

# SCIENCE

## Rocks with evidence of the earth's magnetic field discovered

The Hindu Bureau

Geologists at MIT and Oxford University have found ancient rocks in Greenland that bear the oldest remnants of the earth's early magnetic field. The researchers determined that the rocks are about 3.7 billion years old and retain signatures of a magnetic field with a strength of at least 15 microtesla. The ancient field is similar in magnitude to the earth's magnetic field today.

The results of the study published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research*, represent some of the earliest evidence of a magnetic field surrounding the earth. Previous studies have shown evidence for a magnetic field on the earth that is at least 3.5 billion years old. The new study is extending the magnetic field's lifetime by another 200 million years.

"If the earth's magnetic field was around a few hundred million years ear-

lier, it could have played a critical role in making the planet habitable," Benjamin Weiss from the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences at MIT and one of the authors told MIT News.

### Magnetic shield

Scientists suspect that, early in its evolution, the earth was able to foster life, in part due to an early magnetic field that was strong enough to retain a life-sustaining atmosphere and si-

multaneously shield the planet from damaging solar radiation.

Exactly how early and robust this magnetic shield was not known, though there has been evidence dating its existence to about 3.5 billion years ago. The objective of the researchers was to find rocks that still held signatures of the earth's magnetic field when the rocks first formed. To get to the rocks that were hopefully preserved and unaltered since

their original deposition, the team sampled from rock formations in the Isua Supracrustal Belt in southwestern Greenland.

The team returned to MIT with whole rock samples of banded iron formations – a rock type that appears as stripes of iron-rich and silica-rich rock. Given their composition, the researchers suspect the rocks were originally formed in primordial oceans prior to the rise in atmospheric oxygen

around 2.5 billion years ago.

They used uranium to lead ratio and found that some of the magnetised minerals were likely about 3.7 billion years old. Through this careful process of remagnetisation, the team concluded that the rocks likely harbored an ancient, 3.7-billion-year-old magnetic field, with a magnitude of at least 15 microtesla. Today, the earth's magnetic field measures around 30 microtesla.

## SNAPSHOTS



### Extreme floods in Pakistan lead to heatwaves in China

Extreme heatwaves in China follow floods in Pakistan because of an upper tropospheric pathway tied to the Asian summer monsoon system, according to an analysis of more than 40 years of atmospheric data. This pathway emerges due to the system's internal variability and occurs independent of sea surface temperature forcing patterns. In the summer of 2022, Pakistan experienced catastrophic flooding. Right afterward, China was struck by long-running heatwaves followed by severe drought.



### Diversity can help Canadian drylands endure drought

A new study demonstrates how a diversity of functional plant traits can bolster dryland forest ecosystem productivity in Canada as the climate warms. Based on 57 years of data, the research suggests that dryland biomes with more of this functional plant diversity are far more productive than their monoculture counterparts even during drought intensification. Functional diversity can thus boost ecosystem resiliency over the long term and are unique as Canadian drylands offer a well-preserved forest ecosystem for research.



### Dengue surveillance reveals how viral types shape risk

A study that combines genetic analysis of the dengue virus with surveillance data teases apart how different subtypes of the virus can shape the risk of having severe repeated infections. The antigenic data on the viruses was combined with a catalog of details on hospitalised cases. When infected for a second time with serotypes that were very similar or very different the disease risk is lower than those when infected with moderately different serotypes.

# Where shall the poor go for a kidney transplant in Kerala?

Kerala was once in the forefront of deceased donor transplantation but not anymore; the State is far behind Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where deceased donor transplants are taking place routinely

K.G. Prem Chandran

Al over the world, kidney disease and kidney failure are most prevalent in the poor and economically underprivileged. About 50,000 or more patients are on dialysis in Kerala for terminal kidney failure. Being on dialysis is never a permanent solution to kidney failure. Fraught with several complications and lethal infections the yearly mortality rate in the dialysis population is in excess of 20%. Many of them cannot pay for a kidney transplantation and immunosuppressants which are required indefinitely.

The Kerala government does pay a modest amount for each dialysis treatment. But the government does not do much to promote transplantation, which is less expensive in the long run than keeping people on dialysis. Not to mention the improved quality of life for dialysis patients if they can get a transplant. I believe it is within the governmental powers to promote deceased (cadaver) donor transplantation in the State, as long as the transplant procedure is ethically done adhering to scientific protocols. Like in neighbouring States, government subsidies for the purchase of immunosuppressants will also be helpful.

Intensely confounding cadaver donor transplantation is the public's mistrust of doctors, the healthcare system and the pronouncement of brain death. The definition of brain death is globally approved and fol-

## Kidney transplantation needs a leg-up

Being on dialysis is never a permanent solution to kidney failure

■ Kerala pays a modest amount for each dialysis treatment but does not do much to promote kidney transplantation

■ A few past irregularities in pronouncement of brain death has adversely affected kidney transplantation in the State

■ There is an assumption that the waiting list is not genuine, and those on the waiting list may not get a chance to receive a kidney

■ There is apparently little interest on the part of doctors to pronounce brain death as they are subjected to intimidation and lawsuits even if they follow well-defined procedures for declaring brain death

■ Most tertiary government hospitals in Kerala do not have the capabilities to do more than one transplant surgery a month

■ Family members of potential organ donors often hesitate to consent to donation as the organs go to help patients in private hospitals



**Overwhelming:** About 50,000 or more patients are on dialysis in Kerala for terminal kidney failure

lowed by countries with some differences. But in Kerala, a few past irregularities in the pronouncement of brain death that garnered negative publicity have been played up by misguided activism. Additionally, the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissue Act of India, which all the States follow, is unnecessarily rigorous, often causing delays in the harvesting of vital organs leading to compromised organ viability.

Mistrust of the idea of organ donation after brain death can be ameliorated if Kerala promotes ethical, transparent and well-defined steps in organ procurement and allocation. Kerala was once in the forefront of deceased donor

transplantation but not anymore. The State is far behind Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Deceased donor transplants are taking place routinely in these States. In fact, in 2024, Tamil Nadu has witnessed an average rate of almost one organ donation a day.

In August 2023, Tamil Nadu received the award for the best State Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation from the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation. The Kerala government should increase the awareness of voluntary organ donation and donation after brain death.

### Negative publicity

After speaking with multiple doctors across the

State, it appears that there is little interest on the part of doctors to pronounce brain death. Even if they follow well-defined procedures for declaring brain death, they are subjected to intimidation and lawsuits and consequent negative publicity. This leads to fewer organs being harvested from brain dead people. It is time the government steps in to break this impasse by authenticating a methodical assessment of a prospective donor before organ donation.

Like in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the Kerala government can demand and facilitate recordkeeping of patients on dialysis and a waiting list for kidneys and other organs, and update this list periodically. There

is a prevailing assumption that the waiting list is bogus and those who are on the waiting list in Kerala are not going to get a chance to receive a kidney. Organ allocation algorithms can help in impartially deciding who gets the kidney when a deceased donor kidney becomes available.

Most tertiary government hospitals in Kerala cannot do more than one transplant surgery a month. If this can be improved, more deceased donor transplants can be done in government hospitals. At the same time, private hospitals have more resources to undertake organ transplants and these resources should not be wasted.

Like Tamil Nadu, Kerala might want to cap hospital charges that private hospitals levy from recipients of deceased donor transplants. Family members of potential organ donors often hesitate to consent to donation as the organs go to help patients in private hospitals, which charge exorbitant amounts from the recipients. Capping of the hospital charges where organ transplantation takes place as well as for the hospitalisation of the potential organ donor death may go a long way in increasing organ availability and rebuilding public trust.

There is a plethora of available medical, surgical, immunological, and organisational skills across the State. These skills should never be wasted, and apathy assuredly will. (K.G. Prem Chandran is a consultant nephrologist, Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.)

# The many benefits of coconut



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

A paper published in 2014 by Uma Ahuja *et al.*, in the journal *Asian Agri-History*, points out that the coconut palm is considered as a native of Malesia, a bio-geographical region that includes Southeast Asia (notably India), Indonesia, Australia, New Guinea, and several Pacific Island groups. This paper deals with the history through archaeological, epigraphic, and historical records and its uses and related folklore. Coconut has been recorded in archaeological excavations and epigraphic inscriptions in India – in scriptures of religious, agricultural, and Ayurved-

ic importance. Its multiplicity of uses has earned it epithets like the Tree of life, Tree of abundance, and Kalpavriksha (a tree that provides all necessities of life). The authors point out that in addition to its food value, it has health, medicinal, and cosmetic benefits.

In India, coconut is mainly grown in southern States – Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. These states produce over 90% of coconuts. This is because these trees need a warm and sandy soil which is well-drained and nutrient-rich, a warm and humid climate, and abundant rainfall. North India, on the other hand, has a predominantly temperate climate, with cold winters and hot summers. The region also experiences distinct seasons with uneven



**Kalpavriksha:** In addition to its food value, coconut has health, medicinal, and cosmetic benefits. GETTY IMAGES

rainfall, which are not conducive to the growth of coconut trees. However, some Northeastern States, with their appropriate temperatures and rainfall, also produce coconuts, but they have a clayey soil, not ideal for the trees to grow. Coconut occupies a spe-

cial and a higher place among the many articles used in religious offerings to god. It is used in religious and social ceremonies even in areas where it is not grown. Not an inch of the tree goes waste, and all parts are put to some use. Through its innumera-

ble working utilities and direct uses as food, feed, and drink, coconut has penetrated the cultural, social, religious, and lingual matrix of people of various communities. Coconut plays an important role in our daily life in South India. Every temple is decorated with coconut palm trees, its whole nuts are offered to the deity and the devotees are offered a bit of the nut and some coconut water given as 'prasadam'. No drink matches the coconut water in freshness and health; it is just nectar! And no sweet can match the 'kozhukkatai' (or 'modak'), which is made from the 'meat' of the broken coconut! (It is the favourite of Lord Ganesha). Also, as a child grown in Tamil Nadu, I was forced by my grandmother to take an oil-bath every month, using castor oil, or

coconut oil (much against my wishes!)

There are many benefits to coconut. The website Healthline.com lists the many nutrients contained in the 'meat': high in fat, rich in fibre, and in vitamins A, D, E and K, which control overeating and help regular bowel movement. When we turn from the 'meat' to the oil, some groups have suggested that coconut oil appears to benefit the flow of arteries and veins in the body, thus more beneficial for our cardiovascular health. Some groups even suggest that it may delay Alzheimer's disease, though this may need more evidence. I, as a senior citizen, use coconut oil, hoping to avert these conditions. I often use it instead of butter in my daily breakfast of toast. This would have pleased my grandmother!



## Question Corner

### Flying in fashion

How do birds fly in a coordinated and seemingly effortless fashion?

Part of the answer about how birds fly in a coordinated and effortless way lies in precise, and previously unknown, aerodynamic interactions, mathematicians have found. The researchers found that flow-mediated interactions between neighbours are, in effect, spring-like forces that hold each member in place. However, these 'springs' act in only one direction and this non-reciprocal interaction means that later members tend to resonate or oscillate wildly. To replicate the columnar

formations of birds, in which they line up one directly behind the other, the researchers created mechanized flappers that act like birds' wings. The wings were 3D-printed from plastic and driven by motors to flap in water, which replicated how air flows around bird wings during flight. This 'mock flock' propelled through water and could freely arrange itself within a line or queue. The flows affected group organisation in different ways – depending on the size of the group.

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

## How do extreme climate events impact Asia?

What does the 2023 'State of the Climate in Asia' report say? What does it mean for India?

Privali Prakash

The story so far:

Asia has warmed faster than the global average since 1960, the World Meteorological Organization's 2023 'State of the Climate in Asia' report said. It also reiterated that 2023 was the warmest on record around the world. The climate report also noted an "alarming gap" between climate projections and the ability of Asian countries to adapt to and mitigate climate change and its impacts.

What toll did heat exact on Asia?

More than 2,000 people were killed and more than nine million were affected by extreme climate events across Asia in 2023. More than 80% of these events were related to storms and floods. The report also recorded several parts experiencing severe heat waves, leading to multiple fatalities, but acknowledged that heat-related mortality is widely under-reported. In India, severe heat waves in April and June killed around 110 people. A prolonged heat wave engulfed large parts of South and South-East Asia in April and May, affecting areas from Bangladesh and eastern India to southern China.

How did floods and storms affect Asia?

Tropical cyclone Mocha, which affected Myanmar and Bangladesh in May 2023, was the strongest cyclone in the Bay of Bengal in the last decade. Shortly after, floods, landslides, and lightning killed around 600 people across India, Pakistan, and Nepal in June and July 2023. In India, floods and landslides in August 2023, primarily in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, killed at least 25. Lightning accounted for 1,200 deaths around India through the year.

How well can Asia spot a coming disaster?

An early-warning system is an integrated process that monitors, predicts, and forecasts hazards. It also includes activities related to risk-assessment, communications, and preparedness that allow individuals, communities, governments, businesses, etc. to take timely action to mitigate risks.

India's early preparedness when dealing with cyclones is commendable, but managing deaths and destruction caused by lightning needs improvement, says Sreejith O.P., scientist and lead author on the climate report

Thanks to such systems, for example, authorities in Bangladesh had a day's head-start to prepare for cyclone Mocha and take anticipatory action in Cox's Bazar, which allowed local communities to better survive its landfall. Twenty-one Asian countries

reported the status of their early warning systems to the UN. According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the average composite score for the availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning systems was 0.46 out of 1 in Asia; 0.58 for preparedness to respond; and 0.50 for observation and forecasting. To compare, the world scored 0.35, 0.78, and 0.33, respectively, on average on these counts. Warning and dissemination was the strongest area under the framework for Asia while risk knowledge was the weakest. According to the report, fewer than half of all Asian countries have the tools to mitigate climate change impact.

What do these findings mean for India?

"The findings of the report are in sync with the analysis of our agency," Sreejith O.P., scientist with the India Meteorological Department, Pune and a lead author of the State of the Climate in Asia report, told *The Hindu*. "Extreme climate events are rising globally, including in India. But with improved preparedness, we can minimise the damage. We used early warnings when cyclone Mocha, one of the strongest in the Bay of Bengal, was about to hit. Earlier, similar cyclones have killed thousands of people," he added. While Dr. Sreejith commended India's early preparedness when dealing with cyclones, he said managing deaths and destruction caused by lightning needs improvement. "The response time for lightning is very less. Although we have built mobile applications and other tools, marginalised communities are unable to utilise it," he said. According to Dr. Sreejith, some groups like farmers who work in fields, are already out and away from sources of information by the time an alert can be sent.

"While India has historically demonstrated commendable resilience in responding to floods, storms, and droughts, the new and escalating challenges posed by climate change – such as unprecedented heatwaves, the retreat of glaciers, and rising sea levels – reveal that our preparedness is alarmingly inadequate," said Harjeet Singh, Global Engagement Director at the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative. "These emerging threats require urgent attention and a strategic overhaul of our current policies and adaptation strategies. It is crucial that we empower our communities with the necessary resources and policies to effectively combat these evolving climatic adversities," he added.

## Will new insurance rules help senior citizens?

What is the change in the upper age limit to avail a new health cover? What has the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India said about designing products for senior citizens? Will all types of existing medical conditions be accepted?

N. Ravi Kumar

The story so far:

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Insurance Products) Regulations, 2024, came into force on April 1. Introduced as part of a wider reforms agenda that the IRDAI has been actively pushing for in recent months, the new norms covering various aspects of life, general and health insurance have generated considerable interest, particularly around a presumed change in the upper age limit to avail a new health cover.

What do the new regulations address?

The keenly watched new regulations are intended to enable provisions for insurers to respond faster to emerging market needs, improve ease of doing business and enhance insurance penetration while ensuring protection of policyholders interests. The last objective is sought to be achieved by encouraging insurers to conform to good governance while designing and pricing their products.

Specific to health insurance, the new norms are important, for instance, in reducing the "specific waiting period" from four years to three years. What this means is a reduced wait time, from the time the policy is purchased, to get insurance cover for specified diseases/treatments (except due to an accident). As per the new norms, on completion of the waiting period, diseases/treatments will be covered provided the policy has been renewed without any break. The time-frame for defining pre-existing disease has also been set to three years in the new regulations. Pre-existing disease refers to any health condition, ailment,

'Buying a policy early provides comprehensive coverage, especially as the risk of ailments increases with age'

injury or disease diagnosed by a physician not more than three years prior to the commencement of the policy or for which medical advice or treatment was recommended or received from a physician not more than three years prior to the date of policy issue.

AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy systems) treatment coverage is another aspect emphasised in the new norms. Mandating a Board approved policy for the insurers, the regulator wants insurance companies to treat AYUSH on par with other treatment options. The previous regulation, which was in force till March 31, 2024, said: "all insurers may endeavour to provide coverage for one or more systems covered under AYUSH treatment, provided the treatment has been undergone in the hospitals or healthcare facilities subject to the guidelines as may be specified by the Authority from time to time".

The regulator has also advised insurers against denying renewal of a health insurance policy on the ground that the insured had made a claim or claims in the preceding policy years, except for benefit based policies where the policy terminates following payment of the benefit covered under the policy such as in the case of a critical illness policy.

What changes are relevant to senior citizens?

The April 1 notification attempts to broaden insurance coverage from a demographic perspective, broadly in line with IRDAI's 'Insurance for All by 2047' goal. In contrast, the Health Insurance Regulations, 2016, on entry and exit age, stipulated that "all health insurance policies shall ordinarily provide for an entry age of at least up to 65 years". In other words, under the previous regulations health insurers could not deny cover to those aged up to 65. This, however, does not mean that all insurers were hitherto averse to providing health cover to those aged above 65 years. Siddharth Singhal, Business Head, Health Insurance, at Policybazaar.com, listed nine policies offered by different health insurers, where the maximum entry age is 99 years and five policies where the maximum entry age is 75 years. The new regulations have also asked insurers to establish a separate channel to address health insurance related claims and grievances of senior citizens.

How are insurance companies likely to respond to the new regulations?

Since it is more of a nudge from the IRDAI, many general insurers dealing in health insurance as well as stand-alone health insurers are likely to

wait and watch, while some may start work on new products for those above 65. Industry officials expect health insurers to over time reformulate their products by resetting the maximum entry age to 99 years.

Hari Radhakrishnan, Regional Director, First Policy Insurance Brokers, observed that there had been no explicit age restriction in the previous regulations either. Every health insurance product has a minimum and maximum entry age, he noted, adding that the earlier regulations had a provision whereby the maximum entry age needed to be at least 65 years. Now, that provision has been dropped and so insurers are free to fix their minimum and maximum entry ages.

How significant are the changes?

While measures to enhance access are indeed welcome, affordability or the ability to pay premiums is crucial for senior citizens in terms of opting for health insurance, especially at a time when they require the cover most.

IRDAI, which does not interfere with the pricing of health products, has in the new regulations said the "premium shall remain unchanged for the policy term. Insurers may offer facility of premium payment in instalment, [also] devise mechanisms or incentives to reward policyholders for early entry, continued renewals, favourable claims experience, preventive and wellness habits and disclose upfront such mechanism or incentives in the prospectus and the policy document".

In terms of buying health insurance, 'earlier the better', is something that those seeking cover should ideally keep in mind, underscored Amitabh Jain, COO, at Star Health & Allied Insurance, which is among the few companies that already provide health insurance to those above 65 at the time of entry. "Buying a policy early provides comprehensive coverage, especially as the risk of ailments increases with age. Insured customers who develop ailments like cancer and cardiac conditions are covered without an increase in premium and with guaranteed policy renewal. However, without insurance, and an increased risk of hospitalisation as you age, the risk needs to be priced into the premium," he explained. Acknowledging the importance of affordability of the premium as being a key consideration for many customers, Policybazaar's Mr. Singhal said health insurance policies were increasingly becoming modular with varying features depending on the paying capacity of customers. Also, buying health cover young would mean less waiting period.

Mr. Radhakrishnan said the changes give plenty of latitude to insurers to develop products for various demographic segments. The ability to develop products with better features and affordability will ultimately, to a large extent, depend on factors like disease incidence and medical inflation, he observed.



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## When is a candidate elected unopposed?

What are the rules under the Representation of the People Act? What happened in the Surat Lok Sabha constituency? What has the Supreme Court asked the Election Commission about a petitioner's plea seeking fresh elections in constituencies where NOTA votes are in a majority?

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

On April 22, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party opened its tally in the Lok Sabha when its nominee for the Surat constituency in the western State of Gujarat, Mukesh Dalal, was elected unopposed. This followed the rejection of the nomination papers of the Congress candidates [main and substitute nominees] the previous day and the withdrawal of other nominees. This means Gujarat's second largest city will not go to the polls on May 7.

How is a candidate declared elected before polling?

Section 53 (3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 deals with the procedure in uncontested elections. According to this proviso, if the number of such candidates is less than the number of seats to be filled, the returning officer (RO) shall forthwith declare all such candidates to be elected. In this regard, the RO's actions are governed by Section 33 of the Act which pertains to the presentation of nomination papers and requirements for a valid nomination.

Sub-section 4 says: "On the presentation of a nomination paper, the returning officer shall

Section 53 (3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 deals with the procedure in uncontested elections

satisfy himself that the names and electoral roll numbers of the candidate and his proposer as entered in the nomination paper are the same as those entered in the electoral rolls..." In the given instance, three proposers of the Congress' candidate for Surat, Nilesh Kumbhani, claimed in an affidavit to the district election officer (DEO), Sourabh Pardhi, that they had not signed his nomination form. They did not also turn up before the DEO on April 21 to support the candidate's nomination form.

Besides, the Handbook for Returning Officers (Edition 2) issued by the Election Commission (EC) in August 2023, in the chapter titled uncontested election, states that "if in any constituency, there is only one contesting candidate, that candidate should be declared to have been duly elected immediately after the last hour for withdrawal of candidature. In that event, a poll is not necessary." It also says that "all those candidates, who are returned as uncontested and [who] have criminal antecedents, must publicise the details in the prescribed format as per timeline."

What is the scope for negative voting in the election system?

There is ample scope in the system. While the NOTA (none of the above) option has been in force since 2013, the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, allows electors to decide not to vote through Rule 49-O. A remark to the effect that the elector has decided not to record his or her vote would have to be made in the "remarks column" against the entry relating to the elector in the Register of Voters by the presiding officer, after which the signature or thumb impression of the elector would have to be obtained against such a remark.

The option of NOTA, introduced through the Supreme Court's intervention, has been available on electronic voting machines (EVMs) since November 2013. This became a reality in the wake of a verdict given by a Bench of the Supreme Court comprising Chief Justice P. Sathasivam and Justices Ranjana Desai and Ranjan Gogoi in September 2013, while allowing a petition filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties. The then CJI, who wrote the

judgment, said: "Giving right to a voter not to vote for any candidate while protecting his right of secrecy is extremely important in a democracy. Such an option gives the voter the right to express his disapproval of the kind of candidates being put up by the parties." He expressed the hope that "gradually, there will be a systemic change and the parties will be forced to accept the will of the people and field candidates who are known for their integrity."

There is a difference between an elector exercising Rule 49-O and one using the NOTA option. In the case of the former, the likelihood of such an elector compromising his or her secrecy is high, as there is a procedure to be followed manually at a polling booth. However, in the case of the latter, there is no such issue.

But, according to the Handbook for ROs, the NOTA votes are not to be taken into account for calculating the total valid votes polled for the return of the security deposit. The EC's stand has been that the person getting the largest number of votes in any constituency will still be declared the winner, regardless of the number of NOTA votes.

But, with respect to local bodies' polls, the situation is different, at least in Maharashtra. Through an order in November 2018, the Maharashtra State Election Commission said that NOTA would be regarded as a fictional electoral candidate for the polls to urban local bodies, and wherever NOTA gets the highest votes, the Commission would go for re-poll.

What are the developments post NOTA?

There have been instances wherein votes obtained by political parties were lower than the NOTA votes. But, a section of activists and constitutional experts has been critical, calling NOTA a "toothless tiger" with no implications on the results, despite the fact that NOTA was reported to have netted over 1.29 crore votes in the State Assembly elections and the Lok Sabha elections combined in the last five years.

On April 26, the Supreme Court, which had in the past refused to direct the EC to hold fresh polls if the majority of the electorate exercised NOTA, asked the poll panel to respond to a plea seeking fresh elections to constituencies where NOTA votes were in majority. The prayer of the petitioner-author Shiv Khera was that the court should direct the EC to frame rules, stating that candidates who polled fewer votes than NOTA should stand debarred from contesting elections for five years.



Easy entry: BJP leader Mukesh Dalal receives the 'certificate of election' after he was elected unopposed from Surat on April 22. PTI

# PROFILES

## Turbulence in the skies

### Boeing

The American aircraft maker, for long considered to be the 'pinnacle of engineering' excellence, faces serious safety questions following a mid-air cabin blowout and a safety audit finding issues in the production process

Murali N. Krishnaswamy

**"M**r. Calhoun, what is your message to passengers concerned who are flying in your planes?"

"We fly safe planes," responds Boeing's President and Chief Executive Officer David L. Calhoun to the reporter. "We don't put airplanes in the air that we don't have a 100% confidence in. I am here in the spirit of transparency. Number one, I recognise the seriousness of what you just asked. Number two, to share everything that I can with our Capitol Hill interests," Mr. Calhoun continues, gesturing a bit grimly to the passageway behind him, "... to answer all the questions because they have a lot of them".

Indeed, the great American planemaker does have quite a few tough queries to answer.

The "questions" Mr. Calhoun was referring to were the bouncers U.S. lawmakers on Capitol Hill were sure to have bowled to him in a meeting in late January 2024, in a quest to seek reasons as to why a Boeing aircraft, a 737-9 MAX, had had a mid-air cabin blowout weeks earlier.

In January this year, there were two incidents involving Airbus and Boeing-made aircraft, spotlighting the critical issue of safety in the world of aviation – more so in the manner of their occurrence. On January 2, an Airbus A350-900, one of aviation's most modern jetliners, on a flight from Sapporo to Tokyo Haneda, Japan, and with 367 passengers and 12 crew on board, collided with a Japanese Coast Guard De Havilland Dash 8-300 on the runway just after touchdown.

Even as images of flames consuming both fuselages were being broadcast across the world, a textbook example of the cabin evacuation was also playing out on TV screens, highlighting the advances the aviation industry has made in ensuring passenger safety. Every single soul on the Airbus exited successfully. As day gradually broke after the blaze had been extinguished, aviation investigators were seen scrutinising the accident site, piquing even greater interest as this was a composite constructed craft they were dealing with.



**Quality control:** The fuselage plug area of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 Boeing 737-9 MAX after facing a mid-air incident in January. REUTERS

Just a few days later, there was another aircraft incident. On January 5, an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737-9 MAX, on a flight from Portland to Ontario, with 171 passengers and six crew, was climbing out after take-off when one of the cabin windows-emergency exits, the related holding panel and parts of one unoccupied seat separated from the jet. The oxygen masks were released. The crew had to stop the climb, declare an emergency, report depressurisation and eventually manage to carry out a safe landing. There were no major injuries reported but the sharp pictures left behind a trail of bad headlines for Boeing.

#### Regulatory scrutiny

When the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board stepped in, its initial report concluded that four bolts meant to attach the door securely to the fuselage had not been fitted. What followed next was an immediate grounding and inspections of all 737-9 MAX of similar configuration, following which the single-aisle planes gradually returned to service. A safety audit found a series of issues in the

production process.

For the American aerospace giant, every day a Boeing-operated flight takes off seems to be one of turbulence, inviting more scrutiny from regulators and also the media (some of the reportage is a bit exaggerated as they are airline operator related). The Boeing 737 MAX manufacturing programme is also one that the company has been trying hard to stabilise after the two crashes involving Lion Air flight 610 in 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines flight 302 in 2019, claiming 346 lives.

The Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System, or MCAS, a new control function, was found to have been a key factor, with the company not having been transparent enough in informing operators about the existence of such a system. It also led to accusations of the company having pursued profits over safety.

It is a dark episode in Boeing's history that resulted in fines, lawsuits and compensation to the tune of a few billion dollars. But, importantly, what it uncovered was the slack role of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in maintaining vigil over the

programme and its certification. The aircraft was eventually cleared to return to service after a series of design and training changes, but the worldwide grounding of the plane is an event that has gashed and scarred the manufacturer.

In a report in March, *The New York Times* cited Boeing employees flagging "shortcuts everywhere". For a company long considered to be the "pinnacle of engineering" excellence, senior employees have found the fall to be distressing.

They pointed out how the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have seen the experience level of the workforce drop, inspection processes to check the work on the assembly line weaken and an adherence to quality standards by suppliers slump even further.

In another report, again in March, the *NYT* said an FAA audit of the 737 MAX production line "found dozens of issues, with the company not clearing 33 of 89 audits". One newspaper report read, "Dish soap to help build planes?... "An FAA audit found Spirit AeroSystems using Dawn soap and a hotel key card in the manufacturing

process." A Boeing spokesperson has told *The Hindu* that the audit process is ongoing and corrective measures are being undertaken.

#### 'Inaccurate allegations'

There have also been whistle-blower claims on Boeing's other aircraft families – on the quality and the safety of the Boeing 787 and even the Boeing 777. Boeing has put out information to correct what it calls "inaccurate and a misleading set of allegations" – a clip of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner stress test forms a part of the company's information package. It has said "the issues raised have been subject to rigorous engineering examination under FAA oversight". And, it has emphasised that it "encourages all employees to speak up when issues arise and that retaliation is strictly prohibited at Boeing".

In addition, it has highlighted how other stories continue to link "flight incidents" with "production issues" when these cases should be looked at in the context of production versus maintenance and operations.

Boeing's problems, to a significant extent, can be linked to its vital anchor with Spirit Aerosystems, one of Boeing's major but quality troubled suppliers. It was spun away from Boeing in the 2000s. Boeing is trying to acquire Spirit again in an attempt to set right mounting production and quality woes, and in this, seems to be locked in a race with Airbus, which too has the same intent.

A *Reuters* report says there could even be a 'coordinated arrangement [by both manufacturers] to split Spirit's operations'. This potential deal is being labelled as Boeing's largest acquisition since the 1990s when it bought McDonnell Douglas.

David Calhoun is to leave Boeing at the end of the year as part of sweeping leadership changes. And with 6,259 unfilled aircraft orders – which is the data through March 31 for its aircraft families, the Boeing 737, 767, 777 and 787 – Boeing has much ground to taxi across. But before that, the aircraft maker should know that it needs to be nimble, transparent and conscientious if the tag line "If it ain't Boeing, I ain't going" is to ring true again.

### THE GIST

▼ The Boeing 737 MAX manufacturing programme is also one that the company has been trying hard to stabilise after the two crashes involving Lion Air flight 610 in 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines flight 302 in 2019, claiming 346 lives

▼ The Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System, or MCAS, a new control function, was found to have been a key factor

▼ A dark episode followed in Boeing's history that resulted in fines, lawsuits and compensation to the tune of a few billion dollars

## A president under fire

### Nemat 'Minouche' Shafik

The Columbia University president faces flak after she called New York police to crack down on anti-war protests on the campus

ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

Joan Sony Cherian

**O**n April 17, students at Columbia University escalated their ongoing protests against the war on Gaza by occupying university lawns and creating a 'Gaza solidarity encampment'. At about the same time, Columbia University's first woman president Nemat 'Minouche' Shafik was attending a Congressional hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce wherein she testified about the University's action-plan to counter "anti-Semitic" instances on the campus. In a gruelling interrogation, Ms. Shafik was asked whether phrases such as 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' or 'long live intifada' were anti-Semitic. She said that while to her it seemed anti-Semitic, to others it did not.

"Trying to reconcile the free speech rights of those who want to protest and the rights of Jewish students to be in an environment free of discrimination and harassment has been the central challenge on our campus and numerous others across the country," Ms. Shafik told the committee. Amid calls for her resignation as president, she assured the committee that the university will continue to be a safe



space for Jewish students and that students violating university policy would face consequences. And the very next day, Ms. Shafik asked the New York Police Department to enter the campus and arrest the students who were peacefully protesting in the encampment. More than 100 students were arrested.

#### The Baroness

Ms. Shafik's career has been a journey of many milestones. She was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and when she was four years old, her family moved to the U.S. in the mid-1960s. After doing her masters from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and her DPhil from Oxford, she went on to work for the World Bank. At age 36, she became the youngest Vice President of the World Bank. Her work mostly focussed on global development and foreign aid programmes. She also worked with the International Mo-

netary Fund (IMF) and the Department for International Development of the U.K. In 2014, Ms. Shafik joined the Bank of England as its first Deputy Governor on Markets and Banking, wherein she worked on the contingency planning around the Brexit referendum. She is a member of the U.K. House of Lords and her full title is 'The Baroness Shafik DBE'.

Columbia wasn't Ms. Shafik's first university presidency. In 2017, she took charge as the president of LSE, her alma mater. Even though Columbia seems to be her hardest stint yet, her tenure at LSE was not very smooth either.

It was during her time as president that higher education in the U.K. faced a massive crisis, wherein university staff across the U.K. represented by the University and College Union (UCU) went on successive strikes, from 2018 to 2023, against pension cuts, pay decline, pay inequality, and exploitative and in-

secure contracts, despite mounting workload. At the time university administrators, including Ms. Shafik, came under intense criticism for not doing more on the national stage for striking faculty. In an interview to *The Beaver*, the LSE's student newspaper, UCU President Janet Farrar said university directors are "on the most ridiculous salaries that you've ever heard", quoting Ms. Shafik's pay in 2019-20, which amounted to a whopping £5,07,000. There are staff members "who are highly casualised, who are using food banks, who are burning out with stress, who are experiencing race, disability, and gender pay gaps for work of equal value," Ms. Farrar said.

Interestingly, Baroness Shafik in her latest book in 2021, *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract*, talks about the need for a new social contract for society in order to resolve the increasing anger manifested in polarised politics, culture wars and conflicts over inequality and race. In the book, she calls upon individuals and institutions to rethink how they can better support each other so that society can prosper. As tensions across campuses peak in the U.S., maybe it's time Ms. Shafik revisits her own position within society and takes her own advice.

## Breaking the glass ceiling

### Naima Khatoon

The first woman Vice-Chancellor of AMU in a hundred years comes with rich experience in academia and administrative roles

Anuj Kumar

**T**he appointment of Professor Naima Khatoon as the first woman Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) by President Droupadi Murmu has broken a hundred-year-old glass ceiling.

Ms. Khatoon, the principal of AMU Women's College before the appointment, is seen as a level-headed team player who loves to delegate responsibility. Her colleagues see her as a progressive person who will uphold the secular character of the university and will find her way around the challenges that dot the campus.

To those who followed the long-drawn selection process, her appointment did not come as a surprise. Since Naima Akhtar, an alumna and senior staff at AMU, made it as the VC of Jamia Millia Islamia, there was a demand for a woman VC at AMU. From the time her name was proposed by the Executive Council, Ms. Khatoon was seen as a front-runner among the five candidates, including legal luminary Faizan Mustafa.

The move is being seen as the BJP government's Muslim women outreach. In fact, the appointment letter was released from the Ministry of Education on the day when PM Na-



rendra Modi addressed an election rally in Aligarh.

Ms. Khatoon took charge from her spouse professor Mohammad Gulrez, who was officiating as the Vice-Chancellor after the regular appointee Tariq Mansoor, who was on a one-year extension, retired in April 2023 and joined the ruling BJP.

Interestingly, the founding chancellor of the university, established in 1920, was Sultan Jahan, the Begum of Bhopal. Over the years, at least three alumnae of AMU went on to helm prestigious universities, including Neelima Gupta, the incumbent at Sagar University in Madhya Pradesh. However, it took more than 100 years for the AMU court to propose the name of a deserving woman for the coveted post. Old-timers say certain customs and the residential nature of AMU perhaps prevented a woman from getting the post.

It is noteworthy that the concept of a woman VC is

relatively new as the academia is also not free of patriarchy in the region.

Ms. Khatoon, hailing from Odisha, came to Aligarh in 1977 after completing high school. "She stayed with us for a few days before shifting to the hostel. It was rare for an Odia girl to travel to shift to Aligarh for education those days," retired AMU professor Kafeel Ahmed Qasmi, also from Odisha, recalls.

She completed her PhD in psychology from AMU. She was appointed a lecturer in the same department in 1988 and was elevated to professor in 2006. She continued being promoted in the department before being appointed the principal of the Women's College in 2014.

#### 'A born leader'

Munira T., who has worked closely with Ms. Khatoon, describes her as a team person who has put her training in psychology to good use. "She understands the human psyche

and has a knack for solving administrative problems without hurting the sentiments of contesting groups. A born leader, she was a student union leader in her college days and has served in numerous administrative positions," she said.

Meanwhile, different stakeholders are keen on the new VC putting an end to the culture of adhocism and removing unauthorised elements that have slipped into the residential hostels. Putting the democratic institutions such as the students' union on track is another expectation from her. Ms. Khatoon is also facing a legal challenge as her candidature for the post was challenged in the Allahabad High Court because her name was shortlisted by a committee headed by Mr. Gulrez, her spouse. The next hearing in the case is on April 29. Mr. Gulrez has maintained that university rules were followed and that he and Ms. Khatoon should be seen as independent entities.

The Aligarh Muslim Teachers' Association (AM-UTA), which had earlier questioned the selection process, has acknowledged Ms. Khatoon's appointment. In a letter, AM-UTA's honorary secretary Obaid Siddiqui hoped she would be fair, transparent, and impartial.



## REFLECTIONS

## THE BIG PICTURE

## Debating inequalities in the backdrop of elections

The big question is whether the benefits of the growth process are indeed spreading to all classes of people

It is rare that an academic paper shows up in an election manifesto of a political party. The paper titled *Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj*, by Thomas Piketty and his co-authors Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, and Anmol Somanchi, finds mention in the Congress's election manifesto. They show that not only in the context of India's own record over a century, the country's level of inequality is the highest at present, but also that India is now among the most unequal countries in the world. This upward trend in inequality has been evident since liberalisation — the number of billionaires in US dollar terms rose from one in 1991 to 52 in 2011, and to 162 in 2022.

Even though the manifesto does not talk directly about redistribution, saying only that growing inequality of wealth and income will be dealt with suitable changes in policies, the campaign trail has been heated up with charges by the ruling party that massive wealth redistribution is being planned if the Congress comes to power.

Inequality is a topic that is prone to generating debates anytime, anywhere. In the current instance, coming in the middle of ongoing debates about the state of the country's economy over one decade of rule by the current government as the country goes to vote has naturally amplified its intensity. Now, debates regarding inequality can generally be divided into three main categories.

First, is inequality fundamentally undesirable or at least tolerable to some extent? This is a question of ideology. The Left sees economic inequality as inherently undesirable. The Right, in contrast, argues that economic inequality is inevitable just like inequality in other dimensions, such as intelligence and ability, and should be accepted although both sides tend to agree that absolute poverty or deprivation is undesirable.

Second, should one look at inequality of outcomes or of opportunity? In the case of the former, if one who works harder or is more enterprising earns more it is difficult to argue that is undesirable, let alone the negative incentive consequences on work, enterprise, or innovation. Even so, the question remains, are those who are getting the opportunity the most qualified, the most skilled, the most talented, or does being born into privilege matter?

Third, even if it is accepted that inequality is undesirable and that the problem of inequality of opportunity is very important, what can be done about it? It is a question of policy. If radical social change is not on the list of possibilities, then redistribution through taxation, public investment in health and education, and legal and regulatory steps to curb abuses of power by the rich are some of the policy instruments at hand. This is where the debate gets quite heated.

The main reaction against the thrust of the findings of the paper by Piketty and his colleagues is that economic growth necessarily leads to an increase in inequality as the wealthier classes are better able to take advantage of the expansion of economic opportunities that growth creates. However, poverty also goes down so focusing on ine-

quality is misleading at best, and counterproductive at worst.

Growth leads to an expansion of economic opportunities, which increases wages and incomes in the labour market and thereby the size of government coffers, which, in turn, raises the ability to spend on welfare policies. After all, inequality was lower before liberalisation, but per capita national income and its rate of growth were lower, and poverty was much higher.

The validity of this argument depends on whether the benefits of the growth process are indeed spreading to all classes of people. Are the incomes of the poorer classes rising

at a sufficient rate despite inequality? Are employment and wages increasing at a sufficient rate in the labour market? Is the tax system progressive and public investment in areas where the poor benefit the most from it increasing? Let's turn to evidence.

Research shows that the incomes of the top 1% and 10% income groups have grown at a higher-than-average rate of growth in the post-liberalisation era. Not only that, the growth rates of income of the bottom 50% and the middle 40% were both below the average growth rate. If the process of growth was inclusive, we should expect a higher rate of growth for those with lower incomes since by the laws of arithmetic, the lower the base, the easier it is to increase something by a certain percentage.

Given the incomes of the rich have been growing at a higher rate than the average, inequality — now at a historically high level — will continue to increase over time. Is this a problem that is inevitable in the era of globalisation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), and



The picture emerging from the labour market, as to whether the poor are benefiting from the growth process, is not positive

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not exclusive to India? That happens not to be the case. For example, in China, the income growth rates of the top 1% and 10% groups have been broadly similar to that of India since the early 1980s, even though more recently, it has been higher for India. But, the income growth rates of the middle 40% and bottom 50% have been much higher in China than in India over the last 30 years.

Turning to the labour market, recent research shows that compared to the overall income growth of the country, the labour market fails to show signs of dynamism in terms of the quality of job creation and wage growth. Self-employed workers who do not employ any workers, casual workers, and workers engaged in unpaid family labour constitute three-fourths of the country's total working population and their proportion has increased over the past decade. In terms of wages, the growth rate of the average real income of the working class is negligible compared to the overall income growth of the country. Thus, the picture emerging from the labour market, as to whether the poorer

classes are benefiting substantially from the growth process, does not look positive.

If we look at the tax system, 17% of central government revenue comes from Goods and Services Tax (GST) and other indirect taxes, 15% from income tax, and 15% from corporation tax. However, about two-thirds of GST comes from the bottom 50% of the population, one-third from the middle 40%, and only 3-4% is collected from the rich. Wealth tax has been abolished since 2016. In a country like India, where more than 90% of the population is outside the income tax net, the process of tax collection is not easy, but still, the picture of the tax system that emerges cannot be called progressive in any way.

Finally, let's look at the pattern of allocation of government expenditure on areas that would directly benefit the poor. Since 2014, the ratio of public spending on education as a proportion of national income has been consistently declining. The corresponding proportion for health increased slightly from 2017 to 2021 (the year of the epidemic). But since then, that too has been on a down-

ward trend, and currently, stands slightly higher than the 2014 level. However, allocations to the public distribution system have increased since the epidemic, as have expenditures on public housing and drinking water. Although belated and limited in scale, this orientation of government policy is desirable. Still, the overall picture that is emerging is not promising.

Let's not forget that the economy and politics are closely interrelated. There are other costs of inequality. The super-rich don't just benefit because the tax system isn't progressive enough. As the debate over electoral bonds suggests, they are politically active and, clearly, campaign contributions have economic leverage in terms of buying influence over government policy and decisions. So, the "don't worry about inequality, growth will take care of everything" narrative does not look particularly convincing right now.

Maitreesh Ghatak is professor of economics, London School of Economics (LSE). The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



## Using words to remake and reclaim the world

Unlike his earlier masterpieces, in his latest book *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, on the terrible attack that almost killed him, Salman Rushdie speaks directly to the reader. Intimately and honestly, seeking understanding whilst attempting to convince, sharing his uncertainty, revealing his pain and inner conflicts, he maps out the slow but confidently steady journey of his recovery. It's a very human voice. Very personal. You could say it's more Salman than Rushdie.

I always knew he'd write about the attack. How could a novelist not? But I was judging as a reader. Rushdie's explanation tells you what the effort meant to him. "To write would be my way of owning what

happened, taking charge of it, making it mine, refusing to be a mere victim. I would answer violence with art."

The book is Rushdie's response and the title is carefully chosen. He was brutally attacked with a knife. That's so different from a gun. "A knife attack is a kind of intimacy, a knife's a close-up weapon, and the crimes it commits are intimate encounters." But a knife is also a tool. It acquires meaning from the way you use it. In that sense, language too is a knife.

"Language was my knife," Rushdie explains. "If I had unexpectedly been caught in an unwanted knife fight, maybe this was the knife I could use to fight back. It could be the tool I would use to remake and reclaim my world."

Rushdie's description of the attack is clinical, chilling but riveting. "I can still see the moment in slow motion. My eyes follow the running man as he leaps out of the audience and approaches me. I see each step of his headlong run. I watch myself coming to my feet and turning toward him... I raise my left hand in self-defence. He plunges the knife into it." As if he was watching what was happening like a person other than the victim, Rushdie writes: "He was just stabbing wildly, stabbing and slashing, the knife flailing at me as if it had a life of its own." It seems Rushdie didn't lose consciousness. He was grimly aware of what was happening. "I remember lying on the floor watching the pool of my blood spreading outward from my body. *That's a lot of blood*, I thought. And then I thought: *I'm dying*. It didn't feel dramatic, or particularly awful. It just felt probable. Yes, that was very likely what was happening. It felt matter-of-fact."

At the time what Rushdie didn't realise is he was determined to survive. "My credit cards are in that pocket", I mumbled to whoever might be paying attention. "My house keys are in the other pocket... now, looking back, hearing my broken voice insist on those things, the things of my normal everyday life, I think that a part of me — some battling part deep within — simply

had no plan to die, and fully intended to use those keys and cards again... some part of me (was) whispering, *Live. Live.*"

He was stabbed 15 times. In the neck, right eye, left hand, liver, abdomen, forehead, cheeks, mouth and across his torso. To Alan Yentob of the BBC, he said his right eye felt like a soft-boiled egg resting on his upper cheek. In his book, the trauma of losing it is unsentimentally discussed. "Even now, writing this, I still haven't come to terms with the loss. It's difficult physically... but it's even more difficult emotionally. To accept that this is how it's going to be for the rest of my life... it's depressing."

When the attack happened Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Joe Biden, even the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who never liked Rushdie, expressed horror and concern. Macron famously said: "His fight is our fight." But from the country he was born in, and with which he identifies, there was only official silence. "India, the country of my birth and my deepest inspiration, on that day found no words," Rushdie writes. Shame on us.

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

## ENGENDER

Lalita Panicker



## In the shadow of war, Gaza women battle on

A conservative estimate, 35,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched its retaliatory attack in October 2023, of which at least 70% were women or children. UN agencies estimate that nearly one million women and girls are facing acute food insecurity. While the world waits for a political resolution to the crisis, something which does not seem forthcoming despite several peace summits, more attention must be given to how the crisis in Gaza has impacted gender relations.

The very foundations of the family structure have changed with the loss of the breadwinners, affecting women and children the most. Food shortages, the destruction of schools and loss of education could lead to early marriages for many girls who are virtually destitute now and depend on extended families. Women, often with few skills or low access to economic resources, are now forced to provide for the families they must lead. Even in better times, Gaza's women had restricted access to economic opportunities; now, the violence has wiped even that little bit out. Severe malnutrition has increased among women and children, with women not being a priority for the limited food available. Thus, pregnant and lactating mothers are at severe risk, and their babies as well.

Families are grappling with a surge in domestic violence, significantly affecting women. The burdens of the war that fall on women include standing in lines for hours, while half collapsing from starvation, to fetch water or trying to receive aid through coupons. Women find themselves undertaking tasks that are physically demanding, including chopping firewood. The psychological toll is profound, stemming from the upheaval of leaving homes, the loss of essentials, the deaths of family members as well as spousal violence.

Mohsen Abu Ramadan, head, Haidar Abdul Shafi Centre for Culture and Development says, "The lack of privacy women go through in displacement camps is certainly a form of violence that women currently experience on a daily basis. In addition to the violence, the sexism by male officials in shelters and their preference to accept males over females, adds to the exclusion and marginalisation of women."

Women in Gaza face the risk of being exposed to severe health problems due to water outages and the lack of basic health care during menstruation. Many of them are in crowded camps where the struggle to meet basic needs involves considerable suffering. They have no access to menstrual hygiene products or easy access to functioning bathrooms. According to Ramadan, this means that they are exposed to health risks that further batter their already frail bodies. He quotes one woman as saying that since the beginning of the war, women have resorted to birth control pills to postpone their menstrual cycle, but this caused them great pain, so they were forced to stop taking them, which exacerbated their suffering. The lack of proper hygiene products may put them at risk of cervical cancer.

Lucy Nusseibeh, founder and executive chair of Middle East Non-violence and Democracy in East Jerusalem says, "Women are the future of any society; they need extra support from men in the appalling conditions of the Gaza Strip. The deprivation of women's most basic needs, physical harm to their reproductive systems, along with the growing reality of starvation for their children and themselves, risks destroying future generations. Women in Gaza, who are outstanding examples of courage in their agency and incredible coping, need to be protected and nurtured."

The views expressed are personal

## Being Jagdish Bhagwati in a conflict-riven world

It is rare for a father and his son to have been taught by the same teacher and rarer for them to attend the latter's retirement party together. Yet, this is the extraordinary privilege my son, Abhijeet, and I had on April 15 at Columbia University. The significance of this coincidence is magnified manifold because the teacher in question, Jagdish Bhagwati, is no ordinary figure.

Jagdish was a brilliant student from inception. Prior to joining the Delhi School of Economics (DSE), Jagdish had already published his first paper, "Immiserising Growth: A Geometric Note", in 1958 in the *Review of Economic Studies*, which grew out of his teacher Harry Johnson's lectures on international trade at Cambridge University. He demonstrated that despite following optimal trade policy, a distortion could induce a welfare loss in a growing economy greater than the gains from trade. This piece of academic brilliance sparked new research, which flew against the old trade theory of the time. Not surprisingly, it was on Johnson's advice that Bhagwati went to MIT, obtaining his PhD under Charles Kindleberger and Paul Samuelson.

Jagdish later returned to India and first worked at the newly created Planning Unit at the Indian Statistical Institute, before eventually moving to the DSE where his wife, economist Padma Desai, had secured a position as associate professor. Being a student at DSE between 1960-62, I was blessed to have been instructed by them. So was Abhijeet, three decades later.

At the DSE, Jagdish published some of his most influential articles, including the classic *Domestic Distortions, Tariffs and the*

*Theory of Optimum Subsidy*, jointly authored with VK Ramaswami, challenging the pre-existing notion that free trade had no place in the presence of distortions in developing economies, and free trade can be optimal when the distortions are dealt with domestic policies. According to Paul Krugman, their work "ended up serving primarily as an argument against protection". This left a deep imprint on the teaching methodology in dealing with issues of international trade.

Jagdish also had an abiding influence on India's structural reforms, particularly in trade policy. We know that for decades India had one of the most obscurantist trade policies with stratospheric tariff rates, even though the applied tariff rates were much lower. This, coupled with a plethora of quantitative restrictions, made our trade regime opaque — fostering inefficient production structures. His nuanced and balanced approach to the government's role in opening markets was succinctly outlined in the 1993 report with TN Srinivasan, *India's Economic Reform*, presented to the then finance minister, Manmohan Singh. This was a time when India's economic policy witnessed far-reaching structural changes.

Jagdish had a lasting impact on successive Prime Ministers (PMs). He applauded Atal Bihari Vajpayee for his audacious measures to open up India's telecom sector, realising its long-term gains. He has been a coveted adviser to PM Narendra Modi in shaping his approach to globalisation. In *Defense of Globalization*, his brilliant response to Joseph Stiglitz's *Globalization and Its Discontents*, seeks to address



Jagdish Bhagwati's abiding legacy has led the world to believe that multilateralism must be a guiding force in the long run

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the misplaced, exaggerated concerns about globalisation and argues with conviction that trade must remain an important engine of growth.

We need Jagdish more than ever before for his sanguine advice on two issues. First, in highlighting that trade will remain an important engine of growth. Second, as the world becomes more protectionist and the validity of value-add chains is increasingly questioned, a fresh approach is needed. No country can responsibly compromise its security and sovereignty. However, we must pay heed to Jagdish's lessons that, notwithstanding transient aberrations, comparative factor advantages are compatible with issues of domestic security without excessive trade distortions.

Jagdish's abiding legacy has led the world to believe that multilateralism must be a guiding force in the long run. We need to take a holistic view in the long run to craft a trade policy combining national security and the growing relevance of trade as an important driver of growth. Infrastructure in India is improving dramatically — roads, railways, and airports all serve to improve the overall efficiency of the economy. It would thus be less challenging for us to adapt to a regime which

can gainfully combine the virtues of both. This is the path that Modi has chosen.

In a world beset by geopolitical and economic turmoil, the sanguine advice of Jagdish is as relevant as before. We need the power of his ideas. We need a beacon reminding the world that a closed economy stymies growth potential in the long run. We must continue to believe in the importance of multilateralism and trade as a powerful engine of growth.

Last week, I met Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director-general, World Trade Organization (WTO), who assured me that the organisation's existing dispute settlement mechanism had the teeth for punitive measures without unduly impairing faith in multilateralism. We would need to watch this given the electoral uncertainties in major trading nations.

I feel fortunate to have had an association with Jagdish for more than 60 years. It has been a rare privilege to know a giant of a scholar who can connect with his students after a gap of more than 30 years.

NK Singh is chairman, 15th Finance Commission, president, Institute of Economic Growth and co-chair of the G20 expert group on MDB reform. The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY LETTERS

## Bolster the efforts of Indian police

This is with reference to "Interpol experience in combating crime" by Stephen Kavanagh (Apr 21). The work of Interpol and the Indian police is vital and will increase in importance as the world faces even more complex criminal challenges in the future. We must assist them in tackling crime.

Ritwik Sharma

## Divisive speeches benefit none

This is with reference to "In election season, saving politics from politicians" by Karan Thapar (Apr 21). Contrary to the general notion, PM Modi is not harming the Opposition through his communal speeches. By doing this, he is harming his own party.

Bhartendu Sood

## Timely warning helped save lives

This is with reference to "What Baltimore tragedy says about ocean trade" by Frank Islam (Apr 21). We should appreciate the timely warning by the crew after losing control of the ship, which helped save many lives.

Manohar Yadav

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# Mr Modi rewrites Congress's manifesto

IN AN unprecedented gesture of goodwill and co-operation, Mr Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, voluntarily took upon himself the task of re-writing the Congress's manifesto and to incorporate his inner-most thoughts and ideas that will, he believes, enrich the political discourse. That is the most charitable explanation I can give of the week that has gone by.

There is an intriguing story behind this development. Since April 14, when the BJP's manifesto was released, it was evident to close political observers that Mr Modi was not happy with the document produced for the BJP by a committee headed by the innocent Mr Rajnath Singh. The committee quietly acknowledged that it was not a manifesto of a political party but a tribute to the genius of one man who formed the 'core of the party'. The committee paid due obeisance by calling the document Modi ki Guarantee. However, as Mr Modi guessed correctly, Modi ki Guarantee vanished without a trace within a few hours of its release. No one talks about the BJP's Manifesto today, not even Mr Modi. Modi ki Guarantee rests in peace.

## COMMENTARY ON ORIGINAL

Mr Modi could not trash Modi ki Guarantee nor could he attribute incompetence or dark motives to the drafting committee. Boxed in, Mr Modi decided to take the Congress's manifesto and enhance its visibility and readership with his commentary on the document. This was

in line with the great traditions of Indian literature where commentaries became more important than the original works.

Mr Modi's embellishment of the Congress's manifesto contained the following gems:

- Congress will distribute the people's land, gold and other valuables among Muslims.
- Congress will conduct a survey to value the property of individuals, gold held by women and silver owned by tribal families, and snatch them.
- Land and cash belonging to government employees will be seized and distributed by Congress.
- Dr Manmohan Singh had said that Muslims had the first claim on the nation's resources, and I was present (as chief minister of Gujarat) when Dr Singh said that.
- Congress will take away your *man-galsutra* and *streedhan* and give it to people who have more children.
- If you have a house in the village and if you buy a small flat in the town, Congress will take away one of the houses and give it to someone else.

## COMPETITION AMONG COLLEAGUES

Mr Modi's trusted lieutenant and adviser, Mr Amit Shah, added: Congress will seize temple properties and distribute them. Mr Rajnath Singh contributed his bit by saying that Congress will grab the assets of the people and re-distribute them to infiltrators. Next day, Mr Singh chipped in with another gem: Congress planned to introduce religion-

based quotas in the armed forces.

As the commentators multiplied and outdid each other, Mr Modi discovered that Congress was planning to introduce an 'inheritance tax' and railed against the tax. Ms Nirmala Seetharaman jumped in and contributed her wisdom to the idea of an inheritance tax. She may be forgiven for not knowing that estate duty (a kind of inheritance tax) was abolished by a Congress government in 1985 and that wealth tax was abolished by a BJP government in 2015.

It is not difficult to see why and when the coordinated attack on the Congress's manifesto started. After the first round of polling on April 19, panic seems to have gripped the PMO and the BJP. Mr Modi launched the attack on April 21 at Jalore and Banswara in Rajasthan, and has not stopped. His list of imaginary targets was bizarre. His ministerial colleagues also fired random shots. The media had a duty to call for a stop to this madness. Instead, the newspapers 'explained' the controversial subjects and wrote learned editorials. TV channels aired interviews with pundits and held 'panel discussions'. The fake war started by Mr Modi was amplified many times over.

## WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED

Between April 5 and 19, the Congress's manifesto had become the most talked about subject throughout India. The promises had left a deep impression on the minds of the people, especially

- the socio-economic and caste survey;

- the lifting of the 50 per cent cap on reservations;
- the Rs 400 daily wage for MGN-REGA workers;
- the Mahalakshmi scheme for the poorest families;
- the legal guarantee of MSP for agricultural produce;
- the appointment of a commission to advise on waiver of agricultural loans;
- the Right to Apprenticeship for youth;
- the abolition of the Agniveer scheme;
- the waiver of defaulted education loans; and
- the promise to fill the 30-lakh vacancies in the central government in one year.

Mr M K Stalin, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, hit the bull's eye when he described the Congress's manifesto as the 'hero of the LS election'. This must have offended Mr Modi who decided to portray the document as a villain. To his misfortune, no part of the Congress's manifesto could be faulted. Hence, Mr Modi decided to imagine a manifesto written by a ghost and trash it. That, in my view, is the ultimate tribute that a BJP prime minister could pay to the Congress's real manifesto!

The Congress should say 'thank you, prime minister' for letting the people know what kind of distortions, falsehoods and abuses can be expected if the BJP (with Mr Modi at the helm) won a third term. Graduating *summa cum laude* in re-writing manifestos, Mr Narendra Modi may re-write the Constitution of India.

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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# Robin Hood economics

JUST BEFORE sitting down to write this piece, I spotted Rahul Gandhi's latest campaign video on social media. The video began with a poster of Gautam Adani's face on which the word 'BAN' was written. After this Rahul appeared and declared in an angry voice that he promised to give farmers, workers, and the poor as much money as 'Modi has given Adani'. This is only one of many campaign videos in which the inheritor of the Nehru-Gandhi legacy speaks of how when a Congress government comes to power, it will take money from the rich and distribute it to the poor.

It is time to remind the man who seeks to unseat Modi in this general election that it is not his personal wealth that he is threatening to hand out. It is taxpayers' money. It is not just the money of men like Adani and Ambani, but money given in taxes by all of us who pay taxes. What I find disturbing about Rahul's rants against rich Indians is his unconcealed contempt for those who create wealth. The private sector has survived and thrived despite socialist policies like the license raj, despite debilitating taxation. It deserves to be respected and not disdained. The wealth that is owned by men like Adani has not been 'given' to them by Modi or any other politician. It is wealth that they have created for the country, some of which is already being paid to the government in taxes. Why is this so hard for Rahul Gandhi to understand?

The Congress Party has repeatedly indicated that if it comes to power it has plans to introduce crippling new taxes on rich people. Sam Pitroda, famous for damaging the Congress Party's 'secularism' in the last general election, damaged its economic philosophy last week by announcing that it was time to bring back an inheritance tax. Congress spokesmen quickly distanced the party from Pitroda's statement, but redistribution of wealth Robin Hood style is something that Rahul Gandhi has talked about often since the campaign for this election began.

It is time for him to be reminded of what India looked like when taxes on the rich were so insane in his Granny's time that businessmen were ordered to pay 97% of their earnings as tax. The result was that not only was the private sector nearly destroyed but government itself had no money to distribute to the poor. It was a general redistribution of poverty that resulted. India has taken decades to recover and to prosper enough for a middle class to emerge and for a hesitant celebration of prosperity to begin. In the past ten years it is to Modi's credit that he has continued with economic policies that encourage the creation of wealth. In the opinion of those who would like to see the Indian economy really soar, he has not done enough to end socialism. He needs to do much more to totally rid us of an economic ideology that kept India mired in poverty.

Robin Hood Rahul also announced last week that he was so committed to ordering a caste census that he has made it his life's mission. There can be compromises in politics, he said, but no compromises when you make something your life's mission. He has clarified more than once that the purpose of this census is to enable the redistribution of wealth. So, castes that fall into the poorest category will be the first to benefit. This is reverse casteism at a time when the divisions of caste in urban India have blurred. In villages higher caste bigots may choose not to eat at the same table as those they consider lower than them, but this is not possible in a city restaurant.

Instead of coming up with retrograde economic ideas it would be better for the Congress Party's 'thinkers' to examine why India continues to have millions of people living below or just above a shamefully low poverty line. They will find that the only reason why this has happened is because of bad economic policies. Instead of policies that encouraged private enterprise, we followed for decades economic policies that ground it down. It is my considered opinion that this was done to enable cynical political leaders to portray themselves as benefactors and messiahs of the downtrodden.

If the downtrodden vanished into the middle classes, then how would politicians be able to wander about at election time promising people freebies like monthly pocket money for women and apprenticeships for the unemployed? Instead of freebies what the poor need are the tools to lift themselves out of poverty like good schools and institutions that teach people the skills that would make them employable. But if this happens then how will politicians lure voters by promising them more and more government jobs?

In one of Rahul's rants, he promises to 'create lakhpatis'. It is not the job of a politician to go around creating rich people. It should be the job of every politician to create the conditions in which ordinary people have a chance to become millionaires out of their own enterprise. Instead of promising to take us forward the Congress Party is promising to take us back to a time when nearly half of India lived in poverty. This regressive recipe to win the hearts and votes of Indians is unlikely to work.

# Democracy's hope: A party with Ambedkar as hero

Dalitality

SURAJ YENGDE

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THE ELECTION season is on, and we are watching intensity being played out in the fray. The voters are told to choose between the obvious two camps. However, there have always been ideologies and parties that have stood apart from the twosomeness of Indian polity. The Third Front, for example, which was led by the CPI(M) in the 2009 elections, brought together non-Congress and BJP parties. It also invited smaller state parties to the coalition.

As it happens with every election, once the show is done, the parties wind up their houses and return to their constituencies. The parties without firm ideology side with the ruling ones, attempting to get a sprinkle of share in whatever quantity they can. We also see now regional parties ally with either bloc to retain their agency and have a say in the alliances.

This election, like every election we are told, is a Mahabharat for our country. We have to protect democracy and secure the rights of the poor.

The voter is given a variety of options. The election mandate is diverse, and the voter is begged to vote for their future.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow's idea of the second rate of demand, after the immediate needs of food, housing, and clothing are taken care of, turns to ideas surrounding identity and belonging around safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation at the top. This tells us two things: either the Indian voter is well-fed or is still yearning for the dignity in life that it hoops through the immediacy and demands of identity.

The right-wing has its festival to go wild. The right-wing fanatics will prove their Brahminical agenda by scapegoating the Muslims to consolidate the non-Muslim groups.

Democracy is a playground for those with immediate needs. The rule of people's power cannot be ignored. However, they can be bought at a price when their guts are empty and emotional affliction over religion is pregnant with reaction. The fanatics of the BJP are so strong that

the Congress' duplicity cannot win over the direct affront of the Brahminical wave.

The political organising in India and the world is still happening around the lines of the old borders of religion, though they may not call it such. It takes the form of refugee, immigrant, caste, colour, nativity and so on. This politics appeals to the conscience of the majority. The majority of India, as Dr Ambedkar so sagaciously put it, is communal. This communal impulse of the majority was not for group consolidation but organised together almost randomly against an entity—the outcaste, the Muslim, the other state person, the elite liberal and so on.

The opposition so far seems to have not found a way to react to the majoritarian impulses. Ironically, the majority in India is a collection of minorities. There isn't any single group majority. That is how broader, unhelpful consolidations are created based on the histories of medieval northern Indian and the Deccan.

The Dalit is standing guard for the Constitution and the forces that challenge Manuvaad. In this situation, it is incumbent upon the voter to choose a party with Ambedkar as their central hero. Ambedkarite politics is currently the only one with the potential to push back against the old agenda played out on the chest of voters.

All other ideologies, barring the Left, are ill-equipped to take on the cultural monster that the BJP has created. Because they, too, are subscribers to the values but pretend to stand apart. The voter is unable to distinguish between the colours and flavours.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is the mighty force that braves against both tides of sensationalism and provocation. It followed the mantra advised by Ambedkar, which was to capture political power by making inroads and alliances with the communities. To do this, they invest in nurturing the communities and strengthening them from the bottom up. Their politics is away from the anarchic processes that create fears among the electorate.

Likewise, VCK, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA), Bhartiya Tribal Party and many caste-based parties consolidate a multi-caste polity with a social distribution of goods and economic agenda that have sprung out of the politics of Bahujan-ism.

Suraj Yengde, author of 'Caste Matters', curates Dalitality, has returned to Harvard University

history HEADLINE

ANJISHNU DAS



WITH A month-and-a-half to go for the results of the Lok Sabha polls to be announced on June 4, the BJP has already won its first seat. On April 22, a day after the nomination of the Congress candidate from Surat was rejected, the BJP's Mukesh Dalal was declared elected uncontested from the Lok Sabha seat, after the eight remaining nominees withdrew.

Dalal is only the 29th MP since 1952, when the first elections were held, to have won uncontested, including through by-polls. The most MPs elected unopposed in a single election were in 1952, 1957, and 1967, at five each.

Since 1952, J&K has seen the most MPs elected unopposed at four. Only eight states have sent more than one legislator to Parliament uncontested, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Uttar Pradesh.

At 20, the Congress has seen the most MPs get elected unopposed. The National Conference (NC) and Samajwadi Party (SP) follow with two each. Just one Independent has won the parliamentary election unopposed. Dalal is the first BJP MP in this list.

Only two Lok Sabha seats have seen an MP elected unopposed more than once—Sikkim and Srinagar.

Among the notable MPs who were elected unopposed are former Deputy Prime Minister and Maharashtra CM Y B Chavan from Nasik; former J&K CM and NC chief Farooq Abdullah from Srinagar; former Nagaland CM and ex-Governor of four states S C Jamir; Odisha's first CM Harekrushna Mahatab from Angul; and former Union Ministers P M Sayeed from Lakshadweep and K L Rao from Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh.

In the first election of 1952, Anand Chand became the first and only Independent candidate to be elected unopposed. Chand was the 44th ruler of the erstwhile kingdom of Bilaspur, which at the time had its own Lok Sabha seat and is now a part of Himachal Pradesh. While the Congress had put up a candidate against Chand, he later withdrew his nomination reportedly owing to a lack of funding and to avoid competing with the king amid accusations from the Congress that Chand had bribed its candidate. The party even challenged the uncontested election, but a district court ruled in favour of Chand.

# In unopposed Lok Sabha poll wins, a familiar script



Among those elected unopposed to the Lok Sabha are (from left) Farooq Abdullah, S C Jamir and Y B Chavan. Express

In 1962, Harekrushna Mahatab, the first CM of Odisha, was elected unopposed from the state's Angul constituency. The absence of any rival candidates was a surprise at the time given that he contested a seat where the Ganatantra Parishad (GP) was a dominant regional party. The GP initially named a candidate, who dropped out sensing the competition against Mahatab would be too stiff, and the party's eventual candidate too withdrew his nomination, leaving just Mahatab in the fray.

The same year, Manabendra Shah was elected unopposed as a Congress candidate from the Tehri Garhwal seat, now in Uttarakhand. Shah was the last ruler of the erstwhile Garhwal kingdom, which was among the first princely states to sign the Instrument of Accession to join the Indian Union in 1949. Starting in 1957, Shah represented the seat a record eight times and lost just once in 1971. Shah later served as the Indian ambassador to Ireland in the 1980s.

In 1967, Ngawang Lobzang Thupstan Chognor won the Ladakh seat unopposed as a Congress candidate. Chognor, better known as the 19th Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, a Buddhist spiritual leader considered an incarnation of Buddha, won Ladakh again in 1971 and later served as the Indian ambassador to Mongolia from 1990 to 2000.

In 1977, the Sikkim and Arunachal West seats elected their MPs unopposed. In Sikkim, though Chhatra Bahadur Chhetri had seven rival candidates, their nomination papers were deemed invalid during scrutiny. In Arunachal West,

Rinchin Khandu Khrieme was the only candidate to file nomination.

Sikkim sent another MP to the Lok Sabha after an uncontested win in a 1985 bypoll, when Dil Kumar Bhandari became the state's first woman representative in the Lower House.

In 1989, amid rising insurgency in the Kashmir Valley, the Lok Sabha elections for its three seats saw one MP getting elected unopposed. While Baramulla and Anantnag saw a turnout of just 5%, the National Conference's Mohammed Shafi Bhat won from Srinagar uncontested in an election that the government struggled to hold given the growing militancy.

Samajwadi Party leader Dimple Yadav was the most recent MP to be elected unopposed before Dalal. In 2012, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav was forced to vacate his Kannauj Lok Sabha seat after his party won the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls and he became the CM. In the ensuing bypoll, the SP named his wife Dimple as its candidate. While the Congress, BSP and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), stayed away from the bypoll, the BJP, several Independents and minor parties showed an interest to contest from Kannauj.

Before polling though, an Independent and a candidate from the Sanyukta Samajwadi Dal withdrew their nominations, with Dimple expected to win in a seat that had been an SP stronghold since 1998.

Later, the BJP and Peace Party accused the SP of preventing their candidates from filing their nominations. The SP, however, said the BJP had asked its candidate to withdraw.

She SAID

VIDHEESHA KUNTAMALLA



I STILL remember those simpler days while in college. The first-ever smartphone I could afford as a student then was a tiny three-inch Samsung Champ. Clearly a "pocket-sized model", it came with a little joystick and a camera.

As I grew older and as I upgraded to Apple products, I ended up buying phones that were at least five inches in size. Along the way, I also realised that the concept of a "pocket-sized model" was not the same for men and women.

While my Samsung Champ could easily fit into my pants pocket, my new iPhone was a whole different matter.

# The search for the missing pocket

Which is why I switched to the iPhone mini last year. And yet, it would stick out of my pocket. Each time I went out reporting, I would constantly feel that my phone was about to slip out of my tiny pocket. And it actually did one time. After that, I started holding it in my hand.

At social events, I find myself either spending half the time looking for something in my bag, which at times feels like it carries the weight of the entire world, or giving my phone for safekeeping to a man with functional pockets.

Forget childhood bullies, my nemesis has always been the lack of pockets in women's clothing. It's a universal struggle faced by every woman I know. We're constantly burdened with purses or bags because our existing pockets are, well, a

joke. Wallets and cards in bags ghost me regularly, never mind scrounging around for a simple pen.

Purses, while sometimes a nuisance and prone to abandonment, become our burden to bear since keys, cash and menstrual hygiene products need to be stashed somewhere safe and easy to grab. Most women's fascination for men's T-shirts, with their airy and functional pockets, is undeniable. It stems from us falling victim to the "pocket scam" — our excitement over buying cute pyjamas, pants, skirts or dresses is crushed by the reality of discovering the lack of pockets in these apparel. Have you ever seen pockets on a women's swimsuit? Did you know that some swimming trunks for men have pockets? Don't we deserve clothing that allow us to live

our lives without constantly worrying about where to stash our essentials?

For centuries, women have navigated a tightrope between the desire for practicality and aesthetics. While pockets have long been a mainstay of men's clothing, their presence in women's garments depends on the latest trends in the market. Today, the debate continues. While some designers prioritise functionality, in the form of deep, secure pockets, the others stick to form-fitting aesthetics with decorative flaps that offer little functionality.

Barbara Burman and Ariane Fenetaux wrote in their book, *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives*, "Women shaped their consumption of pockets more by the ways they worked and circulated within and between pri-

vate and public spheres than by desires or dreams of fashion... If we think of the pocket as a lens through which to look at the past, a tool to think with, its exceptional resilience for 250 years reveals patterns of continuity remaining alongside great changes over the period."

Although Indian society has transformed from women who were scared to be independent since money in their "pockets" meant freedom that would supersede men, to women who are co-breadwinners of their families. Yet, the majority of women live with the preconception that utility and practical dressing is for men, and all the pink and pretty is only what women should look for.

National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly *She Said* column

# Idea Exchange

SUNDAY, APRIL 28, 2024

**Manoj CG:** For the first time, you are not contesting but leading the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections. How is the campaign shaping up for both the Congress and the INDIA bloc?

Our campaign has been going on for a long time though we may not be visible to the media because of various conditions created by the government. Our campaign is going on well and in each state, our units are working hard at the booth and block levels. At the same time, we are getting surveys and cross surveys done and we have taken all this material into consideration while selecting a candidate. We are organised and doing our best to prevent the BJP from coming to power.

**Manoj CG:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi says *abki baar 400 paar* (BJP will cross 400 seats). Congress leader Rahul Gandhi says the BJP won't even cross 150. What's your realistic assessment?

It's difficult to believe everything Modiji says. This is the first PM I'm seeing who exaggerates so much. But his dream won't come true. We'll show the BJP that it's not the Opposition but the people who want change. The BJP's nervousness is evident from the fact that its leaders are campaigning intensely in every *gully* compared to the past when they would hold just two or three meetings in a district. Whoever they had called corrupt and declared would be jailed have now been inducted in their fold. Modiji is nervous himself. The INDIA alliance will come back with strong numbers and defeat them.

**Manoj CG:** If Modiji is so nervous, why are Congress leaders joining the BJP?

This isn't new. In 1969, when the Congress split, everyone left Indira Gandhi. We lost our symbol after another split in 1978. In 1984, the late Pranab Mukherjee floated his own party (Rashtriya Samajwadi Congress) and took some leaders with him. People leave us when they find the grass greener on the other side. On the other hand, Modiji has weaponised the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Income Tax, which he uses from time to time to scare people. The establishment threatens to close businesses and their owners buy electoral bonds so that they are let off the hook. Ours is not a politics of coercion.

I've been in one party for 53 years. I have been part of Congress rule for 20 years and seen its days in the Opposition for 30 years. People like me don't leave. That's because my political goal is to serve society on principles, not power. That flows from the days of Mahatma Gandhi. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) did not support Gandhiji's Quit India movement.

Only scared people run. Our grassroots worker is intact. If the leader goes, it doesn't make any difference. If the booth-level or block-level worker goes, it's very worrisome. And these workers haven't gone anywhere. So there's no reason to worry.

**Liz Mathew:** The Congress is the only party in the current INDIA bloc with a pan-India responsibility. While you have stronger allies in the south, you have to win the north and the Hindi heartland to make a difference. Which states are you expecting to do well in?

We are weak in some parts of northern India, like UP, parts of Bihar and Uttarakhand. But we have got strong alliance partners in the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar. We have got enough strength in Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and even Assam. We are doing better in Odisha. In Bengal, the alliance could not take off for various reasons but we still have hope given the violence there and a desire to prevent Modi. We are sacrificing some seats because the Congress will definitely try to mobilise and accommodate everybody to save the Constitution and democracy.

**Liz Mathew:** Both you and Rahul Gandhi keep saying that this is an ideological fight. But when it comes to certain issues like the Uniform Civil Code, the Congress has not opposed them. Your manifesto does not mention the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Do you think post the abrogation of Article 370, talking about certain issues could be tricky?

We discuss such issues and do not see them from the winning or losing perspective. There are bigger issues like unemployment and inflation which the PM never talks about. Has he fulfilled his promise of providing two crore jobs to the youth every year? Even ITians and doctors are not able to find jobs. Modi has destroyed the youth completely.

In 2014, he had promised to bring back black money and deposit ₹15 lakh in every citizen's bank account. Has that happened? Has he doubled farmers' income? Not yet. But the UPA government, without anybody asking, has given guarantees like the Food Security Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNRREGA), the Compulsory Education Act and the Rural Health Mission. We have given people rights and those cannot be scrapped. Not like Modiji, saying one thing and doing another.

**MALLIKARJUN KHARGE**  
CONGRESS PRESIDENT

## Leaders may run scared but Congress grassroots workers have not gone anywhere

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on real electoral issues that will have a bearing on results, keeping the INDIA alliance bloc together, real Dalit representation and taking the fight to the BJP camp. The session was moderated by Manoj CG, Chief of Political Bureau

PM says the Constitution is like the Gita for him. But for 140-crore people, the Constitution is the Gita, Bible, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib and more. Your fundamental rights are protected

Keeping our opponents in suspense is what we do. We won't leave it (Rae Bareli) empty, obviously. We'll tell you. You'll be surprised, too

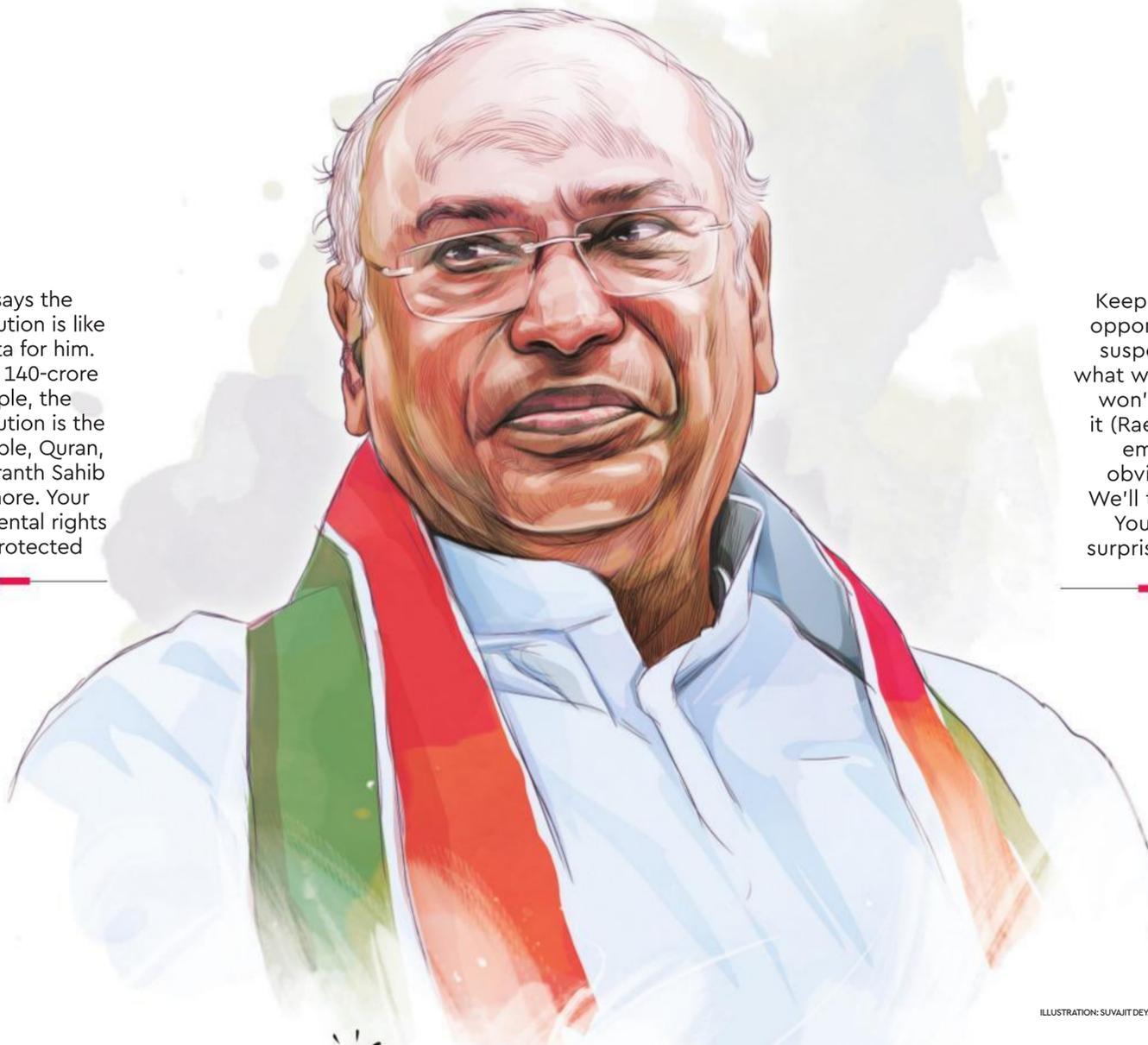


ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY



WHY **MALLIKARJUN KHARGE**

**A**s Congress president, Mallikarjun Kharge faces his toughest test yet in helping a party that is pivoting the Opposition challenge against the Modi-led BJP in the ongoing general elections. Within the party, his job just got tougher with senior leaders joining the BJP. Externally, he has to balance the demands of Congress allies and strike a compromise to keep the Opposition INDIA bloc together. And to convince people, he has to counter the BJP's muscular narrative with an alternative that's inclusive, aspirational and development-oriented

in front of the collector's office, in public spaces and led processions. We have sat in *dharna* before the Gandhi statue and Vijay Chowk over jobs. Nobody is paying any attention to question paper leaks that ruin students' lives, the plight of gig workers or delays in filling government service vacancies. To create employment, Jawaharlal Nehru made so many industries, dams and power projects. Inflation is up.

We talk about democracy and Constitution together because good governance flows from them and if we had good governance, we wouldn't have had such issues.

**Shyamal Yadav:** Your manifesto talks about a socio-economic caste census. In 2011, the UPA government had done one such census despite the resistance of

senior leader P Chidambaram but its data was never made public. Your government said the data wasn't reliable though ₹5,000 crore was spent. How will you correct the gaps?

This will be the decision of the INDIA alliance. For example, people in Bengal have reservations and want the socio-economic census done differently, not on the basis of caste. You mentioned Chidambaram sahib. Now he's the manifesto chairman. So there won't be any problem this time. Rahul Gandhi and us will work to implement this properly.

**Harish Damodaran:** Although your party introduced reforms and ushered in liberalisation, of late, there is a feeling that much of the Congress rhetoric is bor-

rowed from the Left and is not industry-friendly. Doesn't such a perception put off investors?

You said it. We liberalised the economy. We encouraged the private, public and the cooperative sectors. We are not against any corporate or industrialist provided they follow rules. There should be a level-playing field for everybody and we cannot be seen as promoting a monopoly or a few people. We support industrialists because without industry, you can't create wealth or jobs. We also have to look at labourers, their wages, skill and health, for higher productivity. We are neither left nor right, we are centrist. We are following Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's path. Look back and you will see that our five-year plans were well-balanced. We supported many industrialists and encouraged their growth.

**Jatin Anand:** Although the Congress is in alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for the Delhi Lok Sabha election, it has not fielded a woman candidate. Your comment.

We've got three seats — Chandni Chowk, North East Delhi and North West Delhi. The last is a reserved seat. We have tried to balance various factors with whatever we've got. Of course, our best candidates are with us. In Punjab, we are fighting separately. So there is no problem in allocating seats there according to our terms.

**Aakash Joshi:** The Congress is probably contesting the lowest-ever number of seats, under 300. Did your party have to give up the scale of its national footprint because your allies did not compromise enough on seats?

We are contesting more than 350 seats and have announced 280 seats. Sometimes we have to accommodate and sacri-

fice seats, like we did in Maharashtra recently. The aim is to keep the alliance intact, fight unitedly and defeat the Modi government.

**Sandeep Singh:** Since the BJP is talking about winning 400 seats, it has trained its energies on southern states and Bengal to get extra seats. The Congress is only focussing on the south when it should be focussing on big states like UP and Maharashtra. You are not doing as many rallies either.

We have strong regional alliance partners. Wherever our leaders are required, we use them and wherever heavyweight leaders like Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray exist, they helm the campaign. But more campaigning is left in states and we have a phase-wise plan. We have tried to cover seven seats in the first phase.

**Manoj CG:** Why is there so much suspense about Rai Bareli?

Keeping our opponents in suspense is what we do. We won't leave it empty, obviously. We'll tell you. You'll be surprised, too. Let's see.

**Lalmani Verma:** In UP, you have an alliance with SP. But no SP leader came to campaign with top Congress leaders and vice-versa. Priyanka Gandhi held a press conference and roadshow on the last day of campaigning for the first phase. The opposition was again missing. How will you challenge the BJP in such places?

In this campaign, we had just one seat from the beginning. Besides SP workers let us know wherever we are needed and we attend those rallies. But if it's not needed, no point creating unnecessary conflicts with each other. Rahulji and Akhileshji (SP leader Akhilesh Yadav) held a press conference in Bengaluru. They delivered speeches in Mandya and Kolar, too. The rest, we'll go where needed. The PM has so many resources that he goes to each place 10 times. Remember, our accounts have been frozen.

**Manoj CG:** When Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested, and Congress accounts were frozen, there were discussions that the Opposition would boycott the elections entirely. Was this ever discussed?

I don't know. Maybe some have had that idea. It's not that if you have a cold, you cut off your nose. You should find a solution and the public finds it. So we are preparing them. Once they stand up, these people will run away.

**Liz Mathew:** Modiji has been talking about how Congress boycotted the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Some Congressmen, like a leader from Gujarat, even criticised the party publicly. Looking back, do you think you should have participated?

This is a matter of personal faith. Whosoever wants to visit the temple and offer prayers can go on that day, next day or any other day. The PM is not a *pujari*, so why should he take the lead in consecrating the temple? He just did it for political purpose as not even one-third of the temple is complete yet.

He invited me, Mallikarjun Kharge, leader of the Opposition, and Sonia Gandhiji. Had he invited us as party representatives? Was it a political or a religious function? Why mix religion with politics?

Truth be told, my people (Dalits) are not allowed into temples even today. Leave the Ram Mandir aside, Dalits have to fight for entry at even the smallest of village temples. You don't allow Dalits access to drinking water or educational institutions. You don't even allow bridegrooms ride the horse in a procession. People pull them down and beat them up. If they keep a moustache, they ask them to shave it off. Did they expect me to attend? Rather, would they have tolerated my presence?

They did not allow the first citizen of this country, President Draupadi Murmu, to be present with the PM. Neither was she invited during the inauguration of the Parliament despite being the political head of the country. You did not allow former President Ram Nath Kovind to lay the foundation stone of the new Parliament. So what kind of Dalit representation are they talking about? There are Scheduled Castes and Tribes. They talk about our rights and then humiliate us. And all you can say is that the Congress didn't come.

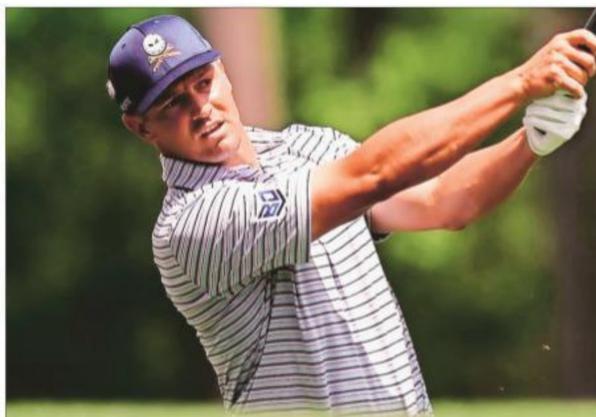
I don't have any animosity. So if they allow my people to worship, we will worship all 33 crore gods and goddesses. Till my people get real freedom, where do I go?

**Shyamal Yadav:** If INDIA alliance wins, and Congress gets to lead, will you convince Rahul Gandhi to step back and let someone else take the lead?

After 1989, which Gandhi family member became a PM, deputy PM, CM or a Central minister? Just abusing the Gandhi family, that's all Modiji does. The BJP targets them because they think if the family finishes, the Congress finishes and the BJP will get a free hand with RSS. This is their plan. First we're getting an alliance together. Nobody will take a decision individually. We'll decide together based on the numbers we get.

# Opinion

SUNDAY, APRIL 28, 2024



Golf has always been a game bound by constraints

INSTAGRAM

## The brawn and short of it

Golf swing is an unholy marriage of violence and grace

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

DRIVE FOR SHOW and putt for dough. And what a show Bryson DeChambeau put on at the 2024 Masters Tournament! The burly American finished tied sixth for a career-best outing at Augusta. The highlights weren't just DeChambeau's trademark mighty heaves with the driver but his scintillating performance with the flat stick. If anything, it was the latter that really made an impression on golf fans. There's a dark magic to golf that long-ball junkies forget. This golf swing has always been an unholy marriage of violence and grace, and you can't build a scorecard on just one of those things.

At the top of his backswing, poised to unleash his downswing, DeChambeau reminded me a bit of Uwe Hohn, the East German javelin powerhouse. At the Games in Berlin, 1984, Hohn hurled the javelin, and the world gasped. Think of the power, the biomechanics, the sheer danger of that thing soaring through the air like an angry hornet just over 100 metres. They changed the sport after that: made the javelins less lethal and curtailed how far they could fly. A similar thing is happening in golf. Just not for safety but rather, as those who're calling the shots like to see it, to save the soul of the game. And they're doing it by restricting it by how far the golf ball will be able to fly.

The R&A, golf's old guard in those stuffy blazers, keeps a tight lid on things: length of shafts, number of dimples on the ball — there's a reason they micro-manage the hardware. We want a level field, of course. But it's deeper than that. See, golf's always been about walking a razor's edge. Power, yes, gives you a leg up. But you need touch around those greens, that Seve-like wizardry, to scramble, to plot a bogey from the deepest rough. But young players aren't interested in being wiry magicians like Ballesteros anymore. Not surprisingly, equipment companies have cashed in: wedges like machetes and drivers that turned a mishit into a missile. It was only a matter of time before weekend warriors like us got caught up in the arms race.

Look, I'm not one of those purists whining about the good old days. I love my forgiving driver heads as much as the next hacker. But the pros? Their game looks different now. Bomb and gouge — that's the strategy. 350 off the tee, wedge onto the dance floor, yawn. Where's the artistry in that? Where's the thinking man's desperation that made this game so fascinating?

All of this has had pretty damaging (and expensive) repercussions on

golf course architecture. Classic gems have had to get stretched out, bunkers repositioned, all to keep up with the absurd lengths these pros are hitting. It's like trying to contain a raging river by building higher dams — sooner or later, something breaks. The charm of the old layouts, the emphasis on shot-making and strategic choices, slowly fades in favour of brute force and bravado.

Old-timers, guys who played with persimmon woods and balata balls, swear there's an art that's being lost. That the modern game is too clinical, too, reliant on brute force and the latest tech toys. And maybe they've got a point. There's a joy in the struggle, in learning to shape a shot with the equipment you've got, making magic with what seems like limitations. That, right there, is the key difference — limitations.

Golf has always been a game bound by constraints. The course itself, with slyly concealed bunkers and deceptively sloped greens, dictates your choices. The rules, with their meticulous penalties, force both strategy and discipline. And even our bodies, frustratingly human and prone to hiccups, present a constant challenge. Technology keeps trying to break those chains, to give us more power, more forgiveness, to smooth over the rough edges.

But isn't there a danger in that? Doesn't part of the allure of golf lie in the fact that it can never be truly mastered? That even the greatest players have days when nothing goes right when the ball stubbornly refuses to obey? The constant struggle against the elements, against the course, against our own flawed selves... that's what keeps us coming back for more. It's the promise that maybe, just maybe, tomorrow, the stars will align, and we'll play that one round that justifies all the frustration and expense.

There's this photo I keep coming back to. Seve Ballesteros, in the rough, contorted like a circus performer, playing a shot from what looks like an impossible lie. On his face, pure defiance. I imagine him thinking, "Alright, world, try and stop me." That's not power. It's guts, it's desperation, and it's far more compelling to watch than the calculated perfection of some modern fairway robot.

Of course, none of this will stop me from secretly admiring the effortless bombs my playing partners unleash. And hey, maybe I'll even splurge on one of these low-spin, drivers that everyone is hitting 300 yards these days. The truth is, like so many of us out there, I'll never practise my short game enough to get good at it. This means the joy of a well-struck chip that dances up to the pin will always be a rare thing. And that, my friends, is where true magic lies.

*Agolfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game*

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



To Mr Modi's misfortune, no part of the Congress' manifesto could be faulted. Hence, he decided to imagine a manifesto written by a ghost and trash it. That, in my view, is the ultimate tribute that a BJP prime minister could pay to the Congress' real manifesto!

IN AN UNPRECEDENTED gesture of goodwill and co-operation, Mr Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, voluntarily took upon himself the task of re-writing the Congress' manifesto and to incorporate his inner-most thoughts and ideas that will, he believes, enrich the political discourse. That is the most charitable explanation I can give of the week that has gone by.

There is an intriguing story behind this development. Since April 14, when the BJP's manifesto was released, it was evident to close political observers that Mr Modi was not happy with the document produced for the BJP by a committee headed by the innocent Mr Rajnath Singh. The committee quietly acknowledged that it was not a manifesto of a political party but a tribute to the genius of one man who formed the 'core of the party'. The committee paid due obeisance by calling the document Modi ki Guarantee. However, as Mr Modi guessed correctly, Modi ki Guarantee vanished without a trace within a few hours of its release. No one talks about the BJP's Manifesto today, not even Mr Modi. Modi ki Guarantee rests in peace.

Commentary on original

Mr Modi could not trash Modi ki Guarantee nor could he attribute incompetence or dark motives to the drafting committee. Boxed in, Mr Modi decided to take the Congress's manifesto and enhance its visibility and readership with his commentary on the document. This was in line with the great traditions of Indian literature where commentaries became more important than the original works.

Mr Modi's embellishment of the Congress's manifesto contained the following gems:

- Congress will distribute the people's land, gold and other valuables among Muslims.
- Congress will conduct a survey to value the property of individuals, gold held by



PM Narendra Modi addressing a public meeting for Lok Sabha elections

## Mr Modi rewrites Congress' manifesto

women and silver owned by tribal families, and snatch them.

- Land and cash belonging to government employees will be seized and distributed by Congress.

- Dr Manmohan Singh had said that Muslims had the first claim on the nation's resources, and I was present (as chief minister of Gujarat) when Dr Singh said that.

- Congress will take away your *mangalsutra* and *streedhan* and give it to people who have more children.

- If you have a house in the village and if you buy a small flat in the town, Congress will take away one of the houses and give it to someone else.

Competition among colleagues

Mr Modi's trusted lieutenant and adviser, Mr Amit Shah, added: Congress will seize temple properties and distribute them. Mr Rajnath Singh contributed his bit by saying that Congress will grab the assets of the people and re-distribute them to infiltrators. Next day, Mr Singh chipped in with another gem: Congress planned to introduce religion-based quotas in the armed forces.

As the commentators multiplied and outdid each other, Mr Modi discovered that Congress was planning to introduce an 'inheritance tax' and railed against the tax. Ms Nirmala Seetharaman jumped in and contributed her wisdom to the idea of an inheritance tax. She may be forgiven

for not knowing that estate duty (a kind of inheritance tax) was abolished by a Congress government in 1985 and that wealth tax was abolished by a BJP government in 2015.

It is not difficult to see why and when the coordinated attack on the Congress' manifesto started. After the first round of polling on April 19, panic seems to have gripped the PMO and the BJP. Mr Modi launched the attack on April 21 at Jalore and Banswara in Rajasthan, and has not stopped. His list of imaginary targets was bizarre. His ministerial colleagues also fired random shots. The media had a duty to call for a stop to this madness. Instead, the newspapers 'explained' the controversial subjects and wrote learned editorials. TV channels aired interviews with pundits and held 'panel discussions'. The fake war started by Mr Modi was amplified many times over.

What can be expected

Between April 5 and 19, the Congress's manifesto had become the most talked about subject throughout India. The promises had left a deep impression on the minds of the people, especially

- the socio-economic and caste survey;
- the lifting of the 50% cap on reservations;
- the ₹400 daily wage for MGNREGA workers;
- the Mahalakshmi scheme for the poor-

est families;

- the legal guarantee of MSP for agricultural produce;

- the appointment of a commission to advise on waiver of agricultural loans;

- the Right to Apprenticeship for youth;

- the abolition of the Agniveer scheme;

- the waiver of defaulted education loans; and

- the promise to fill the 30-lakh vacancies in the central government in one year.

Mr M K Stalin, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, hit the bull's eye when he described the Congress's manifesto as the 'hero of the LS election'. This must have offended Mr Modi who decided to portray the document as a villain. To his misfortune, no part of the Congress's manifesto could be faulted. Hence, Mr Modi decided to imagine a manifesto written by a ghost and trash it. That, in my view, is the ultimate tribute that a BJP prime minister could pay to the Congress's real manifesto!

The Congress should say 'thank you, prime minister' for letting the people know what kind of distortions, falsehoods and abuses can be expected if the BJP (with Mr Modi at the helm) won a third term. Graduating *summa cum laude* in re-writing manifestos, Mr Narendra Modi may rewrite the Constitution of India.

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FIFTH COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH

## Robin Hood economics

JUST BEFORE SITTING down to write this piece, I spotted Rahul Gandhi's latest campaign video on social media. The video began with a poster of Gautam Adani's face on which the word 'BAN' was written. After this, Rahul appeared and declared in an angry voice that he promised to give farmers, workers, and the poor as much money as 'Modi has given Adani'. This is only one of many campaign videos in which the inheritor of the Nehru-Gandhi legacy speaks of how when a Congress government comes to power, it will take money from the rich and distribute it to the poor.

It is time to remind the man who seeks to unseat Modi in this general election that it is not his personal wealth that he is threatening to hand out. It is taxpayers' money. It is not just the money of men like Adani and Ambani, but money given in taxes by all of us who pay taxes. What I find disturbing about Rahul's rants against rich Indians is his unconcealed contempt for those who

create wealth.

The private sector has survived and thrived despite socialist policies like the license raj, despite debilitating taxation. It deserves to be respected and not disdained. The wealth that is owned by men like Adani has not been 'given' to them by Modi or any other politician. It is wealth that they have created for the country, some of which is already being paid to the government in taxes. Why is this so hard for Rahul Gandhi to understand?

The Congress Party has repeatedly indicated that if it comes to power it has plans to introduce crippling new taxes on rich people. Sam Pitroda, famous for damaging the Congress Party's secularism in the last general election, damaged its economic philosophy last week by announcing that it was time to bring back an inheritance tax. Congress spokesmen quickly distanced the party from Pitroda's statement, but redistribution of wealth Robin Hood style is something that Rahul Gandhi has talked about often since the campaign for this election began.

It is time for him to be reminded of what India looked like when taxes on the rich were so insane in his Granny's time that businessmen were ordered to pay 97% of their earnings as tax.

The result was that not only was the private sector nearly destroyed but government itself had no money to distribute to the poor. It was a gen-

eral redistribution of poverty that resulted. India has taken decades to recover and to prosper enough for a middle class to emerge and for a hesitant celebration of prosperity to begin. In the past ten years it is to Modi's credit that he has continued with economic policies that encourage the creation of wealth. In the opinion of those who would like to see the Indian economy really soar, he has not done enough to end socialism. He needs to do much more to totally rid us of an economic ideology that kept India mired in poverty.

Robin Hood Rahul also announced last week that he was so committed to ordering a caste census that he has made it his life's mission. There can be compromises in politics, he said, but no compromises when you make something your life's mission. He has clarified more than once that the purpose of this census is to enable the redistribution of wealth. So, castes that fall into the poorest category will be the first to benefit. This is reverse casteism at a time when the divisions of caste in urban India have blurred. In villages higher caste bigots may choose not to eat at the same table as those they consider lower than them, but this is not possible in a city restaurant.

Instead of coming up with retrograde economic ideas it would be better for the Congress Party's 'thinkers' to examine why India continues to have millions of people living below or just above a shamefully low

poverty line. They will find that the only reason why this has happened is because of bad economic policies. Instead of policies that encouraged private enterprise, we followed for decades economic policies that ground it down. It is my considered opinion that this was done to enable cynical political leaders to portray themselves as benefactors and messiahs of the downtrodden.

If the downtrodden vanished into the middle classes, then how would politicians be able to wander about at election time promising people freebies like monthly pocket money for women and apprenticeships for the unemployed? Instead of freebies what the poor need are the tools to lift themselves out of poverty like good schools and institutions that teach people the skills that would make them employable. But if this happens then how will politicians lure voters by promising them more and more government jobs?

In one of Rahul's rants, he promises to 'create lakhpatis'. It is not the job of a politician to go around creating rich people. It should be the job of every politician to create the conditions in which ordinary people have a chance to become millionaires out of their own enterprise. Instead of promising to take us forward the Congress Party is promising to take us back to a time when nearly half of India lived in poverty. This regressive recipe to win the hearts and votes of Indians is unlikely to work.

ODD &amp; EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE





Whatever it is that the government does, sensible Americans would prefer that the government do it to somebody else. This is the idea behind foreign policy

P J O'Rourke

## GOOGLIES & YORKERS FROM THE INDIAN POLITICAL LEAGUE

THE Indian Premier League has unveiled a new paradigm this season. The players have blown away conventional strike rate math—nine teams have scored over 250 runs in 120 balls and there are 10 centuries already. Eerily, the Indian Political League is similarly upending existing templates—if records are being smashed on the ground, rhetoric is erasing the norms and boundaries of expression and assertion in E2024.

The effects are in stark contrast. Those tuning in to the matches are thrilled at the blitzkrieg of strokes, while those tuned into the ricocheting rhetoric are dismayed and even the parish of believers is filled with a sense of disquiet. As on the field, there is no dearth of lofty shots, mystifying and mind-numbing claims which stretch credulity with googlies and yorkers galore. And mind you #2024Elections is yet in the 'power play' stage, with only two of seven phases completed.

The context is riveted by troubling questions awaiting answers and will hopefully trigger conscientious introspection on the stated and unstated intent of political contestants and quality of conversations in the world's largest democracy. Here are a few observations and posers to catalyse contemplation on the state of the nation.

Like the unthinkable and unexpected has transpired. Manifestos till date were essentially item songs stringing election campaigns. Surprisingly, manifestos have emerged as the theme song of mass campaign rallies. The Congress may not have quite expected the volume of interest in the idiom of its political promise; its Nyay Patra may have notched some traffic for downloads.

The lather in the media has been about whether or not the Nyay Patra explicitly states the confiscation of private wealth for redistribution. What is troubling is the underlining of euphemisms—mangalsutra, trespassers and those who birth many children—deployed as instruments of identification resulting in polarisation. The Congress may argue about what is explicit but in a fast-evolving election cycle politics is scaffolded by perceptions of implicit beliefs.

Like the shift in narrative and campaign messaging is stark. Following the consecration of the Ram temple, the general belief was that 2024 is a done deal. February saw the unveiling of the 'Abki baar 400 paar' slogan, with the BJP crossing the Rubicon of 350 on its own. The past week's events haven't altered perceptions about the trajectory, but they have triggered questions—even among the believers—on the numerical destination.

The question being discussed in living rooms is less about the character of political postulation and more about what caused the ratcheting of rhetoric. Popular theory defines this as a response to the low turnout of voters in the first phase and is overlaid on a rich tapestry of allusions of the geography of contests and location of strategic discussions that preceded the onslaught. The moot question is whether the blitzkrieg is being designed to ramp up voter turnout, or whether the ramp-up of messaging was aimed at galvanising the turnout of the cadre.

There is no mistaking that the contest between the BJP-led front and the opposition is marked by an asymmetry in capacity and capability worsened by the Congress's affected articulation and struggle for space. The manifesto is decently detailed on some promises and patchy in parts. The declaration of a caste x-ray and a financial survey without explanation has opened up a can of claims and has been leveraged by the BJP.

Unsurprisingly, the debate is focussed on inheritance tax, which the BJP has highlighted and the Congress is laboriously denying following the utterances of family friend Sam Pitroda. Inequality is a complex subject and has occupied the minds of philosophers ranging from Hume and Mill to Rawls. History tells us that taxes on wealth and estate have been tried and discarded.

Any attempt to address systemic inequities must start with the gaps in policies—for instance, liberating agriculture from the curse of imperfect economic models. Sure, the caste census may illuminate the faultlines, but that information—something the UPA failed to make public in 2013—is at best only a starting point. Tackling asymmetries of ability and opportunity require policy intervention—investments in health, education and skilling.

The redistribution debate is waylaid by definitions. The debate must focus on can, and should, wealth be corralled and redistributed, or should mitigation be funded by revenues garnered. That said, there is redistribution visible on India's balance sheet—in schemes and provisions of private goods. India spends over ₹5 lakh crore on centrally sponsored schemes. The free ration to 81.3 crore, the health coverage to 50 crore, the provision of housing, the direct benefit transfers to farmers and women are all crafted from the receipts section and detailed in the budget.

For a change, the reality of a two-speed, K-shaped economy has found space in the political theatre. The truth about India's poverty is embedded in one statistical fact—nearly half the workforce engaged in agriculture must depend on a sixth of the national income. This column has previously illustrated the political geography of India's economy. There is no escaping the sectoral and geographic divergence and need for policy intervention.

Finally, the Congress seems to possess an uncanny knack of contributing to the BJP's campaign. In 2014, it was the 'chawala' refrain, in 2019 it was the 'Chowkidar chor hai' slogan, and in 2024 it's inheritance tax. India deserves better—a landscape of competitive ideas, not just an argument industry.

## WHY MODI IS WESTERN MEDIA'S HATE MAGNET



POWER & POLITICS

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PRIME Minister Narendra Modi has had the best of relations with Western leaders in his twin terms so far. Not so with the Western media, who have an assortment of descriptors for him ranging from strongman to autocrat. His government's response to the carefully orchestrated verbal assault has been a disdainful scorn for traditional media, masked in a new aura of confidence in national supremacy and a refusal to be the Western media's favourite whipping boy. This was demonstrated yet again when Rahul Gandhi's Indian American advisor inherited from his late father, Sam Pitroda, weaponised recent Western media headlines in an attack on Modi. In an age of WhatsApp forwards and meme fests, news has become content to be embellished with bells and whistles. And what should be highlighted and headlined is usually the responsibility of a select few gatekeepers, not all of them in the media.

As India moves ahead to elect its 18th Lok Sabha since independence, headlines and selective statements culled from newspaper interviews and TV debates have become news. So it was no surprise when Pitroda posted a compilation of over 50 headlines on India carried by various media outlets from all over the world. These headlines, chosen from various publications from Washington to Wellington, reflected, according to the BJP, hatred for Modi and contempt for Indian institutions. The maximum number of headlines from the past few months were chosen from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*,

*The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *LA Times*, *Reuters*, *Le Monde*, *Time* magazine and *Bloomberg*, among many others. The message from all was similar, as if it was dictated by the same thought process. Pitroda's social media blitz was deliberately launched to influence voters. Within a couple of days, his X post was viewed by over half a million Xians. Not only was it amplified by pro-Congress enthusiasts but also by the Sangh parivar, with the aim of demolishing the credibility of global news organisations.

Here are some of the headlines chosen by Pitroda:

'Modification of India is almost complete,' *Time*

'India's election: fixing a win by outlawing dissent damages democracy,' *The Guardian*

'Progressive South is rejecting Modi,' *Bloomberg*

'The mother of democracy is not in good shape,' *Financial Times*

'Modi's temple of lies,' *The New York Times*

'India a democracy in name only,' *Le Monde*

'Narendra Modi's illiberalism may imperil India's economic progress,' *The Economist*

'Democratic backsliding in India could prompt the West to review its cooperation with Delhi,' *Chatham House*

'Why is Biden silent on Modi and India's slide toward autocracy?' *LA Times*

'Authoritarian drift in the world's largest democracy,' *The Informant*, New Zealand

When almost all the major international publications were carrying an acerbic diatribe against India, foreign correspondents based in New Delhi also joined what the BJP claimed was a 'defame and demolish Modi operation'. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's South Asia bureau chief

Avani Dias left India claiming she wasn't given a visa and was denied an opportunity to cover the elections. The government dismissed her claims as motivated. But that didn't deter 30 foreign journalists from issuing a statement saying: "Foreign journalists in India have grappled with increased restrictions on visas and journalism permits for those holding the status of Overseas Citizen of India. The circumstances of Ms Dias's departure are further cause for concern. We call on the Indian government to facilitate the vital work of a free press in line with India's democratic traditions."

Earlier, French journalist Vanessa Dougnac had also accused the government of unilaterally revoking her OCI card for controversial reporting. The government is clearly uncomfortable with the reporting by foreign media, especially given the stark contrast with a considerably more pliable media at home. The government is convinced that these reports are not based on facts and provide distorted views rather than factual news.

Excessive interest from the Western media in Indian elections has always been perceived as interference in domestic affairs. Even Indira Gandhi was targeted by the American media when she refused to buckle under their negative projection. When India conducted nuclear tests during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure, Western news organisations painted India as the villain of the peace. It blamed India for spending on nuclear weapons rather than the far more urgent need to alleviate poverty.

Barring a few exceptions, self-proclaimed foreign clairvoyants have been predicting doom for India in spite of its record GDP growth. While they may have some justification for their critical

reporting, the same Western news conglomerates have been ignoring attacks on freedom of expression in many other countries including China and Russia. As one of the senior BJP leaders put it: "They draw the conclusions first and find the facts later which they get right." Even External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, who has been cultivating the American media his entire career, found faults. He has said the foreign media attacks India "not because they lack information, but because they think they are also political players in our elections".

He has a point. The tenor of reportage does reflect intentions. Of late, the media has been taking sides based on ideological predilections. Even in the US, the media is divided between those who adore Trump and those who abhor him. A similar situation prevails in India as Modi considers himself the worst victim of a motivated media. Modi loyalists charge that the elitist and illiberal foreign media haven't been able to digest the rise of a 'chawala' as the prime minister of the largest democracy. While it ignores the vicious attacks on the Jewish community in the West, it indulges in Modi-bashing while reporting from India. The PM likes attention, but only on his own terms. Like Indira Gandhi, he too patronises selective media. His visible hostility to the media stems from his experience as Gujarat chief minister. Modi was humiliated by the Western media, which ensured that he was denied a US visa.

As PM, he has kept both the Indian and the foreign press at an arm's length. He has become the first PM not to address a single press conference in a decade. He has stopped taking the press corps with him on his domestic or foreign visits. And as he seeks a third consecutive mandate, the battle lines have been sharply drawn. Every powerful leader would like to manipulate and manage the media. Dissemination of irresponsible and inaccurate news makes his or her job much easier. That is precisely what the foreign media is doing in many countries including India, with all the news that is not fit to print, leave alone trusted.



THE THIRD EYE

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## A CASE AGAINST AUTOMATED VOICE MESSAGES



OPINION

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A deluge of automated voice messages is the latest menace we all are facing. A series of numbers starting with 713xx is used solely to send you voice-recorded messages at any time of the day, including early morning. You can keep blocking the numbers, but they will keep coming back with a different one.

What do these messages say? The one I receive most often says they are from the ministry of home affairs and calling for a Swachhata Sarvekshan or cleanliness survey. If only I could answer them, I would tell them how they spoil my peace of mind and invoke anger, leaving my mental energy unclear. Then there are credit card offers, loan offers and insurance sellers. The worst are the callers who dial random numbers and then want to know who you are. Many use the tactic of pretending to be an old friend you have forgotten. They get a precious few seconds' access to your phone till you figure out the real motive.

From a business perspective, I do not

see any conversion happening through these automated calls. In fact, they may well work against the brand and antagonise potential customers. The top brand recall is that of the sheer nuisance they add to my day. Even if I am looking for a product or service you are selling, I would stay away from a brand that has annoyed me enough already. You have been a productivity killer for me, interrupted my precious sleep or the flow of my conversations, and broken a creative thought process.

If marketing calls are a nuisance, fraudsters take it to another level. Lately, I have been getting calls from Bengaluru-based landlines saying all the mobile phones linked to my Aadhaar number would be disconnected in the next two hours unless I do what the caller tells me to. I disconnect even before the complete message is spoken. But I remember that when I received it the first time it did scare me, for what would we do without a mobile phone. It is obviously a scam, as my phone is still working.

Another day, I received a similar threat that my credit card would be discontinued unless I instantly did my KYC. I might have fallen for it, but for the fact that I did not have any credit card from the bank they mentioned. I have had innumerable job offers from absolute strangers on WhatsApp that start by saying hello like an old lost friend.

The Do Not Call registry exists in principle, but in practice it has no meaning whatsoever. I have forgotten the number of times I have registered the request with my mobile service pro-

vider; but am yet to see any impact. Is it not the time to implement with an iron hand? I am sure the cybercrime authorities can do with fewer cases to handle.

The baniya in me thinks here is a great opportunity for telecom operators and the government to create a revenue model around automated messages. As of today, these messages cost hardly anything to the senders, while they may be overloading the systems for service providers or messaging platforms. Making the cost pinch the sender will make the marketing teams think judiciously.

Automated voice messages disturb us at all hours. Do not call registries don't work and caller identification is often faulty. Telecom firms should warn users about ads, as they can get in the way of genuine alerts from the authorities

Today, when they are just rampantly flooding my inboxes, the cost is borne by me in terms of lost productivity and annoyance. They just buy databases available at a throwaway prices, which is another area needing strict regulation. If sending mass messages cost the sender substantially, they would at least work on customer segmentation and send it to only those who are most likely to convert. Another way to get around

this may be the way advertising works for content creators. Let advertisers pay for people to listen to their messages. UPI and e-wallets can easily enable it.

I strongly think the government should restrict automated voice messaging to emergency announcements like weather alerts, disruption in services or potential threats the citizens ought to know. Right now, even if they want to send an alert, I would probably not pick up an unknown number. Yes, they can have special numbers to communicate emergency messages, but they will have to think ahead of scamsters who will find a way to impersonate them.

At the very least, there can be a compulsory disclaimer that it is an advertisement. Can there be an audio marker that tells us that this message is from the authorities or advertisers that can help us decide to pick or not to pick? Caller identification worked for a while, but not many are willing to pay for a data with limited reliability.

For telecom firms, KYC is the key to trace those sending these messages from multiple numbers. If there are too many block requests for a number, the firms should double-check the credentials. For a higher number of blocks, a fraud alert should be triggered. The cyber police and telecom operators need to work as a team for proactive prevention.

Unless we restrict unwarranted access to our phones, we are sitting on a minefield of scams, besides losing our precious productivity. The more power we assign to our phones, more they become vulnerable for misuse.

### QUOTE CORNER

Apologising is the easy part. We have to pay the costs. Are there actions that were not punished and those responsible were not arrested? Are there goods that were looted and not returned? Let's see how we can repair this.



Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Portugal president, on paying reparations for slavery; Portugal kidnapped and sold into slavery at least 12.5 million Africans and thousands of Indians over four centuries

Remember when Trump was trying to deal with Covid, he suggested injecting a little bleach in your veins? He missed, it all went to his hair.

Joe Biden, US president, in a speech to the largest American builders' union

What are we? We, in these streets for months and months, are the exodus. The exodus from Zionism.

Naomi Klein, author and political analyst, calling Zionism 'a false idol' that has betrayed core Jewish values and created 'roadmaps for ethnic cleansing and genocide'

### MAILBAG

#### Failed visit

Kudos for your editorial on the Delhi lieutenant-governor's canvassing in Kerala. Some church leaders said later that they stood for a secular government, which means Vinai Saxena's trip was a failure. Saxena's claim to have come to attend a hospital inauguration may be true, but it is a hospital built by the head of Believers Church, who is known to have cheated many in the US and Kerala.

#### Greater good

Ref: *My neighbour who envisioned another India* (Apr 27). The author rightly highlighted L K Advani's laudable views that secularism does not mean running away from religion, and that religion should not be used as a tool for political oppression. One could not agree more with his call for bringing all religions together for the nation's greater good.

#### Indirect slight

While I share the author's respect for L K Advani, I think his real intention was to suggest Narendra Modi's greed for power. Had the BJP got the majority in 2009, Advani would have been PM. By the way, was Indira Gandhi the senior leader when Shastri died? Was Rajiv the senior when Indira died? We don't apply the same yardstick to the GOP.

#### Leadership styles

At ISRO's Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, I interacted with two union leaders, C P Ravindran and Johnson Fernandez. Ravindran was a mild-mannered and reasonable person, Fernandez was a firebrand. Vajpayee was like Ravindran, Advani like Fernandez. For me, a decisive leadership is needed at the moment and Modi is providing it.

#### EVM order

Hats off to the Supreme Court judges who put their foot down against the plea for introducing verifi-

able audits for all votes. Ironically, when opposition parties won elections in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Telangana, they were satisfied with the voting machines. Hence the INDIA bloc leaders must be bold enough to digest their loss gracefully. If they continue to file cases against EVMs, the Supreme Court should penalise them for wasting the court's time.

#### Braille option

No country can be prosperous and secure without free and fair elections. Every citizen has the right to cast his or her vote. In India, there are around two million people who suffer from either blindness or severe vision loss, but the government has yet to provide adequate facilities for visually impaired voters. The Election Commission should improve the deployment of Braille signage on voting machines.

#### Kerala turnout

It is really surprising that the turnout in Kerala was only around 70 percent, in spite of the fact that

Kerala is a highly literate and politically conscious state. The people should consider voting as a responsibility rather than an option. Maybe in the future, it can be made compulsory.

#### Other sports

Jyothi Surekha from Vijayawada reached the finals of the Archery World Cup held recently in Shanghai. The athletes showed their ability against other countries. We should not be spending such a lot of money only on cricket, but also on all other sports, giving all kinds of encouragement to the players.

#### Senior care

As a senior citizen from Sivanchetty Gardens, I cannot walk up to the Shivaji Nagar bus stand in Bengaluru. It is horrible to walk through the garbage-filled area. Efforts should be made to immediately open a pedestrian cross. This is one of the reasons for getting a lower voting percentage.

# Insults and counter-insults



**TOUCHSTONES**  
IRA PANDE

AS I write this column, I am surrounded by the din and cacophony of insults and counter-insults being traded by our political leaders in language that burns my ears. Whatever happened to us that we have become so coarse and combative? We, who prided ourselves for our syncretic roots, our civil exchange of views and fair reportage? When I was growing up, there was an unwritten code that no one would name religious groups when reporting riots and clashes. For as long as I can remember, there have been bitter political rivalries that often burst into communal clashes. In Lucknow, every Ramzan ended with bloody clashes between Shias and Sunnis in the old areas of the city. Similarly, states such as Gujarat, Bihar, the northeast had a bloody history of communal clashes between rival religious communities. However, when such events were reported, the two warring factions were never named. Riots were referred to as clashes between members of one community and another. Of course, we all knew which the two communities were but no newspaper ever named them openly as Hindus and Muslims.

This propriety in our public conversations was tossed out a few years ago as the media became more and more biased. Today, even the topmost leaders of our major political parties, ministers and heads of government have no hesitation in taking names. If the very fountainhead of a country is poisoned, it is only natural that the polity, too, will follow suit. I have never been more reluctant to vote

and yet, this is the only chance for me and others like me to register their choice. However, I hang my head in shame at what we have brought our national elections to.

Even as I say this, I cannot absolve my own generation for the indifference with which we treated politics. Just look at the early decades of our Independence. Our parliamentarians were men and women who had distinguished themselves in law, public service and nation-building. They were highly educated people who tried to bring the best practices and ideals that they

## I hang my head in shame at what we have brought our national elections to

could into the debates that took place. Even though television did not exist then and we could neither see, nor hear those debates, the reports that were published in national newspapers were eagerly lapped up by the *janta*.

Mind you, it wasn't all highfalutin stuff either. Witty people like Pilo Mody kept everyone amused with good-natured asides too. Then, there were the firebrand MPs who hurled uncomfortable questions at the ruling party and they were not expelled for that. The Prime Minister always attended Parliament and listened to everyone before answering his critics in equally sharp terms. Politicians left their mother parties to re-group, but were they ever accused of crossing the floor or doing so for money? I cannot recall any such aberration. Why is it then that politics began to be regarded as a dirty business and none of us were inspired to join it? Eventually, it became a transactional business and the misuse of political representation was distorted to bring in those goons whose local clout among the

underworld brought them power in their parties.

By the end of the 1970s, a large part of the country's elite had decided that politics was a dirty game best left to the loudmouths and hustlers that gradually took over. Some good people tried their best to cling to some vestige of constitutional propriety, but they were soon outnumbered. Today, there is no political party that can survive without the *dadas* that control money and muscle power. So, whether one votes for one party or another, the voter is always the one who feels cheated. We may have mastered the art of holding efficient elections and our Election Commission may be the world champion in organising elections on such a gigantic scale, but the spirit of the process is slowly being lost. What will happen as the country drifts towards one-party dominance is a worry that my generation will take to their grave.

However, we must acknowledge the nobility of our simple villagers and rural folk who have tried to keep democracy alive. The most enthusiastic participants in every election, they come out in full strength to cast their vote. This is more than one can say of our spoilt rich classes, who can't bear to stand in queues in punishing heat, or stand next to the local cobbler who is an equal citizen. They take the holiday to drive to the hills or have pool parties. Their children have already succeeded from the republic as they study abroad and are unlikely to ever return. They themselves have the means to live in gated communities, with captive water and electricity, personal guards and never use public transport or public hospitals. What does it matter, they reckon, if one party wins or loses? Their money is safely parked abroad and their businesses know how to work the system.

This, dear reader, is where our glorious republic is at present. To the younger readers, my earnest plea is to take part in the process and go and cast your vote. Do not make the mistake that our generation did and let the goons take over. We failed you, you should not fail your children.

# To recoup life while it's still throbbing



BINDU MENON

IN August 2022, Salman Rushdie was almost killed for being "disingenuous". That was one of the reasons put forth by the writer's would-be assassin, who confessed to having read only two pages of *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's fourth novel was also his most controversial. Published in 1988, it had sparked a *fatwa*, launched a thousand protests, triggered numerous killings (including that of the Japanese translator of the book) and compelled Rushdie to live under the shadow of death. Though he had anticipated an attack in the decade after the *fatwa*, it had somewhat receded until the murderous attack on his "last innocent evening" in upstate New York, where Rushdie was to ironically give a talk on the safety of writers. Death, or rather the nearness of it, is what Rushdie reflects on in his new book *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*.

How do writers under the shadow of death confront it, grapple with it every day, and yet make meaning out of it and use it as material? Is death a battle to be fought and won, an inevitability to be made peace with, or a fear that haunts till the last living breath? Poet John Donne throws a gauntlet of irreverence at "proud" death, when he says, "Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so! For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow! Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me."

If death made several failed encounters with Rushdie, it was an "imposing itinerant visitor" for Paul Kalanithi, the young neurosurgeon who faced it with equanimity and courage. Diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer at the age of 36, Kalanithi writes in his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, "I began to realise that coming face to face with my own mortality, in a sense, had changed nothing and everything." Nothing, because he knew someday he would have to die though he didn't know when. Everything, because now he knew it more acutely. There was also the more profound realisation that "even when I'm dying, until I actually die, I am still living".

In the case of both Rushdie and Kalanithi, it is love and language that illuminate their lives in their darkest phases. Both harness the power of literature to recoup life while it's still throbbing. "Language was my knife," Rushdie ruminates in *Knife*, "the knife I could use to fight back" and a tool to reclaim his world, while Kalanithi, "searching for a vocabulary with which to make sense of death", found it in writing. "Words," he writes, "have a longevity I do not."

Christopher Hitchens, the literary world's best known contrarian, too, became that "finalist in the race for life" when he was diagnosed with



Death, or rather the nearness of it, is what Rushdie reflects on in his new book *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*. REUTERS

## How do writers under the shadow of death confront it, grapple with it every day, and yet make meaning out of it and use it as material?

esophageal cancer and recollects how he had been in denial for long.

"But I can't see myself smiting my brow with shock or hear myself whining about how it's all so unfair: I have been taunting the Reaper into taking a free scythe in my direction and have now succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even me." Hitchens writes in his memoir *Mortality* that documents a very public dying.

"I have more than once in my time woken up feeling like death" is how Hitchens begins the book. He details his diagnosis as "a very gentle and firm deportation" into the land of malady, a land that he says is quite welcoming, where "everybody smiles encouragingly and there appears to be absolutely no racism" though the humour in this new country is "a touch feeble and repetitive" and the cuisine the worst of any destination. Then comes the rather numbing realisation that "I don't have a body, I am a body".

More pervasive though is the wry Hitchensian humour, when he describes how "the novelty of a diagnosis of malignant cancer has a tendency to wear off... even to become banal. One can become quite used to the spectre of the eternal Footman, like some lethal old bore lurking in the hallway at the end of the evening, hoping for the chance to have a word".

Are life and death therefore two mutually exclusive or mutually constitutive binaries? Philosopher Jacques Derrida, mining for some understanding of this quandary from science, philosophy and psychoanalysis, argued that death must be considered neither as the opposite of life, nor as the truth or fulfilment of it, but rather as that which both limits life and makes it possible. As Kalanithi words it beautifully: "The fact of death may be unsettling. Yet there is no other way to live."

# Navy women script sailing history



CMDE SRIKANT B KESNUR (RETD)

AMID the hype and hoopla of the IPL, a significant sporting achievement has been relegated to the margins. On April 21, Lieutenant Commanders Dilna K and Roopa A, two Indian Navy officers, completed a historic transoceanic voyage on the Indian Naval Sailing Vessel (INSV) Tarini. In the process, they became the first Indian women to achieve the distinction of undertaking a transoceanic expedition in double-handed mode.

The two travelled by sea, to Mauritius and back, propelling on wind power alone. They spent nearly two months on a small sailing vessel braving rough seas, strong winds, high waves, treacherous currents and much else that nature throws at you in the wilderness of oceans.

While India has in its ocean sailing catalogue feats of solo sailing and sailing by a group of people (usually six), this is the first time it has been done double-handed — crewed by only two — over such a long distance.

Dilna and Roopa will now prepare for their next big challenge. The Navy is preparing to flag off the 'Sagar Parikrama IV' expedition, a circumnavigation of the globe, on INSV Tarini, scheduled to commence in September.



Lt Cdr Dilna K (left) and Lt Cdr Roopa A during the flag-in ceremony of INSV Tarini. ANI

Interestingly, both have an armed forces background — Dilna's father was in the Army while Roopa's served in the Air Force. Both were also actively involved in the NCC before joining the Navy and have led Navy's Republic Day marching contingents. Dilna is a commerce graduate who joined the Logistics branch in the Navy. She has also been anational-level shooter. Roopa has been a university rank holder in aeronautical engineering who joined the Navy's Armament Inspectorate branch. She is an active marathon runner. Both have logged an impressive 38,000 nautical miles of sailing under their belt.

Ever since they volunteered for 'Sagar Parikrama IV' in 2022, both women have made INSV Tarini their home. They often stay on the ship even when it is berthed along

side its home port in Goa and they are the ones who clean its decks and sweep its floors and do all the 'ship's husbandry' tasks. The Navy's Ocean Sailing Node in Goa gives them a full range of off-shore support, infrastructure and academic guidance. INS Mandovi acts as the mothership nurturing the vessel and the sailors, and the Indian Naval Sailing Association at Delhi handles the overall development of sailing in the Indian Navy.

The Navy has exhaustively trained these officers in all aspects of ocean sailing. Further, a full-fledged medical support team, which includes a psychologist and sleep medicine specialist, monitors their health and medical fitness. Above all, they have an ace in the form of the legendary Abhilash Tomy, who joined them as a mentor in August 2023.

In praise of the sailors, Tomy says, "My job was tremendously reduced thanks to the willingness and effort that the women have put in... Personally, I think they have done well, especially in comparison to the other crew who have sailed the route. They have been safe and quite professional in dealing with defects in the boat and navigating it, and have brought the boat back in an excellent state of preservation."

Quite fascinatingly, in Cowes, UK, on April 22, a sailing yacht appropriately called 'Maiden' won the McIntyre Ocean Globe Race, becoming the first all-women crew to win an around-the-world yacht race. The crew included two Indians who sailed in different legs. Lt Cdr Payal Gupta is a serving Navy officer and Dhanya Pilo is the daughter of a retired Navy officer. Their triumph needs a separate telling.

# A strong case for corrective advertisements



CONSUMER RIGHTS  
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

PATANJALI Ayurved has finally issued an "unconditional public apology" for its disobedience of the directions and orders of the Supreme Court, through large advertisements, but is it enough?

The apex court will obviously deliberate on this issue at its next hearing, but for consumers, who have been misled for years, nothing short of a series of court-directed 'corrective advertisements' to set right the erroneous impressions created by the company's campaigns and advertisements will do. Consumers have a right to information and informed choice and it is imperative that Patanjali informs, through corrective advertisements, that it advertised its products

despite knowing fully well that it was violating the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act and the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and also admits the misrepresentations. The prominence and duration of such advertisements should correspond to the original ones.

Such advertisements would not only hold the company accountable for its misdeeds, but also send out a warning to all those businesses who unabashedly peddle lies and half-truths about their products and services, at the cost of consumers' health and safety. In fact, such misrepresentations strike at the very root of the citizen's fundamental right to life and flowing from it, right to health, safe food and drugs.

The concept of corrective advertisements may have its share of naysayers, particularly among businesses, but I have always been a strong votary of corrective advertisements as the most effective legal remedy for false and misleading advertisements. First, it cures the erroneous impression created by such advertisements in the minds of consumers. Second, if used effectively, it can be a very strong deterrent against mis-

representations because the perpetrator is forced to invest heavily in advertisements that actually expose him and hold him accountable for misleading the public. Third, even when a false advertisement is pulled down, there is always a time lag between its appearance and its withdrawal, by which time it would have already conveyed the misinformation.

It's for this reason that every law, regulation, irrespective of the sector, dealing with false and misleading advertisements should have a provision for corrective advertisement and it must be enforced extensively and effectively. I put particular emphasis on the enforcement because having successfully pushed for the corrective advertisement provision in the Consumer Protection Act as well as the Food Safety and Standards (Advertising and Claims) Regulations, I am extremely disappointed that most often, the provision is ignored. Even when applied by consumer courts, there is a lack of understanding of its objective and therefore, the corrective advertisement does not serve the intended purpose.

One of the best examples of corrective

advertisements can be found in the directions of a federal court in the United States in what is commonly known as the Civil Racketeering lawsuit against tobacco companies. Accordingly, in 2017, major tobacco companies had to issue corrective statements as full-page advertisements in at least 50 newspapers around the country once a week for one year and also broadcast them as 30 and 45-second prime time shots on major TV networks. The corrective statements had to refer to the manipulation of cigarette design and composition to enhance nicotine delivery, adverse health effects of smoking, addictiveness of cigarette smoking and nicotine, absence of health benefits from smoking low tar, light, ultra-light, mild and natural cigarettes, and adverse health effects of exposure to secondhand smoking.

Patanjali's promotion of its drugs makes a strong case for corrective advertisements because the company has constantly flouted laws with impunity and misled consumers for years. It cocked a snook at the enforcement authorities. It even tried that with the Supreme Court!

The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objec-

tionable Advertisements) Act prohibits advertising and promotion of any drug for the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment and prevention of any disease, disorder or condition specified in the Schedule of the Act. And the Schedule covers almost all diseases, including diabetes, high or low blood pressure, glaucoma, and goitre. Yet, Patanjali advertised drugs for these diseases consistently, despite notices from the Uttarakhand licensing authority, following complaints.

The law also prohibits misleading advertisements, and many of its advertisements, forwarded by the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs to the Advertising Standards Council of India (on complaints from consumers), were found to be misleading. And such infractions have gone on for years.

In fact, Patanjali's belligerence also speaks very poorly of the enforcement agencies and calls for strict action against officials who failed to act suo motu, and also on complaints. It also calls for more transparency in the working of enforcement agencies and regular scrutiny of their work through independent agencies.

"I've spent days in cinemas answering questions from the audience, in interviews, travelling abroad, and all they do is thank me nicely"  
— George Lopez



## CHRONICLE OF BIHAR, BEYOND ELECTIONS

In his travels across cities and hamlets of Bihar, DEEPAK KUMAR JHA discovers that the local populace loves to have extensive discourses on politics and engage in conversations where the rhetoric of caste is quite pronounced and audible

Still considered as some of the most backward districts of Bihar — Madhepura, Purnea, Saharsa, Supaul — the *Dehati* (rural) thatched structures until a few years ago have all metamorphosed into brick and mortar dwellings amidst lush green mango orchards, banana plants, and corns in the backyard. However, the basic problems of health and education are galore. In every election for the past five decades, people of this region have been promised 'upliftment' by various political parties and leaders in the fray but ultimately the cast die is caste-ridden, preventing their holistic development. Migration, which started in large numbers almost three decades ago when Bihar was in the stranglehold of 'Jungle Raj', continues unabated even under the much hyped 'Sahasran Raj'. "Sitting chief minister Nitish Kumar rode over former CM Lalu Yadav's Raj and people overwhelmingly voted for him going beyond caste and religion, but things are different now. The JDU leader seems to have run out of ideas after a good two terms. His last alliance with Tejaswi Yadav's RJD kindled some hope on the employment front. But such people-oriented development seems to have taken a backseat while caste and religion-ridden politics is back if you look at the pattern of ticket distribution," says Pushpendra Kumar, former professor and chairperson of the Patna Centre of the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) who is now working full time as a researcher of Bihar's society and polity. Partly, *Bijli*, *Sadak* and *Paani* (BSP) are visibly translating into votes but what remains invisible, not only in the *Dehati* areas but even in towns and cities, are negligible secondary, higher education facilities topped by the lack of healthcare facilities. Amidst these deficiencies the irony is that a plethora of coaching institutes of engineering, medical, and Government jobs across prominent towns and cities like Patna, Muzaffarpur and Bhagalpur have come up and there is a mushrooming of private medical clinics and diagnostics centres in the principle districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Purnea, Katihar, Gaya and Ara-Chapra. Come election time, there is 'Chah (not Chai) Par Charcha' across cities or hamlets where people love to have extensive discourses over Modi, Nitish, Rahul, Tejaswi or even Obama and Biden. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of caste is loud and audible in the

conversation of the locals, sitting on machans (bamboo cane cots), a fact that still dominates the entry and exit of these villages. The women folk have to volunteer to supply the motley crowd with tea doses. "Din bhar mein kum se kum 50 cup chai banta hai. Inko koyi kaam nahi, din bhar sirf rajneeti ki baat karte hain. Unka bhi time katata hai," (More than 50 cups of tea are made for them every day. They have no other work so they spend their idle time talking about politics) observes Neelam Devi, a villager of Satarwar in the Saharsa district of Bihar. The elderly male folks gather as early as 5 am and hang around till 8 am and then come back by 3 pm, remain until dusk at their machans, finding some time to revive the agriculturists in them. Evening chats are conducted within the precincts of temples every 100 yards with the smoke of incense sticks — one for spiritual rites and the other from mosquito repellants — emanating, providing a mixed essence in the clean atmosphere, resplendent with the aroma of cattle and cow dung heaps. And during the wedding season and *Janeu* rituals (thread ceremony), almost every household performs functions and celebrations in its neighbourhood as everybody looks forward to welcoming either an election contestant or any of his/her representatives preferably the dominant caste of that village or town. This reporter, who was covering the Lok Sabha 2024 elections in the Supaul area, got the divine opportunity to feast on chaste *dehati* flavours sitting on a *gamcha* (cotton scarf) rolled over the raw mud field. The serve was obviously *puri*, salads, *papad*, *aloo-parwal*, tomato chutney, *dal-bhaat* (cooked rice) which has now been replaced by Pulao alongside new *Shaheri* add-ons like *paneer* based *subji* and mixed-veg. Sweet delicacies, what they call *Sukha Mitha* (*gulab jamun*) and *Gila Meetha* (*rasgulla*), Boondiya (besan cooked sweet), and lot of curd, is a must to earn the tag of best *Bhoj*. However, elderly people regret the fact that in recent times the city culture is dominating as huge decibels of tractors loaded on tractors is a must during celebrations. Further down to a visit to another village Bara in Saharsa, the author halted and then became part of the discussion over a patient, identified as Nepali Jha, being transported from Sadar Hospital to Patna in a serious condition. The patient was transported to Patna in an ambulance accompanied

by at least a dozen villagers who, en route, were simultaneously making attempts to establish 'contacts' so that the patient could be admitted at Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (IGIMS) in the State's Capital city. Despite their efforts the IGIMS turned down the patient and he was somehow 'accommodated' at Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH). All this while, the villagers accompanying the patient kept insisting with the hospital attendants that the patient be taken to IGIMS, but in vain. When this journalist witnessed their attempts turning futile and one of them claimed to even approach a sitting MP in Bihar, this reporter of *The Pioneer* volunteered to help using bureaucratic contacts in the administration for admission of the patient at IGIMS. The 'mission' was successful and the IGIMS agreed but by that time the patient had to be put on a ventilator back at PMCH and moving him in that critical condition was not feasible. In this grim milieu tea was offered and unfortunately the news about the patient's demise simply vanished from media attention. Although the villagers profusely thanked this reporter, they were equally troubled about their local leaders and MPs who were not of any help in their moment of crisis and used foul language to curse their apathy. "The need for better medical facilities is a must. While several elderly people have moved out of the villages to bigger cities to stay with their children, those who are fond of villages are left in the lurch. Several people have died due to lack of even basic medical facilities in backward areas like in Madhepura, Purnea, Madhepura, and here," said Gyan Mishra, a local villager. While the people in the districts of eastern Bihar struggled for a decade to get a sanction for an AIIMS at Saharsa, considered to be most backward, they are now annoyed with both the Central and State Governments as the project has been moved to neighbouring Darbhanga, considered to be prosperous. The Darbhanga AIIMS was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last year but soon the project got mired in controversy over the tug of war between the neighbouring districts. The matter is now before the Supreme Court. Last year a group of 20 parliamentarians led by Madhepura MP Dinesh Yadav, cutting across party lines launched an intensive campaign for the construction of an AIIMS in Saharsa, and even met Union Health



minister Mansukh Mandviya and handed over a letter of their demand. The letter mentioned that the number of patients suffering from cancer, kidney, heart, liver and other such life-threatening ailments has been quite high in the north-eastern region, comprising Saharsa, Madhepura, Supaul, Khagaria, Purnia, Katihar, Araria and Kishanganj districts. The letter stated that the Saharsa district magistrate (DM) had communicated to the State Government about the availability of 217.74 acres of land for the construction of an AIIMS, but the State Government announced the allocation of land for the AIIMS in Darbhanga. MPs from Siwan, Nalanda, Karakat, Gaya, Valmikinagar, Gopalganj and Jehanabad had also signed the letter despite knowing that the people from their regions will not be visiting Saharsa for their treatment. But, when we talk about Bihar, it would be incomplete without the world famed and internationally acclaimed Madhubani paintings which have received several Padma awards. Another delight for the people of Bihar is the folklores of various languages, including charting numbers of Bhojpuri. Most of the popular artists who dominate all rituals including the mega festival of *Chhath*, is Sharda Sinha, who too has been bestowed with a Padma award. Most common regional languages spoken in Bihar include Angika, Bhojpuri, Magadhi, Maithili, Magadhi Prakrit, Hindi as well as Urdu amongst other dialects. Currently, Bhojpuri singers have carved a niche for themselves on both social and political platforms and some of them have even become Parliamentarians or are in the current fray to be one. Therefore the raw, rustic lyrics of traditional songs have now been tuned discreetly among the youth on occasions as several of them are tagged as '*fuhar*'. They have been duly banned by the State Government. In one's travels across Mithilanchal, one is struck by the public emotion when people get talking about Madhubani

paintings, *paan* (beetle), *makhana*, *maach* (fish) and *litti-chokha*. Seema Roy, Mithila Painting artist said earlier the paintings were done by women with vegetable dyes on the walls. "Now it is done on paper. The paintings normally depict village scenes, human and animal forms, gods and goddesses," Seema said. "Through your platform let me share the most significant tradition of Bihar, particularly Mithila, as you have already been apprised by its arts and crafts. An unnecessary fish-mutton issue has been derived in the ensuing political campaign by top leaders and we heard the new age media platforms, including social, discuss a lot on this subject. Let me be very clear, be it any day of the week, any festival like *Durga Puja* (we do not call it *Navratri* in Bihar), *Saraswati Puja*, *Mahashivratri*, or *Sawan* or any given Hindu auspicious day, we essentially cook and relish on (*maach*) fish. Mithilanchal is famous as we say *pug-pug* (every step) is fond of *paan*, *makahana*, *maach*, *pokhar* (pond)," opines a delighted Birender Thakur, a retired school teacher and villager in Bavangaon in Supaul. He also narrated a poem in the local language which had all the auspicious occasions where it mentioned the serving of non-vegetarian food, particularly fish. His companion, Nand Kishore Jha, who was part of the discourse, was quick to add that in Bihar non-vegetarian dishes only mean fish and mutton and not chicken or eggs. Although now eggs and chicken delicacies have made their way in the bylanes, *chowks*, and bazaars the elderly people do not appreciate the invasion. Bihar is also famous for its stone pottery, white metal statuettes, bamboo artifacts, wooden toys and leather goods. Several villages around Vaishali are into making of toys. Sikki Work is done by weaving a humble blade of grass into a beautiful basket and mats while Lac bangles are also made in Muzaffarpur. Bihar's rich traditional and culture legacy must not be drowned by the political din around.

IN EVERY ELECTION FOR THE PAST FIVE DECADES, PEOPLE OF BACKWARD REGIONS HAVE BEEN PROMISED UPLIFTMENT BY VARIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES AND LEADERS BUT ULTIMATELY THE DIE IS CAST IN FAVOUR OF CASTE, PREVENTING THE STATE'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT.

*'Don't be afraid to commit mistakes' is Chef Massimo Bottura's mantra, that is how his iconic dish came to life, writes Gyaneshwar Dayal*



The renowned Chef Massimo Bottura was in New Delhi once again with the culinary marvel, Osteria Francescana. Twice rated as The World's Best Restaurant by The World's 50 Best, Chef Bottura's culinary masterpiece returned to The Leela Palace New Delhi for a second consecutive year. This unparalleled partnership between The Leela Palace New Delhi, Culinary Culture, and the culinary virtuoso himself was an unforgettable gastronomic experience. Massimo Bottura is a renowned Italian chef and owner of Osteria Francescana, a three-Michelin-star restaurant in Modena, Italy. He is not just a culinary maestro but also a passionate philanthropist, earning international acclaim for his dedication to social and environmental causes. As a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the founder of the non-profit organization 'Food for Soul,' Bottura advocates for sustainability and the reduction of food waste, aligning perfectly with The Leela's eco-conscious ethos. For the uninitiated, Chef Bottura is one of the top chefs in the world and people wait to eat at his restaurant Osteria Francescana for at least three months. Some say you need to be prepared because the restaurant is fully booked for four months. Osteria Francescana was ranked the #1 restaurant in the world in 2018. The menu includes dishes like Modena's bolognese, polenta with eel and saba, Aula on tempura, and Tortellini in cream of Parmigiano Reggiano. The chef brought his restaurant to Delhi for Rs 55,555 + taxes per person. Under Chef Bottura's guidance, Osteria Francescana has captivated global palates with its innovative approach to Italian cuisine. He is known for reinventing the Italian dishes. The restaurant has consistently secured its position among the world's best, offering a sensory journey unlike any other. Iconic dishes such as 'Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart,' 'The Crunchy Part of the Lasagne,' and



'Psychedelic Cod Not Flame Grilled' will grace the special menu offered during the event. Bottura is a philosopher in his own right. He is passionate about making mistakes. That's right that is how his world-famous iconic dish 'Oops! I Dropped the lemon tarts and came to life. Chef Bottura's culinary philosophy, is deeply rooted in embracing mistakes and turning them into culinary masterpieces. Bottura shared a story in his interactive session in Leela, about the creation of a dish that symbolises embracing imperfections. It originated when Francescana's sous chef Taka Kondo accidentally dropped a lemon tart. Feeling distraught, Kondo's perfectionist tendencies clashed with his mistake. Bottura intervened, reframing the mishap as a metaphor for the fusion of sweet and savoury, breaking boundaries. Bottura emphasised the

importance of leaving room for poetry in daily life, allowing for imagination and creativity to flourish. "If you don't make mistakes, don't dream big, you end up nowhere, won't learn a damn thing," he quips. This ethos of embracing imperfection and transforming it into something extraordinary resonates throughout his culinary creations. Chef Bottura hosted an interactive session, engaging in a conversation with Vir Sanghvi, India's foremost food expert, offering insights into his culinary journey and philosophy. During the conversation, they had a difference of opinions but agreed on two things. Italians like Indians are mama's boys and two both love their food. Sanghvi remarked, "Massimo Bottura transcends the role of a chef; he serves as a global inspiration, leveraging his influence to bring about

positive changes worldwide. Mr. Anupam Dasgupta, General Manager of The Leela Palace New Delhi, expressed his enthusiasm for this unique culinary collaboration. He stated, "It is our privilege to host Chef Massimo once more at The Leela Palace New Delhi. We eagerly anticipate the epicurean delight that Chef Massimo will curate for the pop-up dinners." Speaking with anticipation about his return to India, Chef Massimo Bottura expressed his excitement, saying, "Namaste, India! I am delighted to return to your beautiful country. In New Delhi, we are working with Culinary Culture and The Leela Palace. I love India - the food and the people - and can't wait to be back and give you all a big Italian hug!" Indeed, chef Massimo Bottura is just not a chef he is a philosopher and a package you could talk to and take lessons for your kitchen and life. Chef is all for dreaming big and how creativity and dreaming big means a lot in life. His mantra: Dream big, it costs nothing and don't be afraid to make mistakes if you don't mistakes you will never learn anything new. Just a trivia here, any guesses what Massimo Bottura was most excited about in the evening. It was his breakfast with the underprivileged children he had invited for breakfast the next morning. So the world waits for Massimo Bottura's dinner and he for a simple breakfast with children of lesser God who give him all the inspiration he needs for his next masterpiece

# 'OOPS! I DROPPED THE LEMON TART'



## Standing Alone, and How



MKT impressed with its high-quality ingredients, well-informed and well-attired servers, excellent preparations, and comfortable interiors. It not only stands out among standalone restaurants but also outshines many star hotels with its overall offerings, says **PAWAN SONI**

**M**KT at Chanakya stands out among Delhi's standalone, multi-cuisine restaurants with its delightful offerings. This spacious 144-seater, adorned with well-lit interiors, caters perfectly to both small and large groups, boasting several live kitchens that serve a variety of popular cuisines from around the globe. While this was not my first visit to MKT, it was my first experience with their new menu. The shift towards modern Indian cuisine, complemented by a diverse Asian selection, came at the expense of the Mexican live kitchen. Our culinary journey began with a tender coconut and poached lobster soup. While the lobster soup met expectations, the vegetarian tender coconut soup exceeded them. It offered a delightful tanginess, coupled with glass noodles, snow peas, broccoli, and chili-fried garlic. The sashimi platter, featuring salmon, tuna, yellowtail, scallops, and prawns, was remarkably fresh, accompanied by freshly grated wasabi. However, the standout dish of the day was the salmon belly. Though the three skewers at ₹1335 may seem pricey, this cut is a rarity in the city. Grilled on a robata-yaki with a mildly sweet miso marinade, the salmon belly was incredibly tender and flavorful, justifying its price for the exceptional preparation. Once you have experienced this, you will never look back at the dry salmon tikka available at many other restaurants. A server-recommended starter, the Kimball mushroom, was a delightful mix of enoki, shimeji, king oyster, and shiitake mushrooms tossed in Kimball sauce. This carb-free dish not only excelled in healthfulness but also in taste. While our appetizers were satisfying, we also sampled two dishes from their Indian menu — Quinoa mutton seekh and



Champan mutton for the mains. The mutton seekh was tender and flavourful, served with smoked lehsun chutney and khameeri roti, a refreshing departure from the ubiquitous mint chutney. The Champan mutton was a pleasant surprise, as this rustic Bihar preparation with onions, mustard oil, and whole garlic showcased one of the best qualities of mutton. The chef revealed that they prepare a small batch every day in a traditional handi, ensuring authenticity and quality. Our meal concluded with homemade ice cream, which was delightful and could have been enhanced further with the addition of mango chunks. Overall, MKT impressed with its high-quality ingredients, well-informed and well-attired servers, excellent preparations, and comfortable interiors. It not only stands out among standalone restaurants but also outshines many star hotels with its overall offerings.

**FACT SHEET**  
MKT, Lower Ground Floor, The Chanakya Mall, Yashwant Place Community Centre, New Delhi  
Phone: 83769 86799 | Cuisine: Global  
Rating: Food: 4.5/5 | Drinks: 4.25/5 | Service: 4.5/5 | Ambience: 4.25/5 | Overall: 4.5/5

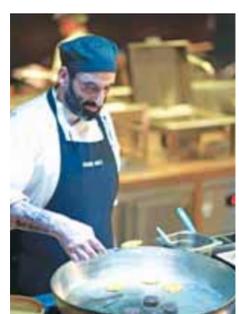
Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com

## REVIVING KASHMIRI PANDIT CUISINE

# A culinary journey through Kashmir

**CHEF RAHUL WALI**, through his expertise and dedication brings forth a unique culinary experience that celebrates the distinct identity of Kashmiri Pandit cuisine. **DIVYA BHATIA** had the chance to taste his lip-smacking delicacies

**K**ashmir is known for its scenic beauty but what people often miss on a trip to Kashmir is its Kashmiri Pandit cuisine which is a rich in flavors, influenced by the cultural heritage and geographical diversity of the Kashmir Valley. Renowned for its exquisite blend of aromatic spices and traditional cooking techniques, Kashmiri Pandit cuisine is a true reflection of the region's history and culinary prowess. Staple ingredients such as rice, yogurt, and vegetables form the foundation of many dishes, which are often infused with an array of spices like fennel, cardamom, and saffron, lending a unique and complex flavor profile. Signature dishes such as Rogan Josh, Yakhni, and Dum Aloo are cherished for their rich textures and vibrant taste. Moreover, the cuisine also features a variety of delectable vegetarian options, including Nadru Yakhni (lotus stem in yogurt gravy) and Haaq Saag (collard greens cooked with spices). With its emphasis on fresh ingredients and intricate preparation methods, Kashmiri Pandit cuisine continues to captivate palates worldwide, showcasing the rich culinary heritage of the Kashmiri Pandit community. Recently, I had the opportunity to indulge in Koshur Wurbal, a culinary extravaganza celebrating the exquisite flavors of Kashmiri Pandit cuisine, at The Roseate House. Often overshadowed by the renowned Wazwan, Kashmiri Pandit cuisine boasts a distinct identity, tracing its origins back to 326 BCE, long before the arrival of Wazwan in the 16th century. Contrary to common perception, Kashmiri Pandit cuisine stands apart with its unique flavors and traditions. There are very few chefs who

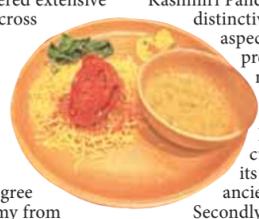


understand traditional Kashmiri Pandit cooking, but Chef Rahul Wali stands as a beacon of tradition in this culinary landscape where authenticity is often diluted by modern interpretations. With a deep understanding of Kashmiri Pandit cuisine, Chef Rahul introduced us to age-old recipes and forgotten culinary practices, offering a rare opportunity to savor the true essence of Kashmiri Pandits' gastronomy. Chef Rahul Wali talked about his journey and passion. Excerpts: **Could you share your journey as a Chef?** I was born in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, and spent my formative years in Mumbai and Pune. My culinary journey began after completing my Bachelor's in Hotel Management from Pune. I garnered extensive experience across various renowned brands in India and abroad, eventually pursuing an advanced Graduate Degree in Gastronomy from Le Cordon Bleu, Adelaide Australia. In recent years, I've been dedicated to reviving and promoting Kashmiri Pandit cuisine through pop-ups, festivals,



and collaborations with hotels and restaurants. **What inspired you to focus on promoting Kashmiri Pandit cuisine?** The inspiration stems from a dual purpose - preserving our culinary heritage and introducing the richness of Kashmiri Pandit cuisine to a broader audience. This cuisine, dating back to centuries, holds a distinct place in culinary history, characterized by unique flavors and techniques. Unfortunately, it has remained relatively obscure compared to the more widely known Kashmiri cuisine. I aim to change that by bringing it to the forefront and showcasing its diversity and depth. **How would you differentiate Kashmiri Pandit cuisine from other regional cuisines?** Kashmiri Pandit cuisine is distinctive in several aspects. Firstly, it predates the more commonly known Kashmiri cuisine, tracing its roots back to ancient times. Secondly, unlike many other Indian cuisines, it refrains from using onion, garlic, or tomatoes in its preparation. The focus is on a handful of traditional spices, meticulously blended

to create nuanced flavors. Additionally, the cooking method involves patience and slow cooking, preserving the authenticity of the dishes. **What challenges do you face in promoting Kashmiri Pandit cuisine outside its native region?** While the reception has been overwhelmingly positive, there are challenges, particularly in sourcing authentic ingredients. Additionally, there's a misconception that Kashmiri cuisine is solely suited for colder climates, which isn't entirely accurate. Educating people about the versatility and richness of our cuisine is an ongoing effort, requiring collaboration and support from various stakeholders. **How do you ensure an authentic culinary experience for guests during food festivals and pop-ups?** Authenticity is paramount, although it's essential to acknowledge that complete replication may not always be feasible, especially in diverse culinary landscapes. However, I strive to maintain the essence and integrity of Kashmiri Pandit cuisine while adapting to local ingredients and preferences. Each dish is crafted with care and respect for tradition, ensuring that guests experience the true flavors of Kashmir.



# ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION

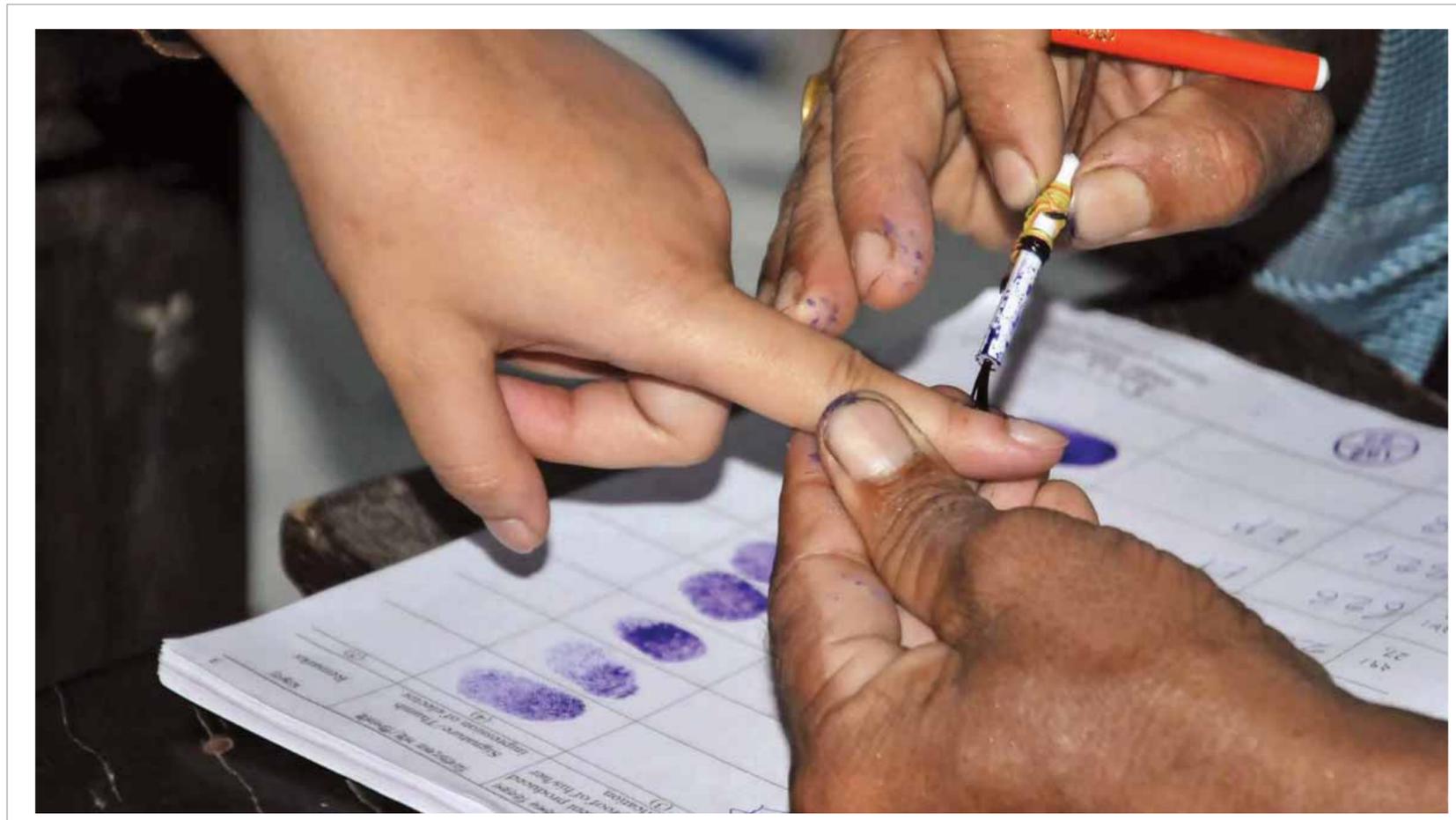
## FEDERALISM AT RISK OR UNITY FORTIFIED?

**PRIYOTOSH SHARMA and CHANDRIMA DUTTA** address this question posed by sceptics on whether the consolidation of electoral cycles could lead to a domination of the political narrative by parties and candidates vying for power and potentially undermine the essence of democracy by overshadowing the voices and choices of individual citizens

In India's democratic landscape, elections have long stood as pillars supporting our diverse linguistic tapestry and regional pride for over seven decades now. Stating Amartya, individuals can hold singular affiliations while valuing their multifaceted identities. But a pressing question arises: If one Nation, one Election were to happen, would national unity overshadow regional loyalties? Sceptics have raised concerns that the consolidation of electoral cycles as a question of national importance could lead to a domination of the political narrative by parties and candidates vying for power. The emphasis may shift away from citizen engagement and democratic participation towards partisan interests and power struggles. This could potentially undermine the essence of democracy by overshadowing the voices and choices of individual citizens.

It's noteworthy that the proposal of One Nation and One Election is not a recent development. As far back as September 1982, the Election Commission of India recommended simultaneous elections to both the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Additionally, the Law Commission of India's Draft Report on Simultaneous Elections in August 2018 further explored this idea. Given this historical context, one might wonder why the ruling party suddenly embraced this proposal in their manifesto ahead of the 2024 general election.

The sudden appropriation of the One Nation and One Election proposal by the ruling party likely reflects a strategic move to prioritise electoral reform and streamline governance processes. However, such a significant shift in policy approach raises questions about the underlying motivations and potential implications. India's governance model hinges on representative democracy, where elections serve as the bedrock of our political system. Campaigning, a pivotal aspect of elections, comes with substantial costs. A case in point is the staggering expenditure seen between February and May 2019, where Google and Facebook collectively reported political online advertising spending amounting to ₹58.67 crore. Notably, while Google declared 12,276 advertisements worth ₹29.3 crore, Facebook's India Ad Library disclosed a significantly higher volume of individual advertisements, totaling 132,419 and valued at ₹29.28 crore. Yet,



amidst this financial discourse, we often overlook the ripple effects of reducing the frequency of elections. Such a move could inadvertently disrupt sectors that thrive on heightened electoral activity, notably advertising, hospitality, and transportation. In light of this, it becomes imperative to carefully consider the implications of "One Nation, One Election" on federalism, regional dynamics, and political stability. For instance, the recent issue in Manipur over regional disparities highlights the potential risks and challenges associated with synchronising elections across different levels of government. As such, thorough deliberation and stakeholder engagement are essential in the electoral reform process to ensure that any changes uphold democratic principles and address the diverse needs of the

respective states. The ongoing debates outside of parliament surrounding One Nation and One Election are fueled by contrasting perspectives. Proponents argue that synchronising elections would bolster national unity by aligning electoral cycles and directing political discourse towards pressing national issues. At least for a brief period of time this narrative of one nation, one election, would appeal to the imagination of the public, as it would come on a platter of "national interest". However, sceptics raise concerns that this unity could merely be a facade concealing broader political agendas. Another significant issue that may raise eyebrows among the opposition is the prospect of diminished accountability if elections are held every five years.

THE ONGOING DEBATES OUTSIDE OF PARLIAMENT SURROUNDING ONE NATION AND ONE ELECTION ARE FUELED BY CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES. PROPONENTS ARGUE THAT SYNCHRONISING ELECTIONS WOULD BOLSTER NATIONAL UNITY BY ALIGNING ELECTORAL CYCLES AND DIRECTING POLITICAL DISCOURSE TOWARDS PRESSING NATIONAL ISSUES. AT LEAST FOR A BRIEF PERIOD OF TIME THIS NARRATIVE OF ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION, WOULD APPEAL TO THE IMAGINATION OF THE PUBLIC, AS IT WOULD COME ON A PLATTER OF "NATIONAL INTEREST"

This could spark doubts regarding the government's responsiveness to pressing concerns, such as notably fluctuations in oil prices, sharp fluctuations in food prices and hikes in gas cylinder costs paralyse citizen's every potential to remove a party from power through electoral process at least in state legislative elections. In navigating India's vibrant democratic landscape, it's crucial to recognize the unique context and complexities inherent to our nation. While other countries like Belgium or Japan may offer valuable insights, it's imperative not to blindly emulate their electoral models. Instead, decisions regarding electoral reforms must stem from a grassroots consensus, voting behaviour tailored to India's diverse socio-political fabric. The denizens of the streets and the

daily wage earners exhibit scant enthusiasm for engaging with political rhetoric; rather, their electoral participation hinges largely upon aligning themselves with the party that they could benefit financially from, thereby rendering the manipulation of their sentiments a feasible endeavour. Nevertheless, this one election holds the potential to wield considerable influence, particularly in terms of cost saving, especially where the prospect of bifurcating public sentiment during concurrent elections remains plausible.

**PRIYOTOSH SHARMA**  
 (Faculty of Department of Political Science, Ramanuj Gupta Degree College)  
**CHANDRIMA DUTTA**  
 (Student of Calcutta University, Political Science Department)

## Education a must for the Panchayati Raj System to flourish

By **Vikash Kumar**

2,39,000 Gram Panchayats all over the country, which are a State subject mentioned in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. The responsibility for their management, financial system, election, and arrangement of the structure rests on the State Government. The governance system of India works at three levels in which the third level is local self-government (the Panchayati system). Article 40 of the Indian Constitution contains provisions related to it, which was not an enforceable procedure. The states were not in favour of giving constitutional status to the panchayat systems, saying it violated the federal system. This is why Rajiv Gandhi's 64th Amendment (1989) and VP Singh's constitutional effort (June 1, 1990) failed. Constitutional status was accorded to Panchayats in 1992 and 1993 by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao worked tirelessly on. The responsibility of conducting their elections rests with the State Election Commission, provided by



Article 243 (K) of the Indian Constitution. Some states have announced their election because of the Constitution; their tenure is for five years, which is provided by Article 243 (E) of the Indian Constitution, but the purpose for which the concept of Panchayati systems was implemented is today helpless in achieving its original objective. Voters and elected officials engage in conversations, yet the conversation does not begin since communication throughout an election is frequently devoid of substance.

Additionally, there are no discussions going on between the candidate and the voter. Prominent political party leaders attend these polls in order to tally their victories. The news certainly delighted the voters when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose too had to raise local issues like loans. Commission, housing commissions, what issues do you have with the water and roads, he had asked earlier. In these elections, health and education are burning issues. The headman often remains indifferent, even as voters focus

on the state of primary schools along with other local issues. Because of lack of knowledge or education, the candidates' intentions and professional experiences are also not scrutinised during these elections. While the Panchayati system has helped local bodies, only a portion of the projects are intended to serve the villagers. Under such circumstances, every voter ought to select the candidate who best reflects the desires of the people, not the 'sole' candidate who offers casteism, religion, regionalism, and self-interest. This process

can only proceed if there is evidence of improvement at the local level. Voters ought to cast their ballots voluntarily and with diligence in order to support local institutions' credibility and enabling the competent leader's directives to be carried out over a period of five years, both of which encourage advancement. Today, the Panchayati Raj system exists in almost the whole country, but in reality, self-reliance today is far from what was envisioned at the time of its implementation. A provision for reservations was made in the Panchayati system under Article 243A. However, women have been unable to take full advantage of it, so have the lower classes, because even today, voting in rural areas is inspired by several biased undercurrents. Only when the Panchayati system becomes solid and self-reliant will India's democracy be strengthened. The process of reforms can start from the village itself. Women have become sarpanches but they do not run the administration; their husbands step in. A person belonging to the SC/ST category becomes a

sarpanch, but only a handful of wealthy people run the administration. Even today, many states need to transfer their subjects to the Panchayati system. In Panchayat elections deceit and force are openly used. The person who has access to the top of the administration is the one who occupies critical positions, a reason why the purpose for which it was created has not been fulfilled. The Government allots crores of funds to the development of villages but the benefits instead are spent on things remote from a village or its voters. To this date, the Panchayati system is entirely self-sufficient and those whose dreams could not be realised. In the present circumstances, the Government should make Panchayati Raj self-reliant for which education is the most significant step ahead. Awareness is only possible with education because that alone can make citizens and voters politically aware. (Views expressed are personal. Author is President of the Indian Research Scholars Association and can be contacted at sagarvikash829@gmail.com)

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