at a time when the Centre is pushing legislation to introduce simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Sreeparna Chakrabarty

Gyanesh Kumar, who took over as the 26th Chief Election Commissioner of India earlier this week, comes to the top position with the image of a man who delivers with a smile. People who have interacted with him during his various stints in the government recall an affable bureaucrat always welcoming with a cup of 'kahlwa' (spiced green tea).

Mr. Kumar is also known to be a bureaucrat "thorough with his paperwork", and "ready to burn the midnight oil". During his tenure in the Union Home Ministry, he headed the Jammu and Kashmir desk and played a key role in policy implementation after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir into the two Union territories of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir. He was also given the responsibility to formulate the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill by the Narendra Modi government.

During his five-year tenure in the Home Ministry, he was involved in the setting up of the 'Ram Jambhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust', which was another key focus area of the Modi government. "This is how he gained the trust of Union Home Minister Amit Shah," a source said.

Mr. Kumar would also be one of the longest serving CECs with an uninter-



rupted tenure of nearly four years till January 2029. This, combined with his expertise in doing spade work for sensitive legislation, is likely to be used by the government for implementing the key electoral reform of holding simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

Two Bills, which aim to achieve One Nation One Election — "The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill, 2024" and the "Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill, 2024", were introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17 last year after the Union Cabinet accepted the recommendation of a high-level committee on the issue headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind. A Joint Committee of Parliament is examining both the Bills.

Mammoth exercise

If passed, the Bills will allow simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies in 2024 if the five-year cycle of the legislature is not broken by early dissolution. As the CEC, Mr. Kumar and his suc-

cessors will have to lay the groundwork for this mammoth exercise to fruition.

The Election Commission had earlier flagged that there was a need for a lead time for the production of Electronic Voting Machines and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPAT), plans for their storage and maintenance, and administrative requirements to roll out simultaneous polls.

The importance of Mr. Kumar's tenure during this key period can be gauged from the fact that he was both the first Election Commissioner and the first Chief Election Commissioner to be appointed under the new law, the 'Chief Election Commissioner (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023'.

The Opposition has claimed that the process followed under this law gives dominance to the ruling party in the selection process.

A 1988 batch Kerala cadre officer of the Indian Administrative Services, Gyanesh Kumar retired as Secretary in the Ministry of

Cooperation on January 31, 2024.

After completing his B. Tech in Civil Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, he studied Business Finance from the Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts and Environmental Economics from Harvard University.

Stints in Kerala

He has worked in the Government of Kerala in various capacities as sub-collector of Adoor, managing director of the Kerala State Development Corporation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Municipal Commissioner of the Corporation of Cochin, MD of Kerala State Cooperative Bank, District Collector of Ernakulam, Secretary of Goshree Islands Development Authority, MD of Trivandrum Airport Development Society and Resident Commissioner of Kerala House in New Delhi.

As Secretary to the Government of Kerala, he has handled diverse departmental issues such as Finance Projects, Public Works Department, Modernising Government Programme, and Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs.

At the Centre, he has worked as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Defence, Joint Secretary and Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Secretary in the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Secretary in the Ministry of Cooperation.

How glacier ice algae accelerate Greenland ice sheet melting

The Hindu Bureau

A new study reveals that dark-pigmented microalgae, which contribute to the melting of the Greenland ice sheet, are highly efficient at nutrient uptake and growth, allowing them to rapidly colonise expanding areas of exposed ice. The findings suggest that these algae can persist and spread without the need for additional nutrient in-

puts, intensifying ice sheet darkening and accelerating melt rates. The results were published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

They utilised cutting-edge single-cell imaging techniques to examine the carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus content of glacier ice algae. By measuring their nutrient assimilation rates, the study found that these algae store phos-

phorus internally and maintain exceptionally high carbon-to-nutrient ratios, indicating a survival strategy finely tuned to nutrient-poor glacier environments.

'Crucial insights'

"Our study provides crucial insights into how glacier ice algae sustain themselves in such extreme conditions," Dr James Bradley from the Queen Mary

University of London and a co-author of the paper said in a release. "They don't require large amounts of external nutrients to grow, which means that as the ice sheet continues to melt and expose more bare ice, these algae are well-positioned to expand their coverage. This is particularly concerning because their dark pigmentation lowers the ice's reflectivity, increasing heat absorption

and accelerating melting and therefore sea-level rise."

The melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet is the single largest contributor of freshwater to global sea-level rise. Previous research has shown that algal blooms on the ice sheet's western margin can enhance melt rates by 10 to 13%. However, the factors controlling algal growth have remained unclear.

This new study highlights how these resilient microorganisms can optimise their nutrient intake, ensuring their survival and expansion despite the nutrient-poor conditions of the ice sheet.

By revealing the self-sufficiency of these algae, the study underscores the urgent need to incorporate biological processes into climate models predicting ice sheet melt.

SNAPSHOTS



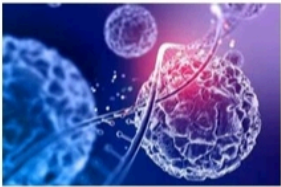
Exoplanet's atmosphere show a unique climate

Astronomers have for the first time peered through the atmosphere of a planet beyond the Solar System and some 900 light-years away in the constellation Puppis, mapping its 3D structure. By combining all four telescope units of the European Southern Observatory's Very Large Telescope, they found powerful winds due to extreme temperature contrasts between the star-facing and far side carrying chemical elements like iron and titanium, creating weather patterns across the planet's atmosphere.



740,000 global deaths from suicide occur annually

About 740,000 suicides are reported annually, which is one death on average every 43 seconds, a comprehensive analysis reveals. Males die from suicide at twice the rate of females. Over the last three decades, the global age-standardised mortality rate for suicide declined by nearly 40%, from about 15 deaths per 1,00,000 to nine deaths per 1,00,000, indicating that intervention and prevention are working. For females, the rate declined by more than 50%, while it declined by almost 34% for males.



CAR-T immune treatment keeps cancer in remission

A woman who received CAR-T cell therapy to treat a nerve-cell cancer, a rare childhood cancer, when she was four years old is still cancer-free 19 years later, the longest reported cancer remission following the treatment. She received the therapy — which uses engineered immune cells called CAR-T cells — in 2006. Since then, CAR-T cell therapies have proved highly effective in some blood cancers, but researchers have struggled to repeat that success against solid tumours.

Why are States asked to use untested AI tool for TB screening?

The Central TB Division informed the States in end-January this year to "consider utilising" the DeepCXR tool only when the States reached out to CTD seeking AI solutions to analyse chest X-ray images

R. Prasad

Even as time is running out to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of "eliminating" TB by 2025, the Health Ministry appears to be moving at glacial speed and is largely disinterested. A report submitted by the Health Technology Assessment of India (HTAI) committee in February 2024 on two indigenously developed solutions to screen people with presumptive and subclinical TB using AI-assisted chest X-ray interpretation was posted on the HTAI website only on December 6, 2024. The two indigenously developed solutions are qXR from the Bengaluru-based Qure.ai and Genki from Pune's DeepTek.

HTA assessment of a new technology or tool for cost-effectiveness and efficacy in terms of sensitivity and specificity is not mandatory. However, the Central TB Division (CTD) waits for the HTA report and approval by the Medical Technology Assessment Board (MTAB) chaired by Niti Aayog and involves stakeholders including itself before programmatic implementation of any new tool, technology or treatment regimen using novel drugs for TB. For instance, TrueNat for TB diagnosis was validated by ICMR's National Institute of Research in Tuberculosis (NIRT), Chennai before it was assessed by the HTA before it was included in the TB programme. Similarly, the

Sidestepping HTA assessment

HTA assessment of a new technology or tool is not mandatory

Two indigenous solutions to screen people with presumptive TB using AI-assisted chest X-ray interpretation have been greenlighted by Health Assessment Technology (HTA)

The HTA report submitted in February 2024 was uploaded in the Health Technology Assessment of India website only on December 6, 2024

Despite the assessment by HTA and approval by Medical Technology Assessment Board, the tools are not recommended for programmatic implementation

The Central TB Division has recommended the Institute for Plasma Research's tool DeepCXR, which is available for free, in the TB programme even without an HTA assessment

There is no published paper about DeepCXR's sensitivity and specificity, and performance in field settings

The Central TB Division did not communicate to the States its recommendation for programmatic introduction of DeepCXR

In end-January 2025, States were told to consider utilising the DeepCXR tool only when the States reached out to the Central TB Division

BPaLM/BPaL regimen for MDR-TB treatment was tested in a phase 3/4 trial by NIRT and then assessed by HTA before being included in the TB programme by the Central TB Division.

Surprisingly, despite the assessment and approval of the two AI tools by the HTA and MTAB, respectively, the Central TB Division has not included them for programmatic implementation. However, even in the absence of an HTA assessment, the CTD has "recommended for programmatic introduction" a similar AI tool — DeepCXR — developed by the Institute for Plasma Research, Gandhinagar. An ICMR expert committee had approved the AI tool for "use under the national TB programme".

Worse, CTD failed to officially communicate to the States that it was recom-

mending the use of the DeepCXR tool in the TB programme. Instead, CTD informed the States in end-January this year to "consider utilising" the DeepCXR tool only when the States reached out to CTD seeking AI solutions to analyse chest X-ray images. And the 100-day TB elimination campaign began on December 7, 2024. As per CTD, the DeepCXR technology is available for free for use in the national TB programme.

As per a January-February 2020 review paper in the journal *Neurology India*, the Institute for Plasma Research had trained the AI tool using 6,000-30,000 chest X-ray images with an "overall accuracy of 93% on a test dataset". Documents show that the AI tool has been trained using 54,000 X-rays and validated using 14,000 X-rays from "multiple datasets

from more than 18 sites, with an average accuracy of over 96%". There is no information on whether the DeepCXR tool is routinely used at any site for TB screening. Except for claims made in some documents and presentations, there is not a single published paper about the tool's sensitivity and specificity and performance in field settings.

In contrast, there are a number of published studies on large patient populations where the performance of qXR and Genki has been evaluated. In fact, the qXR tool from Qure.ai with over 90% sensitivity and more than 70% specificity in people older than 15 years was one of the three AI algorithms that the WHO had referenced when updating the TB screening guidelines in March 2021. The qXR technology has been imple-

mented in over 3,100 sites across 90 countries, and in about 490 sites in 25 States in India, and Genki has been implemented in over 80 sites across 15 States.

As per the HTA assessment, both qXR and Genki have been found to be cost-effective. The cost per case interpreted/screened is ₹30 in the case of qXR and ₹22 for Genki. The pooled sensitivity and specificity of the two interventions are 90% and 68%, respectively, which meets WHO's non-inferior accuracy for TB screening. Both solutions were also found to be cost-effective. "Based on threshold analysis, the qXR technology will be cost-saving up to ₹400 per screening and Genki will be cost-effective up to ₹35 per screening," says Dr. So-men Saha, Professor at the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH), Gandhinagar and the Principal Investigator of the HTA assessment committee for the two AI tools.

Useful interpretation

The importance of using chest X-rays for screening presumptive and subclinical TB cases cannot be overemphasised. 42.6% and 39% TB cases during the National TB Prevalence Survey 2019-2021 and TB prevalence survey in Tamil Nadu (2021-2022), respectively, were detected only because a chest X-ray was used for screening. AI-assisted X-ray interpretation takes less than a minute, has high accuracy, reduces the cost of TB detection, and can be used in resource-limited settings.

Powering a sustainable future



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

Dr. Balasubramanian

Generating electricity by burning coal leads to considerable air pollution, which affects human and animal health. Recently, Dr Kirat Singh and colleagues from Stanford Doerr School of Sustainability, the U.S. have shown that in India nitrogen dioxide and ozone emissions from coal-fired power plants diminish yields of staple crops like wheat and rice. Using quantitative methods, they estimate that annual losses are in excess of 10% in parts of India. This works out to a loss of about six years' worth of growth in average yield in recent years. The productivity of our crops has risen due to improved varieties, better irrigation and mechanisation, and this reduction in yield is a point of concern.

Wheat is largely grown in the central and northern states, while rice is mainly produced in southern and eastern states. The amount of coal left in these areas is estimated by the Ministry of Coal to last for the next 120 years. Coal-fired power generation has been used for India's electricity supply since its introduction in 1920 at Hussain Sagar, Hyderabad, under the Nizam's rule, using British equipment. This method is still being used in India, with some improvement over the years. We thus need to think of other methods to generate electricity.

Cleaner methods

One method is from the 'ground to the wind'. This involves the use of wind power by placing windmills to generate electricity. Nine windy States of India generate as much as 50 Gigawatts (GW) of electricity. India is the fourth largest wind power maker in the world. Several private companies have installed



On top: The top five dams in India together generate 50 GW of hydroelectricity.

windmills that produce electricity for urban and rural Indians.

The second method is 'Sun to the land', which uses energy from sunlight. This involves setting up solar panels on houses and buildings or on large-scale solar farms. These panels absorb sunlight and convert light into electricity. These solar roofs are already very popular, and the Central and State govern-

ments offer subsidies to those who install solar panels.

The third method is 'Block a river and generate power'. This involves stopping a part of a river to make electricity, besides offering water for agriculture in areas where the river flows. When a river's water is blocked by a dam and then released, the resultant energy is used to generate electric power. The

top five dams across India together generate as much as 50 GWs (Gigawatts) of hydroelectricity.

The fourth one is when a river flows into the sea. A review paper published in *Nano Research Energy* discusses how electrical energy can be produced when river waters flow into sea water, which is saltier. This osmotic pressure difference has been used by Dr Javad Sa-

faei at the Centre for Clean Engineering Technology, University of Sydney, Australia. Likewise, engineers at Penn State, U.S. have generated electricity osmotic pressure differences. India has a vast coastline of 7,500 km, where rivers from the west, south and east drain into the sea, and this technology can effectively generate electricity. Here is an opportunity for Indian scientists and technologists to rise to the challenge.

And the fifth method is to use nuclear reactors for peaceful purposes and generate electricity. Nuclear power plants use nuclear fission to heat water, create steam, and spin turbines to generate electricity.

The set of eight nuclear power plants in India together generate 3.5 GW of electricity.

Given all these, let us give up coal to generate electricity, which pollutes the country.



Question Corner

Dream recall

What makes us remember our dreams?

A new study has explored the factors that influence 'dream recall' — the ability to remember dreams upon awakening — and uncovers which individual traits and sleep patterns shape this phenomenon. The study revealed that people with a positive attitude toward dreams and a tendency for mind-wandering were more likely to recall their dreams. Individuals who experienced longer periods of light sleep had a greater likelihood of waking with a memory of their dreams. Younger participants showed higher rates of dream recall, while older

individuals often experienced 'white dreams' (a sensation of having dream without recalling any details). This suggests age-related changes in memory processes during sleep. Moreover, seasonal variations emerged, with participants reporting lower dream recall during winter compared to spring, hinting at the potential influence of environmental or circadian factors. Thus dream recall is a reflection of how personal attitudes, cognitive traits, and sleep dynamics interact.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

TAMIL NADU

A murder story with many versions

The kith and kin of the two youth who were murdered in Mayiladuthurai district recently believe that the rampant trade in smuggled liquor was the motive behind the brazen crime, though the police deny such links. **Nacchinarkkiniyan M.** visits the spot to unravel the truth



Violent backlash: On the night of February 14, village residents and relatives of the victims attacked the home of one of the accused, hours after the murders in Mayiladuthurai district. They damaged motorbikes and household items. **M. MOORTHY**

Despite the Tamil Nadu government's efforts to curb brewing and sale of illicit liquor, bootlegging continues to thrive in districts bordering Puducherry. In many cases, the trade has survived owing to lackadaisical police response and the significant difference between the prices of liquor in Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory. The State has again been forced to confront the consequences of failure to regulate bootlegging, after a double murder in Mayiladuthurai, where two 20-year-old youth were allegedly killed after villagers filed complaints against those involved in smuggling and selling of illicit liquor.

Around 7.30 p.m. on February 14, four friends — Dinesh; Ajay; Ajay's elder brother K. Harish, 20; and B. Harisakthi, 20 — got together at the entrance of their street at Muttam, a village in the Agarakkeerangudi panchayat in the Perambur police station limits. The village is home to over 175 Dalit families and 25 families of other castes. Harish, who had completed his polytechnic education and was working in Chennai for the past few months, had come to the village on February 12 to visit his family. Harisakthi, a resident of the Pattamangalam panchayat, had arrived at Muttam that evening to spend time with relatives.

Around the same time, another group arrived at the spot, allegedly in an inebriated condition. This group, which included Muvendhan, 24; his elder brother Thangadurai, 28; and Rajkumar, 34, was armed with sharp weapons. Without provocation, they attacked the four friends. Harish sustained severe abdominal injuries, while Harisakthi was stabbed in the back. Ajay suffered hand injuries, and Dinesh escaped with minor wounds. Harish and Harisakthi were rushed to the Mayiladuthurai Government Hospital but died on the way.

R. Karikalachozhan, a relative of Harisakthi, said, "Our people were furious after our boys died. Around midnight, a crowd searched for Muvendhan's family and Rajkumar, but they had fled by then. The residents damaged their houses." A section of the residents staged a protest. The main accused — Muvendhan, Thangadurai, and Rajkumar — were arrested on February 15. In the following days, the police arrested K. Sanjay, 22, for allegedly helping the accused persons evade arrest. They also arrested Muvendhan's parents, Munusamy and Manjula, for their alleged involvement in the crime. Residents claim Muvendhan's sister had been present at the scene, though her role remains unclear.

Disputed motive

There are claims and counter-claims, primarily about the reasons for the violence, about Harish's age (which the police initially said was 25), and about the antecedents of those involved. Neither of the deceased had any criminal cases, according to their families and the police. In contrast, Rajkumar had been arrested on February 11 for selling illicit liquor and released on February 14, hours before the attack. Thangadurai faces two cases relating to illicit liquor trade, one filed in 2022 and the other in 2024.

In Mayiladuthurai, the Perambur as well as Porayar police limits have checkpoints at Nalladai and Nandalar, bordering Karaikal in the Union Territory. A persistent problem here has been the smuggling of cheap liquor from Karaikal.

Muttam residents say illegal liquor trade is rampant in their area, with alcohol smuggled from Karaikal being sold extensively. According to them, repeated complaints to the police prompted the accused persons to seek revenge. However, the district police denied any connection

I worked tirelessly to educate my sons, hoping that Harish would change the fortunes of our family. The accused persons have harassed several families here for reporting illegal liquor sales. It is disheartening that the police are framing this as a case of personal enmity.

K. RAMA,
mother of Harish

tion between the killings and illicit liquor sale. In a press statement issued on February 15, they said the murders were a sequel to a verbal altercation among individuals from the same locality.

The police said Muvendhan had a dispute with Dinesh. On the evening of February 13, an argument broke out between the two and turned into a fight, prompting the residents to intervene. The police said that except Dinesh, the other victims had no enmity with the accused persons. The statement rejected claims linking the incident to liquor smuggling and urged the media to avoid spreading misinformation.

Within two days of the murders, Perambur police station inspector Nagavalli and constable Prabhakaran were transferred and put on compulsory wait by Deputy Inspector-General of Police (Thanjavur Range) Ziaul Haque. Mayiladuthurai Superintendent of Police G. Stalin told *The Hindu* that initial inquiries pointed to personal enmity between Dinesh and the accused persons as the primary motive. However, as the investigation progresses, new details are emerging, and the police are open to considering all possible motives.

Families reject police version

Harisakthi, a third-year engineering student in Kumbakonam, was the eldest son of K. Balamurugan, a temple priest in a small village, and B. Gowri, a homemaker. His mother, struggling with unpaid college fees and house rent, described him as quiet and reserved. "At home, he would stay in his room or visit Muttam, where he had friends," she said. "Liquor sales have been happening there for long. Though my son had never filed a complaint, the accused persons were suspicious of everyone. Past relationships mean nothing when profit is at stake."

Harish's mother, K. Rama, is part of the house-keeping staff at a local arts college. She earns ₹5,400 a month. Rama is distraught after losing her son. Her husband, C. Kalyanakumar, has been mostly unemployed for a decade owing to health issues. Their younger son, Ajay, 19, is the complainant in the case. "I worked tirelessly to educate my sons, hoping that Harish would change the fortunes of our family," said Ms. Rama. "But now, I have lost him, and my purpose in life. The accused have harassed several families here for reporting illegal liquor sales. It is disheartening that the police are framing this as a case of personal enmity."

On February 15, CPI(M) members staged a



Prohibition enforcement laws are outdated. Even if an individual is caught, he employs his brother or associate to continue the trade. This cycle keeps the illegal liquor flow uninterrupted.

A POLICE OFFICER,
Prohibition Enforcement Wing

protest near the town bus stand, demanding the arrest of the Perambur inspector for allegedly shielding liquor smugglers. Party district committee member G. Stalin accused the police of acting under political pressure and downplaying the scale of liquor smuggling and sale. He pointed out that while the police initially attributed the murders to personal enmity, the sudden transfer of two officers raised suspicions.

He alleged that the police had leaked the identities of those who reported illicit liquor sales, leading to threats and attacks. Muttam, a predominantly farming village, has recorded an increase in first-generation college students, many of whom have opposed the liquor trade affecting their families. The CPI(M) claimed that a nexus between the police at the Puducherry border checkpoints and the Perambur station officers facilitated liquor smuggling.

During festivals like Thai Pongal, liquor smuggled from Karaikal floods the market. Unemployed youth exploit the price difference — liquor rates in Puducherry are nearly half of those in Tamil Nadu — turning smuggling into a profitable venture.

During a visit to Muttam and the Nalladai checkpoint, which connects Mayiladuthurai and Puducherry, this correspondent observed a liquor shop, a bar, and a toddy shop, all operating on the border. With no residential settlements nearby, the location appears to be strategically placed to attract customers. Beyond the small bridge connecting Nalladai and Karaikal, there are vast stretches of farmland and waterways that make smuggling easier.

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi's regional organising secretary A. Velu Kubendran demanded compensation for the families of the victims and strict action against those responsible, including police officers. He said illicit liquor sales affected Dalit and working-class communities more.



Irreparable loss: B. Gowri, mother of Harisakthi, and K. Rama, the mother of Harish, are inconsolable. **M. MOORTHY**



In Puducherry, the price of a 60-ml liquor bottle starts at ₹20, while a 180-ml quarter is available from ₹40. In contrast, in Tamil Nadu, the cheapest 180-ml quarter of brandy costs ₹45. Additionally, Puducherry offers more varieties of liquor than Tamil Nadu. The significant price difference encourages a section of youth and traders to procure liquor and arrack from Puducherry and sell them in Tamil Nadu at higher prices. The problem is particularly rampant in districts bordering Puducherry and Karaikal.

Mr. Stalin, the Superintendent of Police, refuted claims made by protesters and political parties about the prevalence of illicit liquor sales at Muttam. He said some allegations were exaggerated, particularly those suggesting that multiple complaints had been filed. "While some allege that multiple complaints were filed regarding illicit liquor sales in the village, we have officially received only one complaint so far. The accused persons do not have multiple cases against them to be branded as professional liquor smugglers or sellers," he said.

To curb liquor smuggling, measures were being taken to strengthen border security in key areas, he said. Additionally, as part of a community outreach programme, the police plan to conduct awareness camps in schools and colleges.

Political uproar

The murders sparked a political uproar, with parties criticising the DMK government for failing to check bootlegging and liquor smuggling. AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami accused the government of fostering an environment wherein those making complaints were threatened or even killed.

Mr. Palaniswami also questioned the police's preliminary statements attributing the murders to personal enmity and demanded a thorough probe.

BJP State President K. Annamalai blamed the murders on the sale of illicit liquor. "Illicit liquor is flowing like a river in Tamil Nadu. The State is going through a situation worse than the dark period of DMK rule between 2006 and 2017," he wrote on social media.

PMK founder S. Ramadoss alleged that the police were trying to hide the truth and sought compensation for the affected families. CPI(M) State secretary P. Shanmugam rejected the police claims of personal enmity and said the murders were linked to liquor trade.

The police say they have maintained continuous vigil against illegal liquor. Till February 17, 2025, 208 cases were registered and 222 accused persons arrested in the district. A total of 2,531 litres of contraband was seized. In 2024, 3,547 cases were registered and 3,603 accused persons were arrested. A total of 74,975 litres of contraband was seized.

Lack of enforcement mechanism

A section of the police officers feels that the prohibition enforcement laws are outdated and ineffective in tackling the problem. Bail for those caught smuggling liquor is granted within two days. A person must have been caught with large quantities of liquor and remanded at least twice to qualify for detention under the Goondas Act.

An officer of the Prohibition Enforcement Wing says, "Even if an individual is caught, he employs his brother or associate to continue the trade. This cycle keeps the illegal liquor flow uninterrupted." The lack of stringent punishment and an enforcement mechanism allows smuggling to thrive, posing a challenge to the authorities trying to stamp out the menace.

ODISHA

The relics of Ratnagiri

The discovery of a 1.4-metre-tall Buddha head, along with tablets and stupas, some over 1,500 years old, in Odisha's Ratnagiri has brought the remote village into the limelight and attracted scholars from as far away as Egypt. The excavation has unearthed important historical details, such as Ratnagiri once being a major centre of Tantric Buddhism, while posing unforeseen problems for the experts, reports Satyasundar Barik

In repose: The Buddha head, discovered in December 2024, is the largest ever found in the State. The excavation at the site is likely to continue until the end of March, after which it will be impossible due to the harsh summer sun. BISWANJAN ROUT

In December 1 2024, a group of archaeologists, students, and labourers gathered at a mound in the southern part of the 18-acre Ratnagiri Buddhist heritage site in Odisha's Jajpur district to unearth the remnants of history that still lay hidden beneath the surface. The expectations were mixed, but there was no doubt that resuming excavations after six decades would shed new light on Buddhism's influence in the region.

As the days passed, the rhythmic swings of pickaxes and the delicate strokes of brushes gradually revealed the relics. Every inch of the earth seemed to hold a trace of history. Still, no one in the group anticipated that on that wintry morning, they would discover a breathtaking piece of Buddhist heritage – an intact, massive Buddha head lying face down.

Ratnagiri is no stranger to Buddha sculptures made of Khondalite stone. Dozens of such carvings have been unearthed in the area. But when experts measured the massive Buddha head, which took nearly two months to dig out completely, they found it to be 1.4 metres tall – the largest ever discovered in Odisha.

The excavation at the site is likely to continue until the end of March, after which it will be impossible due to the harsh summer sun. Then, further analysis will be done to determine whether the centuries-old sculpture could be the largest Buddha head ever found in India.

"It [Buddha head] was magnificent. There were wrinkles on its neck. I was amazed at the level of expertise people had back then, carving such sharp and intricate features without modern tools. Besides the colossal head, we also found two other Buddha heads lying nearby," recalls Dibishada Brajasundar Garnayak, the Superintending Archaeologist of Puri Circle.

The team subsequently found more stone-carved parts, including palms and fingers, which, along with the head, are believed to belong to a huge sculpture of Buddha in a meditating posture.

Hills of jewels
Ratnagiri, which means 'Hills of jewels' in Odia, is located on a hillock in the Assia hill range in Jajpur and encircled by the rivers Brahmani, Kimira, and Birupa and their tributaries. The village is situated around 100 km from Bhubaneswar and is part of the 'Diamond Triangle', a collection of three Buddhist sites – Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri – located in a 10-km radius.

Archaeologists believe this landscape was strategically chosen for Buddhist establishments. Its once-secluded nature made it ideal for spiritual and scholarly pursuits.

Moreover, it is believed that the rulers of the time provided land to sustain the monastic settlements, ensuring the residents' livelihood and financial support for their rituals.

According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the historical significance of Ratnagiri came to light in 1906 when Manmohan Chakravarti, the then Sub-Divisional Officer of Jajpur, first reported Buddhist relics from the heritage site. Later, in 1927, R.P. Chanda, an Archaeological Section Superintendent at the Indian Museum Kolkata, visited the site as part of his exploration of Odisha's heritage.

Further exploration followed in 1928 when Haran Chandra Chakladar, a lecturer at Calcutta University, surveyed the hills of Lalitgiri, Udayagiri, and Ratnagiri.

Alarmed by the threat of treasure hunters, the archaeologists urged the ASI to conduct a thorough survey for preservation. This led to a systematic excavation from 1958 to 1961 supervised by Debala Mitra, then Superintendent of Archaeology (Eastern Circle), who would go on to become the first woman Director General of the ASI. Mitra was 33 when she reached the remote site. Over time, she gained the trust of the villagers and unearthed hidden Buddhist treasures.



It [Buddha head] was magnificent. There were wrinkles on its neck. I was amazed at the level of expertise people had back then, carving such sharp and intricate features without modern tools.

DIBISHADA BRAJASUNDAR GARNAYAK
Superintending Archaeologist of Puri Circle

Based on the findings from sculptural and epigraphic remains, the earliest Buddhist settlement at Ratnagiri has been dated to the 5th century AD. It flourished until the 13th century. Over time, its significance declined, leading to its eventual abandonment. However, Buddhist activities in the area continued till the 16th century. Ratnagiri's historical importance is well-documented through various sources, including historical records, inscriptions, and literary evidence. A copper plate charter of Somavamsi King Karna, unearthed during excavations, confirmed that it was once a major centre for Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism).

The place was identified as Ratnagiri based on seals bearing the legend of 'Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihara Arya Bhikshu Sangha'.

Larger picture

"After getting approval from the ASI Director General, an excavation was carried out in the Ratnagiri Buddhist complex in December 2024. The objective was to look out for partially visible archaeological remains and trace out any 'chaitya griha' (shrine complex) at the site," says Garnayak.

He explains that such shrines have been found in the nearby sites of Udayagiri and Lalitgiri. The discovery of such a structure in Ratnagiri would connect it with the major Buddhist sites in Odisha and neighbouring States.

The excavation has uncovered three sculpted heads of varying sizes, a monolithic elephant sculpture, and hundreds of votive stupas, ranging from simple to highly ornamented. Brick and stone masonry structures have also been discovered during the excavation.

Smaller votives – stone-carved pieces depicting divinities – have been found arranged in a line, reflecting the Vajrayana practice of making offerings upon the fulfillment of wishes. The abundance of votives suggests that the site attracted a large number of visitors.

Stone tablets of different sizes, inscribed in Sanskrit using the Kutila script (Siddhamatrika), have also been found at the site. The ceramic assemblage is dominated by fine grey ware in various shapes and sizes. The niches in the votive stupas are believed to have once housed male and female divinities associated with Buddhism, further reinforcing the site's significance as a Vajrayana Buddhist centre.

The notable discoveries include a lion pedestal (Buddha's Simhasana) and votive sculptures of Buddhist deities, such as Amoghasiddhi, one of the five wisdom Buddhas of the Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition; Ratnasambhava, one of the five meditating Buddhas; Akshobhya, another wisdom Buddha; Amitabha, one of the most widely worshipped Buddhist figures in Mahayana Buddhism; Tara, a female Buddha who is a consort of Amoghasiddhi Buddha; Marici, a pop-

ular goddess in Buddhism; Padmapani, a Bodhisattva; and Cunda, the smith who gave Gautama Buddha his last meal.

Ratnagiri consists of two monasteries where Buddhist followers once lived, meditated, and studied. It also includes a massive stupa, which symbolises veneration.

The statues, crafted from various types of rock, stand as evidence of the vast influence of Buddhist followers who might have travelled to faraway places or come from other regions. Renowned for their mastery in brick-making, they produced bricks that have remained intact till today, showing no signs of corrosion.

While a 'chaitya griha', of the kind seen in the two nearby archaeological sites, has not been found in Ratnagiri, the excavation has revealed a shrine complex with a different shape. "The presence of votive stupas in an arranged sequence points towards the shrine complex's existence," says Pragnan Pratima Pradhan, the Assistant Superintending Archaeologist who supervises excavations at the site.

Pradhan says the excavation work on the site is still in the preliminary stages. "More time is needed to fully decode the structures and determine their purpose. Some remains indicate the presence of four walls constituting a room, but not all structures were built simultaneously; they were constructed at different times."

He adds, "The scattered remains of structures, sculptures, votives, and stupas suggest possible vandalism at some point in time. Given the sheer weight of the sculptures, such devastation is unlikely to have been caused by a natural disaster. While

KEARNATH DAS
Ratnagiri resident

an earthquake could have overturned structures, the intact condition of neighbouring sites rules out this possibility."

Meanwhile, the excavation has sparked immense interest among academics, students, and area residents.

Asad Sayeed from the Centre for Maritime Archaeology and Underwater Cultural Heritage at Alexandria University in Egypt and Rajat Gajhiye, a PhD scholar at Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Institute of Archaeology in Greater Noida, have joined the dig. Students from Odisha's Utkal University have also flocked to the site, eager to discover relics linked to Buddhist heritage.

"I have visited nearly all the Buddhist sites, including nearby Udayagiri and Lalitgiri. The sculptures unearthed here exhibit mature facial features that have evolved over time. The artisans of Ratnagiri demonstrated greater precision com-

pared to those who worked at the other sites. The remarkable fineness of these sculptures is likely the result of months of meticulous polishing with various materials," says Gajhiye.

Problem of plenty

Kedarnath Das, 42, a resident of Ratnagiri, is happy – not only because the excavation provided him with five months of work as a labourer but also because the new discoveries have brought Ratnagiri into the spotlight. "In our village, you can't walk far without stumbling upon some Buddhist heritage. Yet, Ratnagiri's full potential as one of the biggest Buddhist heritage sites remains unrealised," says Das.

Yet, the abundance of relics presents its own set of challenges.

A walk through Ratnagiri reveals Buddhist monuments that have been repurposed in various ways. Some votive stupas now serve as bases for Tulsi plants used in daily worship, while bricks and stones from ancient structures have been integrated into houses. Other intricately carved Buddha sculptures adorn the walls of houses as decorative pieces.

"There is no doubt that villagers have unintentionally used these artefacts for different purposes. We have appealed to the public to return them for preservation and further study. So far, we believe the villagers are not opposed to the idea," says the Superintending Archaeologist of Puri Circle.

No one seems to know why the Central and State governments have not prevented further habitation on the hillock.

"We don't enjoy living on steep slopes where the lanes aren't even suitable for cycles. We also understand that more Buddhist heritage might lie beneath our houses. But we need viable alternatives before we can move out," says Basanti Mallick, a resident.

Some villagers, however, resist the idea of further excavation, as it encroaches upon their private land. "The current excavation is happening on our family's land. We need proper compensation for our loss," says Rajendra Panda. Authorities, however, dismiss these claims, pointing out that many names in the land records are listed as caretakers. Under archaeological laws, the authorities argue, such claims do not hold.

Archaeologists have expanded their work beyond excavation, incorporating site catchment analysis, a method of examining the areas surrounding a site that can support its inhabitants by providing the necessary resources. A vast Buddhist centre like Ratnagiri, where scriptures indicate that 500 followers once lived, studied, and worshipped, could not have thrived without a strong support system, they feel.

"The inhabitants of Ratnagiri must have travelled to nearby areas to fetch water, gather food, and source materials for construction while also interacting with local communities. Our researchers are now exploring a 10-kilometre radius around Ratnagiri to uncover relics that substantiate this hypothesis," says Mr. Garnayak.

Soil within 1.5 km of Ratnagiri has been found suitable for brick-making. Soil samples have been sent to a laboratory for testing and matching with bricks from the Ratnagiri heritage site.

The ASI will conduct further studies to find out the temperature and provenance of potteries discovered from the excavation site, as well as the building techniques and iconography. It will also try to interpret the scriptures with the help of experts. Archaeologists believe that both the Centre and the State governments need to rethink their approach to Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, and Udayagiri. They argue that these sites should be viewed as part of a unified Buddhist heritage rather than studied in isolation and that an integrated perspective could help uncover the region's rich heritage more comprehensively.

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At work: ASI officials and labourers at the heritage site; Buddhist sculptures have been repurposed by the village residents. BISWANJAN ROUT



REFLECTIONS

[THE BIG PICTURE]

Why climate leadership is set for a China-India tango

China seems willing to assume the mantle of climate leadership but there are several factors affecting its acceptability at the global high table on climate. India's record on climate action makes it well-suited to partner China here

A recent analysis by Carbon Brief, which found that nearly 95% of the countries that signed the Paris Agreement have missed the United Nations (UN) deadline to submit new climate pledges for 2025, is cause for worry. The finding comes at a time when United States (US) President Donald Trump has signed an executive order to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement, eroding the global momentum for climate action. The countries missing the deadline collectively account for 83% of global emissions and nearly 80% of the world's economy, raising serious concerns about the agreement's ability to drive meaningful climate progress. Meanwhile, the intensifying frequency of climate disasters — from record-breaking heatwaves and catastrophic floods to extreme wildfires — underscores the urgent need for decisive leadership. Without immediate and committed action, the Paris Agreement risks becoming an empty promise rather than a binding global commitment.

Under these circumstances, the world needs to urgently fill the leadership vac-

uum in global climate governance and push for collective action to combat the climate crisis.

Observers believe that the US's exit from the Paris Agreement has created an opportunity for China and India to take on the global climate leadership. Both nations have demonstrated significant commitment, strong credentials, and leadership potential through proactive measures aimed at reducing carbon emissions.

China has shifted from a traditionally insular foreign policy to a more internationalist approach, particularly in the realm of climate leadership. Following the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, China reaffirmed its commitment to multilateralism, with vice premier Ding Xuexiang describing it as the "golden key" to addressing global challenges.

China's pursuit of global climate leadership is evident through its increasing investments in renewable energy, the expansion of its cap-and-trade system, and its efforts to make the Belt and Road Initiative greener. With the US's departure creating a leadership void, China is positioning itself as a central player in sustaining international climate action by leveraging political and market forces to drive the global energy transition.

Although China's climate action is commendable, the country is not yet in a position to independently assume the level of leadership that climate governance demands. Firstly, despite its aggressive climate initiatives, China remains the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), producing twice the emissions of the US. This weakens its ability to persuade

other nations to adopt more ambitious climate goals. Secondly, China has historically taken a hands-off approach to regional and global diplomacy. Addressing the climate crisis and transforming global energy systems require more assertive leadership, along with the ability to propose ambitious climate goals in the future — an area where China has yet to demonstrate sufficient potential. Thirdly, climate scepticism was a dominant narrative in China until recent years, with the climate crisis often being perceived as a "western conspiracy to constrain the development of China and other developing nations." This historic casts doubt on China's commitment to taking on an active role in climate leadership.

Given the US's withdrawal and China's uncertain climate credentials, India has significant opportunities to counterbalance the current climate leadership dynamics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reaffirmed India's commitment to a green transition, emphasising the importance of making the coming years a "green era" while also striving to shape India into a developed nation by 2047.

India's intensified efforts in climate action represent a strategic move to ensure long-term energy security and economic resilience. These steps highlight India's leadership in climate action on a global scale. The country is already undergoing a clean energy revolution and has made notable progress in fulfilling its Paris Agreement commitments. To lower emissions, India has launched an extensive renewable energy programme, surpassing past targets and achieving record milestones. In 2024, India expanded its solar



Aparna Roy



India is creating a supportive environment for the widespread adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) by implementing a reduced Goods and Services Tax (GST) on EVs compared to traditional vehicles.

capacity by roughly 24.5 gigawatts (GW) and its wind capacity by 3.4 GW, more than doubling its solar installations and increasing its wind capacity by 21% compared to the previous year. By December 2024, the country's total renewable energy capacity had reached 162.48 GW, with solar power accounting for 97.86 GW and wind power for 48.16 GW.

Looking ahead, India has set an ambitious goal to achieve 500 GW of non-fossil fuel electricity capacity by 2032. Additionally, the country is continuously refining its policies to reduce coal dependence and speed up the transition to cleaner energy sources. At present, India is well-positioned not only to meet but also to exceed its Paris climate targets.

India is also creating a supportive environment for the widespread adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) by implementing a

reduced Goods and Services Tax (GST) on EVs compared to traditional vehicles. The government aims for EVs to account for 30% of new vehicle sales by 2030, with sales projected to reach 10 million units, potentially generating up to five million jobs. Alongside, significant investments are being made in infrastructure, including the establishment of public charging stations, to accommodate the growing demand for EVs. These initiatives underscore India's dedication to fostering a green energy revolution, attracting investment, generating employment, and boosting the export potential of emerging technologies.

Beyond ambitious actions, effective climate leadership must align with the needs and priorities of the poor and the most vulnerable populations. As the world's largest democracy, India exemplifies how strong climate measures can be successfully integrated with developmental goals. India has

played a crucial role in climate negotiations, particularly during the Paris Agreement discussions. It has consistently defended the principle of "differentiated responsibilities," advocating for more flexible climate regulations for developing nations, recognizing their need for greater space to grow within the limited global carbon budget.

Given the current leadership gap, the world will be closely watching India's role in climate action at key upcoming forums such as the G20 and COP30. As India seeks an international partner to enhance its influence on the global stage, India is in a prime position to seize this opportunity and bridge the leadership void in global climate governance.

Aparna Roy is fellow and lead, climate change and energy, ORF. The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY SENTIMENTS]

Karan Thapar



Twattling does not make a person ultracrepidarian

I've said it before — and I'll say it again — English is a delicate language. You have words that are eerily similar but pronounced differently. As in this sentence: "The bandage was wound around the wound." They're called homonyms. You also have words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently. For instance, beach and beech or tire and tyre. They're called homophones. This means that just because you know how to speak it, you don't necessarily know how to write English or, if you can spell it correctly, that's no guarantee you can pronounce it properly.

I recently received an email informing me of archaic English words that we could usefully revive and use today. They're as pertinent now as they were a few centuries ago. You may not find them in the shorter Oxford Dictionary but they're on Google. These days that seems to matter more!

Fudge is one. It means pretending to work whilst actually doing nothing. I have

to say I'm rather good at that. So too were the British in the 18th century when they coined the word. There's another that describes a characteristic common to most of us: Dysania. It describes the extreme difficulty many have getting out of bed in the morning. I plead guilty.

And then there's a term for the sort of person that undoubtedly irritates each of us. We've all come across people who give opinions on subjects they know nothing about. Indeed, they can be quite voluble and very passionate. The word is ultracrepidarian.

There's also an interesting term that was devised with the government in mind. It's kakistocracy, which means government by the least qualified or, even, the worst people. And, not surprisingly, there's a term for those who in such circumstances are loud in their complaints. It's the 17th-century word grumbletonian, although it sounds more jocular than serious. And if you're one it's probably because

you've discerned your rulers are snoggoys, which, in the 17th century, meant a shrewd and unprincipled person who is a politician.

Now, you might have begun to ask your self a question. Am I indulging in the written equivalent of twattling? It's a 16th-century word which means gossiping idly about unimportant things. Those who do it will tell you it's a most enjoyable way of passing the time.

There are a few other words that are perfect for the people we often meet. A lapsedread is someone who always conveniently shows up with no money at all. You're forced to pay for them. It was obviously a common custom in the 18th century, whence the word.

Whilst a groke is someone who stares while others are eating, hoping they'll share their food. It's an old Scots word, but dare say we've all felt frobly-mobly, which means neither well nor unwell. I'm frequently in that in-between state. Others call it hypochondria!

And then there's something we all do. How often have you lain awake at night worrying about the day ahead? It's called ultracrepidarian. And how often has your conclusion been to put off what you could do tomorrow until the day after? It's called perendinate.

There are two delightful words which I can't help chortle over. First, shiviness, the uncomfortable feeling of wearing new underwear. I imagine it's the only such word in any language. And then there's caxothex.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU LAIN AWAKE AT NIGHT WORRYING ABOUT THE DAY AHEAD? IT'S CALLED ULTRACREPIDARIAN. AND HOW OFTEN HAS YOUR CONCLUSION BEEN TO PUT OFF WHAT YOU COULD DO TOMORROW UNTIL THE DAY AFTER? IT'S CALLED PERENDINATE.

It's 18th-century English for the irresistible urge to do something inadvisable.

Now, two words which I suspect you'll never use. If you come across a woman with the manners of an old one — the female equivalent of an old dog — you ought to call her a pegguff. And if her derriere has caught your fancy, you might say she's callipygian.

Let me end with something we all enjoy — lying wrapped up in a comfortable blanket. Since it is winter, preferably in a razzal or duvet. It's called gruffling. Apparently, the Scots do a lot of it. They coined the word.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

No north/south divide, fight is to ensure justice globally

Some may argue that the world is divided between a "Global North" and a "Global South". But what exactly is meant by that? An economic difference? Of the 20 leading global economies, seven are in the "South". In the "South", some countries are 80 times richer than their neighbours. A climate difference? The climate crisis affects every country in the world, especially small island states and the poorest countries. Among the 10 greatest emitters, if we go by CO2 emissions per inhabitant, there are as many in the North as in the South. Are we talking about a migration difference? The vast majority of migrations are between countries in the South. A political divide? In both the North and the South, there are those who support collective solutions, and conversely, those who support efforts to withdraw from global affairs. In both the North and the South, there is competition between regional powers. In both the North and the South, there are countries that comply with international law and others that flout it.

clashes in the Great Lakes region, where M23 continues to violate the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Congo. That is why France is working towards ensuring Syrian men and women can live in peace and freedom in a sovereign, peaceful Syria that is reintegrated into its regional environment. And it is a role for everyone to play in global governance, and therefore, that it must be reformed. Every second we waste on the path to the reform of multilateral forums fuels claims that its institutions are illegitimate. France would like to see crucial projects for the future of peace and global governance completed between now and 2026 when our country will hold the presidency of the G7.

As the 50th anniversary of the United Nations (UN)'s creation approaches, let us resolutely move forward so that our institutions reflect today's world. As again recalled by President Macron during Prime Minister Modi's visit to France last week, India can count on France's unwavering support to ensure its rightful place on the UN Security Council. We must also make progress on the practical implementation of the Paris Pact for People and the Planet initiated by President Macron because no country should have to choose between fighting poverty and fighting the climate crisis. Because we need private funding so that development assistance is sufficient, and because we must innovate to support developing countries.

The time to act to bridge the gap between South and North is now. France will fully support the efforts of the South African presidency of the G20 towards this goal — the motto of India's G20 presidency, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (One Earth, One Family, One Future) must prevail.

Jean-Noël Barrot is minister for Europe and foreign affairs, France. The views expressed are personal



Jean-Noël Barrot

Live life full, not in excess or to prolong the lifespan

In 1800, the average life expectancy in India was 25.4 years. Today, it is 70.82 years. Longer life is a global trend, due to substantially better medical intervention and diagnostics. In fact, some believe that in a few years, advanced medical science will ensure that most can expect to live between 100 to 125 years. Perhaps, but scientific data tells us that while life expectancy has, indeed, gone up, maximum life spans have not.

The number of centenarians in India may be doubling every 10 years, but they are still the exception, not the rule.

Why do some people beat the odds, and live up to 100 or beyond? According to the Boston University School of Medicine, genes account for less than one-third of your chances of living beyond 85. So, the answer has to include genetics, but also diet, metabolism, lifestyle, a stress-free life, and — something experts call — social integration, which is being an active part of a happy community. It is for these reasons possibly, that some parts of the world, like specific regions in Japan, and areas in the Mediterranean region, are known for the disproportionate number of centenarians they produce.

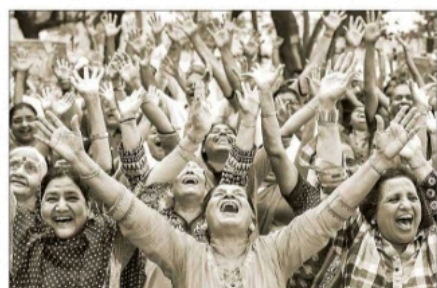
Vast global resources now back research on how to retard ageing by rejuvenating cells that naturally weaken as you grow older. An entire ecosystem of supplements, creams, esoteric

practices and drugs has come into existence. Most of these have not been scientifically tested and may do more harm than good. But such is the desire of most people to be forever youthful, that this new area of pseudo-science has grown exponentially.

To my mind, what is really important is how to age better. Instead of necessarily a longer life span, what is far more important is a long health span. Science has reached a point where it can significantly prolong life even for the terminally ill, but this is hardly a life worth living. American surgeon and best-selling author, Atul Gawande, makes precisely this point in his best-selling book, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Many people now write a living will, which forbids relatives to keep them on life support systems.

A very dear friend of mine in his mid-80s, was suddenly diagnosed with mouth cancer. Fortunately, since his other health parameters were excellent, he could be operated upon and has now fully recovered. The interesting thing is that he had never smoked, chewed tobacco, consumed *gutka*, or even been fond of pain and *sugar*. What his oncologist told him was an eye-opener: As high as 35% of mouth cancer patients were like him. Is life then a bit like a roulette wheel?

Whether it is or not, for me the best formula is to enjoy life fully while you



We must never lose our zest for life, and live it fully, rather than being obsessed only with living longer.

can, taking a median line between abstinence and excess. There is a Russian joke about a man who ate early, exercised regularly, and never smoked, drank, ate meat or partied. His friend's wry response was: "My dear man, you'll die healthy." Conversely, if you smoke two packs a day and drink half a bottle each night, the chances are that your health will suffer.

Basically, a balanced life, as recommended by the *Upanishads*, where *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* combine in the right proportion, seems to be the best answer for a happy and fulfilling life. Iqbal wrote: "Eternity lies in the breadth of life: I do not seek its length." A little bit of restraint about where you admit to the frailty of being human, is not a bad thing. As Zauq rightly said: *Behar tau*

hai yahi ki na dunya se dil lage; par kya karein jo kham na bedilagi chale (Tis best, of course, if you transcend the world's attractions; but what can you do if you cannot resist its distractions).

While deeply grateful to medical science, we must never lose our zest for life, and live it fully, rather than being obsessed only with living longer. This requires avoiding excess, taking care of your health, and also a change of attitude. As Fakhri Badayuni says: *Dil se saabit kar ke tum zinda ho; saans lena koi saboot nahin* (Let your heart show that you are alive; merely breathing is no proof that you are).

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

[SUNDAY LETTERS]

The seriousness of the climate crisis

This is with reference to "No immediate relief in sight from climate crisis" by Ananda Banerjee (Feb 16). The United States president's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement shows that world leaders are still not appreciating the seriousness of the climate crisis. This must change before it's too late.

Deepak Mittal

The mystique of Indian trains

This is with reference to "The changing tracks of romance of trains" by Abhishek Asthana (Feb 16). Beautifully written, this article reminded not only the memories but also the mystique associated with train travel — especially in India!

Anil Shukla

Focus on gender count in procurement

This is with reference to "Making gender count in procurement policy" by Lalita Panicker (Feb 16). The procurement ratio is a deceptively low figure. The government should pay attention to this.

Ravinder Kumar Jain

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Opinion

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2025



Virat Kohli playing Delhi vs Railways Ranji match at Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium, New Delhi, earlier this year
EXRESS PHOTO: ANSHU SINGH

Ranji Trophy providing more engrossing fare

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

THE EYES of the cricketing world will be focused on Dubai today for the 'routine' India-Pakistan group fixture at an ICC event. Despite the lopsided head-to-head record in these games over the decades, the media frenzy and social-media chatter around these 'encounters' never seems to abate, with broadcasters doing everything they can to add fuel to fire even when the actual cricketing fare on offer has often been lacklustre and the excitement largely manufactured.

While the ICC Champions Trophy has garnered eyeballs and mindspace over the last couple of weeks, Indian domestic cricket has arguably provided more engrossing and riveting contests, even when the biggest stars in the game didn't feature in them. Has there ever been an instance of a fielder's helmet making such a decisive 'impact' in such a significant juncture of a knockout game? The Ranji Trophy knockout rounds once again demonstrated what, and how much, can happen over five days of cricket. Most of the players featuring in these games are often referred to as 'journeymen' with a few helping to find their way back to the national set-up and some others hoping to catch the eye.

Kerala reaching its maiden Ranji Trophy final is a momentous achievement, especially when their most high-profile current player - Sanju Samson - was not part of either the quarterfinal or the semifinal, having surgery on an injured finger and expected to be fit in time for the Indian Premier League (IPL) starting next month.

If anything, it seems to have only strengthened Kerala's resolve as they were there just to watch Kohli as otherwise "Ranji kuan dekhta hai (who watches Ranji)!" Ironically, chants of "RCB, RCB" reverberated during a First-Class game, proving that Kohli is identified more with his IPL franchise than the team for which he was playing.

Neither Kohli nor Sharma managed to do anything significant on the field for their Ranji teams in their one-off appearances. They seemed to be akin to short-duration punishment postings for errant civil servants before being rehabilitated.

By the time the knockouts came calling, it was back to the players who had a real stake in the fortunes of their teams. Teams like Mumbai, Tamil Nadu and Saurashtra have a regular presence in the latter stages of the Ranji Trophy. Haryana have been there off and on, Vidarbha and Gujarat have tasted success over the last few years, while Kerala and J&K are recent additions to the list of contenders. Apart from them, there are the likes of Karnataka, Delhi, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Hyderabad, Assam, Baroda, Jharkhand, Andhra and Maharashtra that, even if they don't have the teams to present a sustained challenge, produce talented players who can start at the highest level.

"Ranji kuan dekhta hai" may be a feeling shared only by the most casual of cricket fans, who are only interested in stars rather than a genuine contest between bat and ball. The real connoisseurs of the game will always be interested in what's happening at venues throughout the length and breadth of this vast country.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



If the FM had desired to uphold equity and morality, she could have given tax relief through a cut in the GST rates or cut in the taxes on petrol and diesel. Or she could have to put more money in the hands of the people by increasing the MGNREGS daily wage or raising the statutory minimum wage in every kind of employment across the board

I AM USUALLY sceptical of bare promises made by a government; I prefer a timetable towards implementing the promises and a performance report at the end. Here are examples of the promises made by Mr Narendra Modi or his government since 2014, none of which has been achieved.

■ **Economy will double to \$ 5 trillion by 2022, says Modi** - *The Hindu*, September 20, 2014

■ **In 2022 every house in India should have 24 x 7 electricity**: PM Modi - *Business Standard* quoting PTI, September 4, 2015

■ **Every Indian will have house by 2022**: PM Narendra Modi - *The Indian Express*

■ **PM promises farmers income doubling by 2022** - *The Hindu*, June 20, 2018

■ **Bullet Trains To Be Reality In India By 2022, Says Narendra Modi To Indian Diaspora In Oman** - *Infocore*, photograph, 'last year, Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe' I wonder if 2022 is behind us or ahead of us?

Money is absolute numbers

Budget 2023-26 also contained many promises including 7 schemes, 8 Missions and 4 Funds. There was no allocation of money for many of these schemes and missions. Naturally, during the debate on the budget, the Hon'ble Finance Minister (FM) was questioned by many MPs on the budget numbers.

Budget is about money, and money is allocated and spent in absolute numbers. The PM took cover under 'proportions' not absolute numbers. For example, she admitted that her income tax relief of ₹1,00,000 crore to income-tax payers included the relief given to the rich (annual income over ₹1 crore), the very rich (> ₹100 crore) and the super-rich (> ₹500 crore), but explained that she had given proportionately small relief to the rich! The question that she did



Rising unemployment rate, shrinking manufacturing sector, inflation, stagnant wages and mounting household debt are a few concerns for the common man
EXRESS PHOTO: KANESHVAR SINGH

Budget abandons the lesser gods-2

not answer was 'why do persons who have an annual income of ₹1 crore to ₹500 crore deserve any relief at all? Every economic decision involves the principle of equity and morality. The Modi government had, long ago, abandoned that principle and the PM meticulously followed her leader while giving 'tax relief'. The FM adopted the same technique while explaining the cuts in capital expenditure. The 'cuts' are real:

	'24-'25BE	'24-'25RE	'25-'26BE
On capital account	11,11,111	10,18,429	11,21,090
Grants to States for capex	3,90,778	2,99,891	4,27,192
Total	15,01,889	13,18,320	5,48,282

Undeniably, in 2024-25, the central government's capital expenditure was cut by ₹92,682 crore and the grants to states for capital expenditure were cut by ₹90,887 crore.

FM denied there were any cuts as a proportion to GDP and asserted that the budget estimates (BE) for 2025-26 were higher. Assuming that the estimates for 2025-26 were correct, what is the guarantee that there will not be cuts in 2025-26 too? Will the promised grants to the states to create capital assets in 2025-26 not be

cut as it was done in 2024-25?

Equity, morality discarded

Where did the cuts fall? Taking into account both capital and revenue expenditure, the major cuts in 2024-25 were in critical sectors:

	(in ₹ crore)
Health:	₹1,255
Education:	₹11,584
Social Welfare:	₹10,019
Agriculture:	₹10,992
Rural Dev:	₹75,133
Urban Dev:	₹18,907
Employment generation:	₹8,283

Who is hurt most by cuts in expenditure on the above heads? The poor. Who benefits by the FM's generous income tax relief? Not the poor.

If the FM had desired to uphold equity and morality, she could have given tax relief through a cut in the GST rates or cut in the taxes on petrol and diesel. Or she could have to put more money in the hands of the people by increasing the MGNREGS daily wage or raising the statutory minimum wage in every kind of employment across the board.

Ridicule was the reply

The FM started her reply in the Rajya

Sabha at 4 pm. The MPs are aware of her debating style and she did not disappoint them. At 5.20 pm she took a swipe at Manmohan Singh ridiculing his wisdom and his vision of 1991, and concluded that his ten years as prime minister marked a "null" in reforms. At 5.30 pm she ridiculed the poor when she said, "No poor Jais (Bachchan)! All of you are poor; I am also poor." A few minutes later, she ridiculed Mr Raghav Chaddha, MP (AAP): "Am I really right in thinking that you are a Chartered Accountant?" A minute after 6 pm, the FM completed her reply.

Not a word on the rising unemployment rate or the shrinking manufacturing sector. Not a word on inflation, stagnant wages or mounting household debt. Not a word on the budgeted but unspent money in the education and healthcare sectors. Not a word on the status of the scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. Not a word on the bottom 50% of the population of India. Not a word on the poorest of the poor - 14.96% of the population (or 21 crore) according to UNDP. To PM Narendra Modi and FM Nirmala Sitharaman, the poor do not exist.

May the lesser gods forgive them.

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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Will Kejriwal wilt?

This week's announcement of a new BJP Delhi Chief Minister after 27 years is the trending news, but to write the obituary of former CM Arvind Kejriwal would be a mistake. The Congress and the BJP's assumption that the AAP sprouted overnight like cabgrass and will wilt as quickly could turn out to be wishful thinking. Kejriwal, after all, changed the dynamics of the Capital's politics by converting the traditionally bi-polar political space into a triangular contest. And his ambition to replicate his Delhi experiment elsewhere should not be dismissed outright. After all, he struck gold in Punjab and, just this week, AAP won 30 municipal seats in Gujarat. AAP's appeal, offering an alternative platform to those looking for a change from traditional parties and vested interests, has its tasks.

In fact, AAP's Delhi poll performance is impressive, considering Kejriwal's anti-incumbency factor and other drawbacks. While the BJP was well ahead with 48 seats, compared to AAP's 22 seats, the difference in vote percentage

was a mere 2.06%. In 14 constituencies, the slender margins of the BJP's victory were less than the votes polled by the Congress candidates. A CSDS survey indicated that AAP retained its hold among the poorest strata of society and lower income women voters. The party focused on wooing the marginalised voters with freebies, rather than playing the usual caste card. Kejriwal, for instance, did not benefit from being part of the trader community. Today, the AAP is one of only six recognised national parties, a status symbol that has eluded even Mamata Banerjee's TMC and one that was forfeited by the 100-year-old CPI some years back. Rahul Gandhi's determination to defeat the AAP in the Delhi Assembly polls, even if it ensured victory for the BJP and struck a blow at the INDIA bloc's unity, is understandable.

Rapid rise tale

The meteoric rise of Kejriwal in Delhi is unprecedented in Indian politics and a source of inspiration for aspiring politicians, including pollster Prashant Kishor, who has established a new party in Bihar. Kejriwal, an unknown NGO activist, succeeded in forming a new party and getting elected as CM in just 13 months, vanquishing popular three-time CM Sheila Dikshit. There have been other overnight political success stories, but in all such cases, the shooting stars were either inheritors of their family political legacy or were well-known as

movie stars.

An analysis of Kejriwal's career route indicates an instinctive street-smart shrewdness in sensing an opportunity and seizing the moment. In 2011, the time was ripe because of major corruption scandals in the UPA government. Public outrage, cutting across the social divide, was heightened by the shocking Nirbhaya rape case in 2012. The RSS, working behind the scenes, pressed up Ramdev and signaled to its cadres to swell the crowds at Jantar Mantar. But Anna Hazare eventually emerged as the symbolic head of the anti-corruption movement, with other respected names, including the father-son duo, Shanti and Prashant Bhushan, academic Yogendra Yadav and Kejriwal, a former Income Tax officer, a part of its brain trust. Somewhere along the way, a disillusioned Anna withdrew to Maharashtra and, over time, so did most of the other activists. Kejriwal became the sole face of the movement. His detractors claim that Kejriwal has a history of using people and then booting them out. However, an interview by HT News with veteran Marathi journalist Raju Parulekar suggests a more calculated move. Parulekar, who initially wrote Hazare's blogs, believes that Kejriwal invited Anna, a respected but largely unknown figure outside Maharashtra, to join the cause believing a Gandhian ascetic figure as a front would fire up the public imagination. Whatever the truth, most of the initial

founders of the India Against Corruption movement fell out with each other and Kejriwal took complete control of the new party, AAP. Ironically, in his first brief stint as CM, the Congress supported him - only to keep the BJP out of power and, consequently, marginalised itself in Delhi politics. Incidentally, the Congress had earlier made the same mistake in Uttar Pradesh, backing Mayawati, who later swallowed the Congress's SC's vote bank.

Uncommon common man

Kejriwal carefully cultivated the image of a common man, sporting a long hand-knitted muffler to keep away his hacking cough, and chose the humble broom as his party symbol. Over the years, his hubris got the better of him. The cough and the muffler disappeared, so did his claim of simple living. One of Kejriwal's big mistakes was the failure to build a cadre and his suspicion of all potential rivals. Far from rewarding loyalists, he handed out Rajya Sabha nominations arbitrarily to wealthy uncommitted individuals. The BJP electoral machine is now out to demolish Kejriwal's image with the help of the state machinery and constant media reminders on "Sheesh Mahal" and the liquor scam scandals. Only time will tell whether David can once more to slay the Goliaths.

REFLECTIONS

India vs Pakistan, matchless



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

IT is that time once again when you are asked to make sense of an India-Pakistan cricket encounter. It is a question that challenges your understanding of history, politics, nationalism, commerce and yes, of the sport itself. No matter how much you try to look at the Champions Trophy dash between the two nations — torn apart by a bloody partition more than seven decades ago — as just another cricket match, you can't. Just like life itself, a sporting contest between any two countries cannot be seen in a vacuum. In this case, the two nations have fought three violent wars, politically fought at every international forum and after 2007, never played a bilateral cricket series against each other, with India refusing to visit Pakistan for almost two decades now.

Yet, cricket they must play, even if it means playing at a neutral venue, as the refusal to do so could invite sanctions when it comes to an International Cricket Council (ICC) event. In the changing times when India holds unchallenged control over international cricket politics because of the money it generates from the game, it can get away with any breach of rules. It is so powerful that it forced the ICC to take an unprecedented decision to let India play all its Champions Trophy matches at Dubai, though Pakistan are the hosts of the tournament. The cricketing world order today has no space for Pakistan's protest and all the time to address India's concerns. When money, sorry India, speaks, the world listens.

In similar situations in the past, nations had to forfeit their matches and concede points when

they refused to play another country in ICC tournaments. In the 1996 World Cup, which India and Pakistan co-hosted with Sri Lanka, teams from the West Indies and Australia had to concede their matches against Sri Lanka as they refused to play in that country due to political reasons. Ironically, India and Pakistan made a joint team to play Sri Lanka in solidarity with their island nation neighbours. That was a bygone era of cricket politics when the world had just begun to realise the money-making potential of the game in India because of live television and India's opening up of its economy. Pakistan may have still been an enemy nation but in international cricket politics, it was India's friend and a strong ally. Unlike today, India's cricket board was not an extension of the government and had the courage to take many decisions that the Indian state may not have liked.

Just like life itself, a sporting contest between the neighbours cannot be seen in a vacuum

From a purely cricketing perspective as well, times have changed. India are the powerhouse of skill as well, especially in the shorter format, and Pakistan are struggling to stay afloat. To put it simply, Pakistan are no match for India and if one were to predict an Indian defeat on Sunday, even Pakistanis would express disbelief and a section of Indians will dub you anti-national.

In this world of hyper-nationalism and social media troll army, nostalgia for those rich and rewarding past encounters between the two nations would be a dangerous territory to touch. When politics prevented the two nations from playing in each other's country, a neutral venue in Sharjah was found in the 1980s to milk the money-making opportunity the cricketing rivalry offered. Sharjah, a tiny dot on the map of the

United Arab Emirates, became a breeding ground for the jingoistic crowd of ex-pats from the two countries to express visceral hatred for each other, but cricketively created many new icons and thrilling finishes.

In my own memory, some of the best moments of my reporting days are the three visits I made to Pakistan — 1997, 2004 and 2005. The vast army of cricket fans that visited Pakistan will bear testimony to the love and affection which people showered on us. Lahore was more Punjab than the Amritsar I had lived in during my school and college days. Its generosity was touching and the desire for peace with India heartwarming. The positive impact of people-to-people contact, which the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee encouraged in 2004, when telling the Indian team to "sirf match hi nahin dil bhi jeet ke aana" (not just matches, with people's hearts as well), was evident anywhere one went in Pakistan. At the Lahore stadium where India lost the Test match, many Pakistani spectators were holding Indian flags and cheering the Indian team.

One had been witness to similar scenes in Chennai in 1999 when Wasim Akram's Pakistan beat India and then took a victory lap while the packed stadium gave them a standing ovation.

In the past many years now, India and Pakistan have only played each other in ICC tournaments, encounters which are few and far between. Pakistan is no longer the team it once was and India look near invincible in their dominance of the cricketing field. Many fans believe that India-Pakistan matches are now nothing but overhyped contests, though there is little doubt they still generate television revenues, media frenzy and a lot of ammunition to social media warriors and the flag-waving, chest-thumping nationalists. And yet, given the hyper-charged politics of the region and what cricket means to the two countries, it would be wrong to assume it is just another cricket match.

— The writer is the author of 'Not Quite Cricket' and 'Not Just Cricket'

Going bonkers with bankers



AVAY SHUKLA

UNLIKE our Prime Minister or Mr Narayana Murthy, I don't labour for 18 hours a day. In fact, I don't labour at all — having toiled for 35 years, I have now left it to others to clear out the mess I've created during that period. But this doesn't mean I don't put in many productive hours every day — for, as the L&T chairman never said: "They also serve who only stand and stare." Delecting the hours I spend in sleeping, and staring at Neeraj, I do work for about four hours every day at my office table, which I picked up at a Delhi *chor bazaar* just before someone nicked my wallet. But — and here's my grouse and the trigger for this piece — about two of these hours are spent sorting out issues with my banks.

This constitutes my daily nightmare, of the digital kind. All banks have now gone online and that has its advantages, especially in the matter of withdrawing cash through ATMs, making payments, opening FDs, etc, through net-banking. Beyond these, however, if you have an issue like change of phone number or address, or suspect credit or debit, or closing an account, and need to contact the bank or its manager, or do a KYC, then you need to find up your loins, prepare for a good few weeks and long for the old days when you could drop in at the branch to have a cup of tea with the Branch Manager while your issue was sorted out in a cordial manner. Not anymore. These days, you have to deal with an anonymous, faceless, algorithmic monster called Customer Service, legal fiction which you are led to believe exists (like God) but actually doesn't (again, like God).

I have accounts in four banks, having decided to spread the risks when they start collapsing whenever Mr Adani decides to buy Cyprus or St Kitts and move there with his trillions. But, since it's now quite clear that he is happy to stay in India and buy this country instead, I decided to close two of these accounts before dementia catches up with me and I forget about all of them. I've been waging a battle with one of these banks for the last month to close one account. A Speed Post letter to the BM has elicited no acknowledgement — I suspect he is also legal fiction and doesn't exist. Three emails to Customer Service ('we value our relationship with you') have elicited three identical responses, saying it can't be done online and that I should visit the branch with as many papers as I carried to my UPSC interview 50 years ago.

I pointed out that I am a senior citizen and should not be expected to physically go to the branch which is 20 km away; no response from the bot at the other end, but I thought I could hear a snicker from the bank's URL. The account is still not closed. I think I shall beat it in my will to someone I deem it, preferably a 'bhakti', or some dandy from St Stephen's College (do I need to tell

you that I'm from Hindu College?)

There are other missiles in the armoury of Customer Service which they unleash in the wee hours of the night. One morning you'll be suddenly informed that your basic savings account has been upgraded to Burgundy or Platinum or Super Value, which requires you to maintain a few lakhs in your account at all times, on pain of penalty charges. In return, you will get your own Relationship Manager, free access to an Indigo airport lounge and a discount on meals at a five-star restaurant. I've tried telling them that I can manage my own relationships, thank you, and don't need helping managing them; that I wouldn't fly even if God gave me wings; that it makes no sense to have *biryani* in a hotel where Ms Sitharaman takes 28 per cent of the food off the plate even before I've had the first bite and Service Charge takes 15 per cent of what's left. The algorithms are designed not to take no for an answer.

Sorting out issues constitutes my daily nightmare, of the digital kind

And then there is the bane of our digital lives — the KYC. Every once in a while we are asked to re-verify our mug shots, fingerprints, addresses and telephone numbers. The public sector banks, those remnants of the dinosaurs, insist that you physically visit their branches to do so, even if you are on the International Space Station with Sumita Williams. (Incidentally, you now have to do this also for your FASTag, gas connection, insurance policies, mutual funds, etc.) It doesn't matter a whit that you've had an account with the bank for 40 years, or that it's a pension account verified by the AG himself, or that you've never, ever, defaulted on a loan or a credit card payment, or ever had any dealings with Suresh the Conman, or Mallya or Choksi or Nirav Modi. While people like these gentlemen are siphoning off thousands of crores from the banks, we cannot touch our own money.

One can't help but feel that we are rushing too fast into wholesale digitalisation without adequately preparing our personnel, processes and culture for it, just like Mr Gadkari with his expressways and Ms Sitharaman with her GST. Sometimes, one longs for the old ways. I recollect my dad, after retirement in Kanpur, used to visit his bank branch two or three times every week. He had a gossip session with the BM, got tips on investments, encash a cheque or two over tea and also *ki tikis*, and return home a satisfied customer. He died of old age, not the effects of dealing with Customer Service and Digital India. Me, I'll probably die of an embolism caused by a Customer Service algorithm.

— The writer is a former IAS officer

Bumblebee, buzzing against the odds

PARJITH JOSHI

THERE'S magic in watching Himalayan meadows bloom, as flowers of myriad colours and shapes sprout up on the green grass once the snows relent. It is within this enduring tapestry of natural beauty that one can make an acquaintance with bumblebees, flitting restlessly between blossoms, their fuzzy bodies dusted in golden pollen, defying the thin air and cold with a fervour that belies their gentle appearance.

Bumblebees are vital pollinators in the Himalaya and the Northern Hemisphere as a whole, especially for wild flowering plant species in higher elevations where other pollinators cannot survive. These industrious insects exhibit remarkable adaptations that enable them to thrive in cold, high-altitude environments.

One of the most intriguing aspects of bumblebees is their ability to fly despite having a large body mass relative to their wing size. This apparent paradox is resolved through their unique flight mechanics. By rapidly flapping their wings in a figure-eight pattern, they create little pockets of air, or vortices, that generate lift, which allows them to hover and navigate efficiently in the thin air.

Their thick, insulating body hair, known as 'pile', helps conserve heat and increases the surface area for pollen to stick to their bodies as they travel across nearly 6,000 flowers on a favourable day. Additionally, they possess the ability to shiver their flight muscles and generate body heat, an important pre-condition for many insects to be able to fly.

Bumblebees are among the most effective pollinators in the sub-alpine and alpine



Bumblebees face severe threats from climate change and human activities. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

ecosystems. Their robust bodies and long tongues enable them to access nectar from a variety of flowering plants, including those that other pollinators cannot reach. Species such as the Himalayan blue poppy and *Rhododendron* rely heavily on bumblebee pollination for reproduction.

Today, bumblebees face severe threats from climate change and human activities. Rising temperatures are altering flowering times and shrinking their suitable habitats, while the pervasive use of pesticides threatens their populations by directly causing mortality or impairing foraging and navigation skills.

Their activity not only supports plant biodiversity, but also sustains the livelihoods of local communities. Consider the case of apple plantations, where bumblebees, along with other species like honeybees, are important pollinators. As the populations of these species decline,

farmers in some regions of China, and even in the Western Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, have been forced to pollinate the crops by hand, a time-consuming and labour-intensive process.

The absence of bumblebees in high-altitude Himalayan ecosystems could trigger an ecological collapse. Without these pollinators, the reproduction of many alpine plants would be severely compromised, leading to a decline in plant diversity. This, in turn, would affect herbivores that depend on these plants for food, subsequently impacting the entire food web, while also accelerating soil erosion.

Protecting bumblebees requires urgent action. By restricting the use of harmful pesticides and promoting sustainable alternatives, such as organic farming and integrated pest management, farmers can protect pollinators and maintain their crop yields.

Equally important is the need for dedicated research to better understand bumblebee ecology, behaviour and population dynamics in wild areas. Awareness campaigns are also vital in ensuring that people understand and appreciate the indispensable yet sometimes hidden role of bumblebees.

It is a cathartic experience watching bumblebees dance from bloom to bloom, their plump bodies defying gravity with an energy that seems borrowed from the sun itself. Sometimes, in a nectar-fuelled revelry, they get too drunk and drowsy to continue, curling up unconscious inside flowers like tiny, slumbering pilgrims in nature's delicate inn.

Their ceaseless hum is not just the sound of life in motion, but a reminder of nature's delicate balance, one that we must protect.

— The writer is an outdoor enthusiast

Kartikeya of Punjab, and the southern Kartikeya

IN the state of Punjab stands the temple of Achaleswar Mahadev at Gurdaspur; while in nearby Haryana is the temple of Pehowa at Kurukshetra. What connects these two sites is their association with Kartikeya, the mighty son of Shiva and Parvati. Kartikeya is no longer a widely worshipped deity in North India, but he remains extremely popular in Tamil Nadu, where he is venerated as Murugan, Subramanyam, or the bright jewel.

The earliest depictions of Kartikeya in history appear on the coins of the Yaudheyas, a warrior clan that once controlled the Punjab region, which are over 2,200 years old. Kartikeya was also seen on the coins of Audumbara kings, who controlled the hilly parts of Punjab, near Pathankot, 2,100 years ago. This suggests that Kartikeya was among the earliest deities worshipped in the Punjab region, dating back to Mauryan times. He was called Mahasena, the great divine commander of divine armies, and much admired by soldiers of the region.

In *Mahabharata*, composed 2,000 years

ago, Kartikeya was produced by the collaboration of many gods to kill the demon Taraka. He was called the son of the hermit-god Shiva and his consort, Shakti. Later, in Puranic times, 1,500 years ago, the elephant-headed Ganesha also came to be identified with Shiva and Shakti. In artworks, from 1,000 years ago, we find Shiva's family depicted on temple walls: Shiva, Shakti and their two sons — Kartikeya, with his spear and peacock, and Ganesha with his stylus made of tusk and his inkpot, later linked to sweets (*modaks*).

But there was strife in this family. The athletic Kartikeya was overshadowed by his corpulent and cerebral younger brother. In stories, in the race to go around the world three times, Ganesha won, as he smartly went around his parents, declaring they were spiritually his whole world. Kartikeya, who flew around the material realm of three worlds, was sidelined. Wives were given to Ganesha. Ganesha's name began to be taken first in rituals, since he was seen as the embodiment of smart work, one who

UNIVERSE
DEVOUT PATTANAIK

removes obstacles.

Kartikeya was angry with his father, and left Mount Kailash. Kartikeya was also angry with his mother. When he killed all the demons, and helped Indra regain control over paradise (*Svarga*), all women went to Shakti and expressed their fear of Kartikeya's violent masculine energy. He was seen as the embodiment of fiery Mars. He was the creator of martyrs and widows. The

women feared he would, like a manumand conqueror, disrespect them. So, to protect themselves, whenever Kartikeya approached, they would acquire his mother's face. So all women appeared like Shakti to Kartikeya. He realised he could never see any woman erotically or romantically. So, he could never marry. Furious, he left Kailash, refusing to meet his mother.

Kartikeya tore away his skin and burnt it atop a mountain (Krunach, in Uttarakhand). Having burnt his skin, Kartikeya suffered. At the Achaleswar lake, he bathed. At Pehowa, he stands in a temple where no woman is allowed, and it is poured on his image.

Shiva tried to pacify him at Achaleswar, but failed. Shakti tried to pacify him at Pehowa, but failed. Kartikeya became the first woman-shunning Hindu ascetic, a Nath, who smeared his body with ash to reduce the pain of burning skin. He stays eternally a boy (*Kumara*). This is why some people in Himachal and Punjab equate the peacock-riding boy-god Kartikeya with the peacock-riding boy-

goddess, Balak-nath. In Tamil Nadu, the mountains of Palni are said to have been brought from the North by Rishi Agastya, with the help of the Asura Himabala, on the orders of Parvati, who wanted to ensure her son did not miss his mountain home. In Tamil temples, Kartikeya is called Murugan. He is a warrior god and a romantic god, with two wives: Devasena, daughter of the celestial Indra, and Valli, daughter of a local mountain tribe. In Tamil temples, Ganesha is not married. He is the scribe of sages, interested in intellectual matters. So the Northern Kartikeya, though related, is ritually and narratively very different from Southern Murugan.

In the Deccan regions, no women enter any Kartikeya-Swami temple, for fear he may cause the death of their husbands in war. In Bengal, Kartikeya is shown as a virile and handsome youth, who enjoys refined pleasures like a cultured man. These many forms of Kartikeya are a reminder of how diverse and fluid Hinduism is.

— The writer is an acclaimed mythologist

Serious business of COMEDY



Comics have always been on the social radar, and Allahbadia row has only re-ignited the debate on limits of free speech

NONIKA SINGH

TILL the other day, he was social media's blue-eyed boy. Today, he is everybody's pet peeve, dubbed as Internet's most disgusting outcome. Ranveer Allahbadia's comments on Samay Raina's YouTube show 'India's Got Latent' have not only outraged the 'morally superior', but it seems the Supreme Court too. While granting Allahbadia interim relief from arrest, the apex court has bashed him almost as if one would reprimand a schoolboy. Only, the observations perhaps have far-reaching consequences.

Even before the court observed, "There is something very dirty in his mind that has been vomited by way of this programme", he had already been labelled a pervert by volatile TV anchors. There is no denying that Allahbadia's comments were both unfunny and distasteful and he is no comic either. Only, it's not the first time the question — 'where society should draw the line between free speech and vulgarity?' — raised by the two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court has found traction. Comics have been on the social radar almost coinciding with their rising graph of popularity. 'Mind your dirty language', the universal cry of the moral brigade, invariably finds an echo. Back in 2015, the All India Bakshod (AIB) came under fire for its roasting ways and found itself amid a barrage of criticism as well as a target of several FIRs.

Kunal Kamra, too, has been in the eye of the storm for vocalising his anti-establishment views. Vir Das' intelligent humour has irked many on the right side of the night-vision. His 'Two India' speech became a convenient tool to bash him and question his nationalism. Till he won an Emmy International and silenced his critics, he was another one of trolls' favourite whipping boys.

Does humour have its limits? Yes, say not only the easily-provoked listeners who suffer from herd mentality, but a whole lot of comics too. Comedy is not just serious business but a sacred one, not to be trifled with' is the collective response of many in the business of laughter. "The humour that sails on the oars of abuses and vulgarity is no comedy at all," asserts Sunil Pal, comedian and actor. Winner of 'The Great Indian Laughter Challenge 2005', he even goes on to call stand-up comics who employ short-cut measures of obscenity and rudity to fame as 'kalankaar' and not 'kalakaar'.

"The first thought that comes to mind is that it's certainly not comedy. Humour, like any other art, requires honing and sharpening," feels yet another popular comedian, Jawsant Singh Rathore, who learnt the art of comic timing from his guru, Chacha Raunkhi Ram. Blessed with an innate funny bone, noted comedian and actor Gurpreet Ghuggi goes one step further and argues, "If you are a performer, you ought to know the syllabus of comedy and can't go beyond the limits prescribed by it." Just as the licence to drive is not one to kill, he believes that freedom of expression is not a permit for claptrap. They all hail the humour of men like the late humourist Jaspal Bhatti and point out how effortlessly he minted satire with rib-tickling barbs, exposing societal flaws but not once crossing the line.

Sanjay Hegde, senior advocate, Supreme Court, however, observes, "What people forget is that it's not acceptable speech which requires protection, but one which is unacceptable." He reiterates the words of Voltaire, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' What to talk of defending the rights of those we perceive are not in alignment with our thought process, as a nation, are prone to selective outrage, and that too way out of proportion at times?

Could the hullabaloo become reason enough to further curtail the rights of artistes?



Ranveer Allahbadia has been facing a backlash since his comments on Samay Raina's YouTube show 'India's Got Latent'.

Politicians often get away with murder. In their public speeches, they make the most disparaging remarks about women, religion, and even justify heinous crimes like rape and often utter the reprehensible, Hegde reminds, "But then, we don't like to take on the powerful." Artists, on the other hand, are an easy target. Is only blaming them for our moral depravity like missing the woods for the trees? Many point fingers at the new crop of stand-up comics for trivialising humour. But filmmaker Anves Bazmee, who has given us many a laugh riot comedies, states, "Stand-ups are a talented bunch." He singles out the talent and writing of many like Varun Grover and Manuwar Faruqi. Yes, the same Faruqi who was arrested for a joke he never told.

Should religion and sex be taboo in humour? While Bazmee does not defend Allahbadia, yet he adds, "Sex is a natural thing, so why can't it be a subject for jokes?" However, it's not just the Hindutva brigade that believes the Indian culture is unlike the Western, where irreverent humour is a norm. Even many comics argue, "Western parameters of comedy can't be applied to our society. We Indians are emotional people and our sentiments are easily hurt. Our job is not to enrage but provide succour." Hegde argues how by its very nature, the art of humour lies in its shock value. No doubt, freedom of speech has limits and the Constitution itself lays down restrictions, but he cautions, "These can't be used to eat away the rights."

Could the present hullabaloo then become reason enough to further curtail the rights of artistes? Rathore shares how each time they do a show for a channel, many dos and don'ts are handed out. "There is a whole list of words we can't use and people (powers that be) we can't make fun of." Could the Raina-Alahbadia incident further pare down what they can say? Could this be an inflection point where comics will have to mind their comedy and bear the consequences of not toeing the sociopolitical line? Surprisingly, Ghuggi asserts, "It could be a cleansing moment for comedy and while some comics could suffer individually, the cause of comedy will be a gainer."

Hegde, however, believes, "People like Dhruv Rathee and Ravish Kumar could become the real victims of the Allahbadia controversy." Singer Vishal Dadlani is not alone in thinking that the uproar over Allahbadia could become a ruse for controlling online content and pushing the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2024. Never mind that Internet is ungovernable and even 'walled gardens' can't quite work in this realm. Ghuggi, all for prescrib-

ing limits, agrees that measures for uncensored Internet content will not be easy to devise. Bazmee anyway is a votary of creative freedom. Busy writing a sequel to his laugh-a-minute comedy 'No Entry', he believes there is a censor within him "and in all of us, which we should pay heed to". For now, even the Central government has asked the OTT platforms to follow age-based classification and self-regulation.

The debate on freedom and limits is not new. Noam Chomsky, social critic and linguist, once said, "If you're in favour of freedom of speech, that means you're in favour of freedom of speech precisely for the views you despise." British politician Winston Churchill remarked, "Hardly a day passes without free speech being extolled, but some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage." Somewhere between these two contrasting viewpoints lies the need to be mindful and sagacious in not only what we say, but how we react and respond.

Nonsense begetting an equally nonsensical response is as regrettable. Besides, as Hegde avers, "After all, one who says nothing stupid will not say anything profound either..." Silence can be golden, provided "people choose it of their own volition, but they can't be silenced into submission".

For now, Raina and Allahbadia join the long list of those facing infamy not only by select sections of media and public, but also the law. Speaking before thinking is possibly a transgression but not an unpardonable crime a sincere apology won't cover up. Or time. American satirist Lenny Bruce, labelled a 'sick comic' in his lifetime, went on to earn the number-three spot on the list of the '100 greatest stand-ups of all time'. Pay heed to what he said: "The 'what should be' never did exist, but people kept trying to live up to it. There is no 'what should be', there is only what is."

Every death by suicide has a different story to it. A common thread is the absence of helping hands along the way

TANU SHREE SENGU

February 2025: A university student is found dead in Haranya. In Odisha, a 20-year-old student from Nepal is found dead in her hostel room. Death by suicide is suspected in both the cases.

2024: 17 lives lost in Kota coaching institutes alone.

A week back, a parent found a note that said, "Sorry, mum and papa. Please forgive me. I couldn't make it. Our journey together ends here. Don't cry. You both gave me immense love. I couldn't fulfil your dreams." The 18-year-old was distressed over her performance in JEE.

IN 2010, a study revealed that India's suicide rate was higher than the world average, with the most number of cases in the 15-29 age group. Cut to 2024, and another report highlighted the sharp increase in suicide rates in the young population. Over the last two decades, student suicides have increased by about 4 per cent per annum on an average. In the last 10 years, the rate has risen to 7 per cent. We have to keep in mind that temper and legal constraints lead to the under-reporting of suicides; in all likelihood making these statistics much lower than the actual figures.

Death by suicide is not a problem that can be addressed by a list of neatly drawn-up tips. It is not something that has just sprung up. From hushed conversations to loud outcries — all are short-lived noises that attempt to assign blame. And then we all move on. The fact is that each year, we lose more young people to suicide than the rest of the world.

We are quick to scan an article for probable causes and then let out a sigh of relief marked by shock and fleeting grief — that



it isn't us. What we fail to see is that a suicide case is not just a failure of life to thrive, it is a failure of a society to help a life flourish. We are all in it together. So, when a life is snuffed out like this, it should not end with merely labelling it as an outcome of parental pressure, academic failure, a failed relationship, or a reaction to bullying. It is a collective societal failure.

Ambika Singh, psychoanalytic psychotherapist at Family Tree, and author of 'Interruptions in Identity: Engaging with Suicidality Among the Indian Youth', points out that every time an incident gets reported, we are jolted by the facts and figures, only for the headlines to be replaced soon after. "We are living in a world that is not very connected. Suicidality and self-harm are a relational problem. Unless we address that at a deeper level, we will be just repeating the cycle," she adds.

A conversation with university students revealed that although many institutions have support systems in place on paper, they are often ill-equipped to handle the issues

Talk to your child, your students — listen as you would like to be heard

faced by the youth. A worrying, and rarely discussed, issue is the rise in substance use, including medicinal abuse alongside substances like alcohol, marijuana, etc. "I have seen so many friends resort to substances to get over mental health issues and I don't know if it's because they couldn't talk about these issues, or because nobody was listening after," says a fourth-year student at a leading university. "The most common reason is not having anyone to turn to. The fear of being judged or harassed if we talked about what we are going through. The fear that no one will understand what we are going through," says a second-year student in Delhi.

Social media has further complicated the situation, with relationships now moving

online, reducing opportunities for real-world communication. Young minds also run the risk of falling in the loop of feeling vastly inadequate in comparison to the perfect lives portrayed in 30-second reels being pushed by social media platforms.

The bottom line is that our children are struggling. We have been window-dressing the problems with half-hearted policy changes, protecting them from failures or simply looking the other way in the name of it being a 'teenage phase'. There could be a million reasons for someone to take the extreme step — from being bullied for their caste or skin colour, to academic pressure or severe mental health struggles. Every life that ends has a different story. However, the common thread is the absence of helping hands along the way. From schools to colleges on the academic front, and from families to friends on the personal front — every child needs at least one adult that they can turn to, talk to, confide in. This is much more complex than it seems. It takes a village to raise a child. Children can develop

the emotional skills required to navigate crises if they have trustworthy, non-judgemental adults who listen to them and support them through their formative years. It could be a teacher, a parent or friends they rely on as adults. However, as a parent, listening should not be confused with permissiveness or being a friend to the child.

A child needs the parent to do just what their role entails — to be a parent, not a friend. A friendly approach is vastly different from an attempt to become a child's buddy. So, while consistent discipline needs to be in place, the approach should be inclusive. Having said that, building discipline doesn't take away the need for a parent to truly listen and try to understand the world as the children see it.

We cannot understand what young people are going through if we view their problems through a generational lens that no longer fits. We need to remove those outdated filters, hold their hands and give them the space to express themselves. There will be times when we fail to understand, but that does not mean we give up or belittle the issues that seem insurmountable to them. It simply means that we must relentlessly seek and create resources to help them — whether in the form of a community, a therapist, or both.

The headlines will fade, but the pain of a life lost will haunt those families forever. Yet, the issue will not resolve itself until we, as a society, take responsibility. Talk to your child, your students — listen as you would like to be heard. See them. Understand them. Be empathetic if you want the same from them. Our young ones are reflecting pain, loneliness and helplessness. If we don't step up now, we will remain nothing more than mute spectators to a steadily rising graph.

— The writer is an author and professor of psychology

Fluctuating knowledge, skill, and attitude of civil servants

'Training for Ethics in Administration' is challenging

VANAM JYALA NARASIMHA RAO

THE role of civil servants in good governance has always been a subject of scrutiny, and in recent times, concerns about their fluctuating knowledge, skill and attitude have gained prominence. Irrespective of the bittersweetness in observation of Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on civil servants, especially on the young bureaucrats, subtly suggesting change in their thought process. Heart of hearts, many in society, in their innermost feelings, strongly agree with him. Such an observation may be contentious, but they reflect a broader concern about the evolving ethics of civil service. Fluctuations in competence, ethical standards, and professional commitment of civil servants need to be analysed by drawing parallels with other democratic countries.

While working at Dr MCR HRD Institute as a Faculty Member three decades ago and being in charge of coordinating training of seven batches of Assistant Collectors Under Training (ACUT) (Probationary IAS Officers allotted to erstwhile Andhra Pradesh), I experienced many interesting aspects of civil service. Further, having closely observed their logical career progression, qualitative and quantitative contribution (barring 'negligible few') as well as unstinted commitment in shaping the state with their initiatives, I differ sharply with Revanth Reddy's observations.

However, on witnessing also closely many of the 'Young Bureaucrats' lacking in knowledge, skill and attitude required to discharge their functions, the observations made by CM Revanth Reddy are certainly valid. When training was conducted as a priority area during CM Chandrababu Naidu time, a 'Commitment Seeking' three-day 'Orientation to Management of Training' (OMOT) module was designed, developed, and implemented for about 150 senior and (then) junior IAS, IPS Officers at Dr MCR HRD Institute. 'Governance for Results' (GFR) program for Civil Servants to identify 'Change Agents' in governance was also organised. These programmes with which I was associated in organizing, yielded significant results. A thought may be given for such programmes contextualising the current scenario.

Hitherto, either in IBNSAA Academic sessions in Policymaking, Land Management, Soft Skills, Project Management, National Security, E-Governance etc., or during the district training with their home cadres, the focus of civil servants training by and large has been on knowledge and skill but seldom on attitude. The 'National Training Policy' emphasized the need for Attitudinal Training and Reorientation in changing organizational ambience to help the Civil Servants appreciate the 'Imperatives of Democratic Society' and helping in building up 'High Standard of Integrity, Character, and Probity' in professional life. Precisely this is



'Training for Ethics in Administration' which will provide 'Right Attitude and Direction' to determine effectiveness of an individual is essential. Growing preoccupation with self-interest which implies lust for wealth, power, recognition, and erosion of work ethic is alarming. 'Commitment, Responsibility, Responsiveness, and Accountability' is slowly languishing. Unethical collusions, and host of favors of different kinds by Civil Servants have become rampant as reported in media, leading to erosion in the people's trust in Civil Servants both at 'Higher Levels' and in 'Young Bureaucrats'

where, the observation of CM Revanth Reddy regarding 'Change in Thought Process of Civil Servant' becomes significant. 'Training for Ethics in Administration' which will provide 'Right Attitude and Direction' to determine effectiveness of an individual is essential. Growing preoccupation with self-interest which implies lust for wealth, power, recognition, and erosion of work ethic is alarming. 'Commitment, Responsibility, Responsiveness, and Accountability' is slowly languishing. Unethical collusions, and host of favors of different kinds by Civil Servants have become rampant as reported in media, leading to erosion in the people's trust in Civil Servants both at 'Higher Levels' and in 'Young Bureaucrats'

This, we seldom see in the two largest democracies UK and USA. In UK, the civil service is structured to uphold 'Neutrality, Accountability, and Professional Integrity'. The UK Civil Service Fast Stream Program' designed to train future leaders, emphasizes 'Ethics, Strategic Thinking, and Adaptability'. The UK's Civil Service Code enshrines values of honesty, integrity, objectivity, and impartiality, reinforcing an ethical framework that is crucial for governance. UK Civil Servants undergo specialized training in leadership, public administration, and policy analysis which align closely with 'Governance for Results' (GFR) initiative but place a stronger emphasis on ethical decision-making and attitudinal transformation.

Political appointments often influence bureaucratic functioning in USA, unlike the UK and India, where civil servants enjoy more continuity and constitutional protection. In both India and the UK, training policies emphasize the need for attitudinal reorientation. The UK experience highlights the importance of 'Ethical

Training Modules' incorporated at multiple stages of an officer's career. India's 'National Training Policy' acknowledges this but requires stronger implementation. The UK's approach to public sector ethics, including independent oversight bodies such as the 'Committee on Standards in Public Life' serves as a model that India could adapt to reinforce ethical conduct.

Political bosses before blaming Civil Servants lock, stock and barrel need introspection. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in February 1999 addressing the 'National Development Council' meeting said: 'People often perceive the bureaucracy as an agent of exploitation rather than provider of service. Frequent and arbitrary transfers combined with limited effect are harming the work ethic, and lowering the morale of the honest officers. While expecting discipline and diligence from the administration, the political executive should self-critically review its own performance. Unless we do this, we may not regain credibility in the eyes of the people.'

The 10th Five-Year Plan Approach paper mentioned that the government must ensure the long-term affordability of the civil service, and it must enforce procedures for rewarding and promoting merit and discipline to strengthen accountable and performance quality. Wayback in 1962 itself, V.T. Krishnamachari a distinguished Civil Servant, recommended for the expansion of the Indian Administrative Service cadre to meet the needs of economic and social development and inclusion of courses in rural development at IBNSAA.

When UK Prime Minister announced an Action Plan with nine points for 'Effective and Responsive Govern-

ment' was adopted in the Conference of Chief Ministers held on May 24, 1997, which among others included, improving the performance and integrity of the Civil Service, and stability of Civil Servants' tenures. The conference noted that people-friendly and effective administration depends on cleansing of civil services at all levels, adherence to ethical standards, commitment to basic principles of the Constitution, and clear understanding of the relationship regulating the politicians and the civil servants.

CM Revanth Reddy's reference to 'Young Bureaucrats' demands honest further probing. Formation of new districts provided bigger roles to young IAS officers earlier than expected. For many of them with their inexperienced approach to matters of importance, and inadequate training on best practices it became 'Attitudinally Difficult' to adjust with ever-changing social conditions and political equations. Patel described 'Steel Frame of the Country's IAS Officers, after orthodox Training in IBNSAA will undergo District Training in their allotted states before posted as Sub-Collectors in a sub division.

From Sub-Collector they become Joint Collector, or TDA Project Directors, and after seven or eight years (Now four-five years) become the District Collector, a pivotal as well as 'Most Sought after Position'. After serving as District Collectors for about a decade they move to capital either for secretariat or department or PSU posting or deputation to center. Promotion is based on seniority. Postings depend on individuals' caliber, capabilities, and proximity to the political boss. 'The Best Position to reach will be that of 'Chief Secretary'. For this seniority is 'Not the only Criteria'. Once they leave the district, for the rest of the career, no direct contact with filed work unfortunately.

The accelerated career progression of 'Young Bureaucrats' has presented both Opportunities and Challenges. 'Shift from Probationary Roles to Decision-making Positions' in a short span is like a 'Future Shock' requiring enhanced training in Knowledge, Skill, and Attitude. The 'Continuous Professional Development' programs, similar to the UK Civil Service-Learning framework, emphasis must be 'Ethics and Attitude'.

Civil Servants' Fluctuating Knowledge, Skill and Attitude is a concern, necessitating 'Systematic Approach to Training'. Notwithstanding 'Political Accountability, Civil Servants must be exposed to Robust Ethical Training, Structured Mentorship, and clearly defined Career Progression Policies. 'Building an Ideal Governance Model' that prioritizes 'Ethical Administration' for 'Right Attitude' and other competencies is essential. Integrating best practices, developing 'Code of Ethics' and Role Model Senior Bureaucrats and Politicians, engaging 'Young Bureaucrats' to become efficient administrators and steadfast guardians of public trust is indispensable.

A real-world marketplace for future entrepreneurs

Dr R RAVI KUMAR

ON February 17, 2025, as I stepped into Numaish for its final day, the energy in the air was electric. The place was buzzing with excitement—families, students, and entrepreneurs filled the sprawling exhibition grounds, making the most of the last few hours. The scene felt nothing short of a grand festival, much like the legendary Kumbh Mela. Laughter, bargaining, the aroma of delicious street food, and the sight of countless stalls selling everything from handcrafted items to cutting-edge gadgets—it was an experience like no other.

As the curtains fell on this year's edition of Numaish, I could not help but wonder—what makes this event so special? What does it truly offer to students and aspiring entrepreneurs? Beyond shopping and entertainment, Numaish has been a treasure trove of learning, networking, and business inspiration.

A Legacy of 84 Years Numaish Masnat-e-Mulki (translated as 'Exhibition of Local Products & Crafts') has been an integral part of Hyderabad's cultural and economic landscape since 1938. It began as a small initiative by the Osmania Graduates Association and was supported by Sir Akbar Hydari and Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan. The first edition, held at Public Gardens, had just 50 stalls. By 1946, it was shifted to its current location at the Exhibition Grounds near Nampally Railway Station. Over the years, Numaish has grown into a massive event with nearly 2,000 stalls representing businesses, artisans, and entrepreneurs from across India.

A Platform for Learning and Entrepreneurship: What makes Numaish unique is its ability to bring together business, culture, and education under one roof. The exhibition offers an incredible opportunity for students and aspiring entrepreneurs to gain real-world insights. From marketing strategies to customer behaviour, pricing models to sales techniques—there is so much to learn simply by observing the transactions and interactions at different stalls.

With participation from government departments, public sector undertakings, multinational corporations, and local businesses, Numaish is a hub of economic activity. It directly and indirectly provides employment to nearly 18,000 to 20,000 people, making it a crucial contributor to the local economy.

The Exhibition Society's Role in Education: Managed by the Exhibition Society, Numaish is more than just a commercial event. The Society, established in 1938, has been instrumental in promoting industrial growth and supporting small businesses. Over the decades, it has expanded its contributions to education by funding and managing 20 educational institutions in the backward areas of Telangana, benefiting around 30,000 students each year.

In fact, the revenue generated from Numaish plays a crucial role in sustaining these educational initiatives. In 2023-24 alone, the exhibition contributed ₹9.66 crore to government revenues through GST, trade licenses, property taxes, and utility charges.

Showcasing Innovation and Women Entrepreneurs: This year's Numaish had a dedicated space for women entrepreneurs, encouraging small business owners to showcase their creativity and skills. Another major highlight was the display of start-ups and innovations emerging from T-Hub, Telangana's innovation ecosystem. The Telangana Industrialists Welfare Federation also participated, promoting small and medium entrepreneurs.

The variety of stalls was remarkable—there were dry



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fruits and handicrafts from Jammu and Kashmir, handmade garments from Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh, as well as exquisite Iranian carpets and high-quality electronic goods from leading brands. Special stalls were also set up by self-help groups and even convicts, showcasing rehabilitation efforts through vocational skills.

Bringing Numaish into Education: One of the biggest takeaways from Numaish is its potential as a learning experience for students. Imagine if business and entrepreneurship courses in colleges included an immersive, hands-on component where students participated in the 40-day exhibition. This could help them develop essential skills like communication, negotiation, financial management, and market research.

Venture development institutes and business schools could design practical immersion programs modelled on Numaish, allowing students to interact with real businesses, analyse market trends, and even set up their own stalls as part of their curriculum. This would bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical business experience.

Learning Beyond the Classroom: Education today is at a crossroads. Traditional classroom learning, while essential, is no longer enough to prepare students for the real world. Theories and textbooks provide knowledge, but experience, practical exposure, and hands-on learning truly shape a student's future. In an era of rapid technological advancements and evolving business landscapes, education must evolve too.

I strongly believe that learning should not be limited to four walls. It must extend into real-world environments where students engage with businesses, solve real problems, and experience industry-driven scenarios firsthand. The integration of education with platforms like exhibitions, startup incubators, and live business projects can significantly enhance the learning experience.

A 12-Point Formula for Impactful Learning from Numaish: To make education more effective, I propose a 12-point formula that combines academic knowledge with real-world exposure, preparing students to be innovators, problem-solvers, and future entrepreneurs.

Powered by Several Trends: Learning should be immersive, and exhibitions provide an excellent platform for students to engage with real businesses, interact with customers, and understand market trends. Industry-Driven Curriculum and Pedagogy Developed with the Exhibition Society: Partnering with industry leaders and organizations ensures that the curriculum remains relevant, practical, and aligned with market needs.

Learn in a Practical Environment: Concepts must be tested in real-world set-

ttings—whether through industry visits, internships, or working on live projects with established brands.

Hands-On Learning Beyond Books: Education should go beyond memorization. Cases, tasks, projects, internships, and business-building exercises must become a core part of academic learning.

Discover and Solve Problems in a Real-World Environment: Students should be challenged to identify problems, analyze them, and implement solutions just as entrepreneurs and industry professionals do.

Gain Experience in Start-ups and Traditional Businesses: Exposure to both startups and well-established businesses allows students to explore various career paths, understand risk management, and learn the differences in business operations.

Holistic Development of Soft and Life Skills: Critical thinking, communication, personal finance, and business operations should be integrated into the learning process to ensure well-rounded development.

AI in Business and Technology: With AI transforming industries, students must learn how to leverage AI in business, decision-making, and technology-driven innovation.

Build a Founder Mindset: Entrepreneurial thinking should be cultivated early—students must develop resilience, creativity, and leadership qualities to launch their ventures.

Build Your Own Brand and Digital Presence: Content creation, video production, and social media marketing are key skills in today's world. Personal branding is no longer optional; it is essential.

Funding Opportunities: Financial literacy and funding knowledge help students navigate investments, venture capital, and financial planning for their startups.

Careers in Entrepreneurship: Not all students will start businesses immediately, but they must know how to approach entrepreneurship as a career path with the right mindset and skillset.

Education should inspire curiosity, foster creativity, and prepare students for the future. A dynamic approach, blending real-world learning with academic excellence, is the key to success. The future belongs to those who learn by doing—and it is time we reshape education to reflect that. As I walked out of the exhibition on its closing day, I felt a deep sense of appreciation for what Numaish represents. It is not just a shopping festival but a living classroom, a business incubator, and a cultural celebration all rolled into one. For students, it offers lessons beyond textbooks. For entrepreneurs, it provides a launchpad to showcase their innovations. For Hyderabad, it remains a symbol of its rich heritage and economic progress. Numaish is more than an exhibition—it is a platform of endless possibilities.

(Writer is a Professor of Media & Communication & Postdoctoral Research Fellow)

Glacier ice loss at alarming levels

JESSICA CORBETT

Glaciers Lost '3 Olympic Swimming Pools Per Second' Since 2000

AN international science project on Wednesday published data in the journal Nature showing that glaciers have lost an average of 273 billion metric tons of ice annually since 2000—depleting freshwater resources, driving sea-level rise, and underscoring the need for sweeping global action to significantly reduce planet-heating pollution.

The Glacier Mass Balance Intercomparison Exercise (Glim-BIE) team compiled major studies to estimate global mass change from 2000, when glaciers—excluding Antarctica and Greenland's ice sheets—held about 121,728 billion metric tons of ice, to 2023.

The researchers found that during that period, the world lost 5% of all glacier ice, with regional losses for the full two decades ranging from 2% on the Antarctic and Subantarctic islands, to 39% in Central Europe. That's a loss of 6,542 billion metric tons total or 273 billion metric tons per year, the equivalent of three Olympic swimming pools per second," noted France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS).

Glaciologist Michael Zemp, who co-led the study, said in a statement that the annual figure amounts to that the entire global population consumes in 30 years, assuming three liters per person and day. "Every tenth of a degree warming that we avoid saves us money, saves us lives, saves us problems,"

Although the researchers highlighted the annual average, they also emphasized that the rate of glacier ice loss "increased significantly" from 231 billion metric tons annually during the first half of the study period to 314 billion metric tons per year in the second half. In other words, the amount of ice being lost surged by 36% between the two ranges.

Zemp, a professor at Switzerland's University of Zurich and director of the World Glacier Monitoring Service, told Agence France-Presse that the findings are "shocking" and warned that many smaller glaciers "will not survive the present century." Stephen Plummer, an Earth observation applications scientist at the European Space Agency, said that "these findings are not only crucial for advancing our scientific understanding of global glacier changes, but also provide a valuable baseline to help regions address the challenges of managing scarce freshwater resources and contribute to developing effective mitigation strategies to combat rising sea level."

The ice loss over the GlimBIE study's full timeline led to about 18 mm or 0.7 inches of sea-level rise. The researchers projected future losses that lead to 32-67 mm, or 1.26-2.65 inches, of sea-level rise by 2040. "We are facing higher sea-level rise until the end of this century than expected before," Zemp told AFP, referring to the



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latest projection from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "You have to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions, it is as simple and as complicated as that," Zemp said. "Every tenth of a degree warming that we avoid saves us money, saves us lives, saves us problems."

The GlimBIE project manager, Samuel Nussbaumer, similarly told Oceanographic, that "our observations and recent modeling studies indicate that glacier mass loss will continue and possibly accelerate until the end of this century," which underpins the IPCC's "call for urgent and concrete actions to re-

duce greenhouse gas emissions and associated warming to limit the impact of glacier wastage on local geohazards, regional freshwater availability, and global sea-level rise."

The team's findings were released during the UN's International Year of Glaciers' Preservation and the Decade of Action for Cryospheric Sciences—and they "will feed into the next IPCC report, due in 2029," according to CNRS. Scientists from around the world who were not involved with the study were alarmed by its revelations—which come after the hottest year in human history and amid humanity's failure to

curb planet-heating emissions, largely from fossil fuels.

Martin Siegel, a professor at the United Kingdom's University of Exeter, said in a statement that "this research is concerning to us, because it predicts further glacier loss, which can be considered like a 'canary in the coal mine' for ice sheet reaction to global warming and far more sea-level rise this century and beyond. The IPCC indicates 0.5-1 meters this century—but that is with a 66% certainty—hence 13 chance it could be higher under strong warming, which unfortunately is the pathway we are on presently."

Andrew Shepherd, a professor at Northumbria University, another UK institution, explained that "glacier melting has two main impacts: it causes sea-level rise and it disrupts the water supply in rivers that are fed by meltwater."

Around 2 billion people depend on meltwater from glaciers and so their retreat is a big problem for society—it's not just that we are losing them from our landscape, they are an important part of our daily lives," he said. "Even small amounts of sea-level rise matter because it leads to more frequent coastal flooding. Every centimeter of sea-level rise exposes another 2 million people to annual flooding somewhere on our planet."

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